At a Distance: The Solitudes of Testimony

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(English)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – MADISON

2013

Date of final oral examination: 12/11/2012

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Introduction

Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o’er the sickle bending; –
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

– William Wordsworth, from “The Solitary Reaper”

“In the second scene at the night shift, I saw a new guard that wears glasses and has a red face. He charged his pistol and pointed it at a lot of the prisoners to threaten them with it. I saw things no one would see, they were amazing.”

– Mohamed Juma, quoted in Mark Danner, Torture and Truth

One way to think about solitude is to imagine uninhabited, pristine landscapes, to imagine poet-wanderers and mystic-hermits, to imagine a place of salubrious retreat, of freedom, of being alone with one’s thoughts. In all cases, I’ll posit, this idea of solitude is not far from an idea of the individual. Whether imagined as a space for self fulfillment or as a space for self-release or escape, solitude, in this view, is already occupied and filled by a willful subject.

At a Distance: The Solitudes of Testimony questions this view of solitude. It does so by considering two things. First, the following analysis defines the solitaire not as a willful subject, not as an extension of community, but as a kind of product, a rejection, a severance of a community. Second, At a Distance considers solitude not as a distant place and frame of being, but as a scene of engagement between the solitaire and community that is forced onto these two parties by a violent event. Solitude, here, is not an object for the subject’s retreat. Rather, At a
*Distance* asks us to consider solitude as a social condition, as a system of relationships between communities and their outcasts, as a scene fraught with various questions of responsibility.

A few years ago, as President Barack Obama was beginning his first term in office, and the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, circulated with some frequency in the news and political discourse, Atul Gawande published an article, an unequivocal exposé, addressing inconsistencies in cultural and political statements regarding solitude and solitary confinement.\(^1\) Citing accounts by victims of solitary confinement (it’s “as torturous and agonizing as any physical abuse” (39)), citing psychological studies (solitary confinement causes brain damage), and citing the “bipartisan national task force, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons,” which “calls for ending long-term isolation of prisoners” (44), Gawande’s investigation clearly articulated the paradoxical and ideological problems in how American culture thinks about solitude. As punishment in prison, solitary confinement starves the prisoner for companionship, but simultaneously affects him in such a way that he becomes incapable of relating with others (40). Similarly, that prisoner who, in order to survive, resists the punishment by disorderly behavior, is then forced to endure the punishment until he’s docile; but the docile prisoner, adapting to his condition, who is then likely to be released, will be unable to readjust to the dynamics of society (41). In this punitive mode, solitude is dehumanizing. It is such a severe form of punishment that he who endures it returns to society unfit and incapable of reintegration. Moreover, as if putting someone in a closed box erases him from awareness, Gawande connects the cultural blindness for carceral solitude with analogous moments of ideological dehumanization.

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In much the same way that a previous generation of Americans countenanced legalized segregation, ours has countenanced legalized torture. And there is no clearer manifestation of this than our routine use of solitary confinement. (44)

One of the difficulties about solitary confinement – apart from studies measuring its efficacy, apart from the moral claim that humans should not treat humans and animals in this way – is its opacity. Solitude is out of sight. Solitude, like some forms of torture, leaves no extrinsic mark on its victim. Solitude is near such an extremity of cultural imagination as to be impossible to take, comprehend or speak of, in practical terms. Because of its mystery – its literal abstractness, as a concept for being apart – solitude becomes an idea easily deployed for ideological purposes. Solitude fits narrative insofar as it is nominally unfit for real conditions.

Gawande’s evidence is, if limited, incontrovertible. Still, the relationship between solitude, community, and the law is not always so explicit. In fact, solitude could be said to be merely an effect of how a community responds to the appeal of a stranger. At the threshold of community – on the frontier, say – our response to what lies beyond recognition risks placing the figure who requests entry into our community into a manner of confinement. David Cole, in his concise summary of the ongoing case of Maher Arar’s with the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, “Getting Away with Torture,” exposes this dimension to solitude.²

Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen, returning home from Tunisia, was detained by US police at JFK. Arar hired a lawyer. Just prior to an initial hearing, Arar was removed by US federal agents to Jordan, and sent from there to Syria, where he was interrogated and tortured. (His lawyer, incidentally, when she got word of Arar’s disappearance, was lied to by his former detainers, who said Arar had been moved to a jail in New Jersey.) “After a year, the Syrians released Arar, concluding that he had done nothing wrong” (39). Arar is suing the US officials

responsible for his detainment, and the Second Circuit court of appeals has all but closed the
doors in his face, arguing that the case will implicate “sensitive issues of national security, foreign
policy, and secret diplomatic communications between the US and foreign governments” (39). Is
the disclosure of information grounds for the postponement, or even dismissal, of a case
concerning the violation of human rights? Cole’s argument is not along such a simple line;
instead, he points out, and questions, precedence. The Second Circuit court has not let diplomacy
interfere with justice in other cases (cases that did not, however, scrutinize US federal agents);
nor has diplomacy interfered with justice in courts in other countries, where violations of human
rights answer to tenets of international law established, Cole argues, in the Nuremburg Trials
following World War II.³

Arar’s case reveals how we have, in Gawande’s words, “countenanced legalized torture.”
There is no question about whether or not Arar was tortured by the Syrians, or whether or not US
agents were accomplices to this crime. But his case is being postponed by what amounts to
secrecy, “sensitive information” that cannot be disclosed. Who knows this information? Where is
it kept? At this threshold of justice, a structural breakdown in communication places Arar, and
others like him, into a condition of solitude. To be sure, this solitude is not explicit; no study will
show the physical damage the Second Circuit court’s irresponsibility causes on Arar.
Nevertheless, this case reveals the complex relationship between abduction, “extraordinary
rendition,” and legal discourse. Interrogation might have its model and method, but our capacity
to listen and respond to the particular abductee, if and when he returns to the community, does
not. When his appeal claims a violation of human rights and calls out to a regime of secrecy, our
understanding of the solitaire seems to have no recourse but to silence.

³ The comparative case he cites, of “extraordinary rendition,” concerned abduction similar in form to Arar’s, and
recently concluded in Italy, where the court convicted US CIA agents (39).
Solitude’s Incongruity

How do we speak of solitude? If language mediates the relationship between one speaker and another, how solitary is the speaker of solitude?

The conventional view of solitude holds that solitude is subordinate to an autonomous self. Such are the woods around Walden Pond for Thoreau. And according to such a view, the solitaire’s dilemma – and one of the reasons why such figures remain fascinating for a culture that valorizes individualism and “freedom” – concerns the desire for freedom from social constraints, on the one hand, that come up against the need for human interaction on the other. As we find in Coleridge’s Mariner, the solitary condition is fraught with a compulsive need to narrate the pain of solitude regardless of how this act of speech mitigates, in unloading on the poor wedding guest, the force of the experience itself. Narration, we sense in Coleridge’s poem, is not quite enough; it does not entirely grasp solitude as such.

But to conclude from this description of a particular kind of social conflict and binary – between being alone with oneself and, or, being social – that solitude is finally only of one’s own experience, one’s own alone – as if I can have my solitude and you can have yours – is not without some important problems. First, this simplification and generalization mitigates the force of the particular experience, as Coleridge’s poem demonstrates; the move of generalization accepts a quiet paradox, making solitude itself not entirely solitary but a device of community, something spoken about from a distance and never from within. Such a community, and paradox, is what has silenced Maher Arar.

Second, as this distance suggests, generalization fails at understanding the particularity of the solitary experience itself. In this way, generalization fails to respond to the voice of the solitaire, and because of this silence, a failure in communication, the experience of or
confrontation with solitude raises an ethical question, a moment where everyday speech is interrupted by what it has never before been able to say.

Maurice Blanchot, in a passage from *The Infinite Conversation* that I’ll return to, describes this dialogic situation as one person faced by *autrui*, the absolute other, a situation where language is reduced to the dangerous binary of speech, whatever the utterance, or death (60, 61). This mode of solitude, then, as always particular, contextual, and in some ways beyond representation or iteration, functioning in a recess of language, compels the community faced by the solitaire to reflect on the potential violence of its discourse. Listen and respond to the solitaire, or, in one form or another, silence him, kill him: this possibility is what the conventional view of solitude overlooks.

The language of solitude communicates a particular kind of silence. Blanchot refers to this interruptive gap in speech as a moment of exposure, a mode of speech that places the precarious speaker before *autrui*. How will we respond? Gawande, quoting Terry Anderson’s *Den of Lions*, describes the deterioration of the mind, memory and its linguistic capacities in solitary confinement, in analogous terms. No more books, no more poems in memory; the mind, disintegrating, dies (38). In solitude, the speaking subject is removed from language by a cognitive abyss. So how will our account of solitude address this figure, *autrui*, and address the necessary questions of responsibility and reintegration?

How we speak of solitude often relies on the so-called solitary self, a Cartesian solitaire who seeks solitude because of various caustic forces he finds in his community. But then how do

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we reconcile such a willful solitaire – one who, like Thoreau, seems to know what he wants – with accounts of carceral solitude that describe self-disintegration? Is the solitaire sometimes unified and at other times destroyed? Is solitude in our era still only of either the self-secure, heroic, romantic individual, or of the eremitic puritan, as Sara Maitland, in *A Book of Silence*, contends? Does the question of solitude finally, and only, come down to a question of personal choice?

Rather than belabor this point so early on, let’s consider the likelihood that our understanding of solitude is, if not mistaken, limited. This understanding cannot have it both ways – or only these two ways – an integrated and disintegrating solitary self. And so solitude confronts us with a conceptual irony: the one alone is first, and begins as, one apart from a community, and being a part, a remnant of the community, the solitaire has no unified, reliable, or responsive self to speak of. In other words, in speaking of “the solitary self” we actually mean “the solitary, socially constructed, self.” Solitude as a concept – not as a space, not as a landscape, not as wistful Hopper figure – signifies a way of thinking about what lies beyond the reach of “community” and communication. As Judith Butler asks in *Frames of War*, a work we’ll return to in the final chapter, “What is this specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside?” (12). What is this figure on our horizon, at our threshold, that is at once one of ours but also one apart? Like certain atomic phenomena, let’s consider solitude only in terms of its effects on a measurable spectrum, and never as if in solitude itself. Solitude comes to us primarily as a trace in language, on things, or in and on bodies; it signals the passage of a body or event beyond the frontier without providing a meaningful, objective referent. Thus, the narrative about the return of the solitary self to his

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community is less an account of solitude as such than it is the normalization of a disruptive element.

The solitaire never entirely returns to his community. And when we find this return in narrative, we witness more about community and, in particular, discipline, than we do about solitude or about what the solitaire has come back to say.

*The Argument*

The aim of *At a Distance: The Solitudes of Testimony* is to shift our thinking of solitude from a conception structured by the individual, by spatial images of being alone, toward a consideration of solitude as both a site of discourse and as an occasion for responsible action. We *speak of solitude* but too often forget the reasoning or causes that lead to solitude and solitary conditions, the framework of and for seeking, finding, or returning from solitude. The images we hold in our memory of solitary figures are idealized or fictional insofar as they fail at describing how the conditions of solitude come about. This dissertation attempts to describe and investigate such conditions. It does so by positing, roughly, three approaches to solitude and to the solitaire.

1) In one of the more obvious ways, this project considers the solitudes of exile and detainment. In this regard I consider how the experience of being apart from one’s community affects how the exile or the detained speaks about or testifies to the experience of solitude – arguing, roughly, that the solitary experience as such is difficult, and maybe impossible, to escape. Solitude for the exile or detained influences, infects, penetrates the very language this figure needs to speak of or write about the event itself. And in this view, the solitaire, even in his former community, never completely returns to this community.

2) On speech, then, this project consider methods and manners of narration, of telling a story about solitude. In this regard, I quietly work against a tradition of narrative, one that I claim begins with the Romantics. While this project does not directly analyze the Romantic view of solitude, the notion of the wanderer – poet or mystic – fulfilling himself in being alone and then returning to speak of his experience is implicitly, and at times problematically, tangled in the analysis. In other words, there are throughout this project questions that work against the idea of a safe and secure self, of being in solitude
as something redeeming and fulfilling. It is not an explicit part of the analysis, but I think my suspicion about this view – an ideology of solitude – is apparent throughout. Along this line, I try to keep in view the idea of solitude beyond the complacency of individualism, of solitude as a kind of place for concentration, as Blanchot says, of the subject’s being and good-intentions.

3) From this suspicion, a third aspect to the project questions certain frames of and for speaking of solitude. Much of the analysis looks at how the receiving community, the solitaire’s community, seeks to normalize the solitaire, to re-incorporate the solitaire – but, through this, risk ignoring the solitaire’s account and risk, worse, securing the frames of his solitude even more. In this regard, much of this project looks at devices – of language and of technology – that I argue not only harm the solitaire but implicitly enforce certain structures of solitude that are already in the community’s midst. In short, much of this project looks at how a new kind of solitude, a new ideology of solitude, is emerging in everyday life, in language and in our devices and tools, which is not only affecting responsible language and responsible community life but affecting how our community responds to the presence of strangers, exiles, prisoners, anyone we perceive as being an outsider.

The solitudes considered by *At a Distance*, to be absolutely clear, are not of and for that being-alone who goes into the wild to find or recover himself; not of Wordsworthian recollection, of that flash upon the inward eye, the bliss of solitude. There is no bliss here. There is scant attention given to what Maurice Blanchot calls, early in *The Space of Literature*, solitude as concentration, as “a complacent isolation of individualism” (21). In fact, I offer here an argument against solitude as the site where the subject, the ego, finds room to recover and grow, room to do what it wants. While I use the figure of the religious prophet in some discussions, the questions I ask and consider of such figures are never of mysticism, religion, or psychology.

Even at its most abstract – and unfortunately convoluted – I have attempted to keep the analysis grounded, so to speak, in a recent history and in a political crisis that is still ongoing. So, with the religious prophet in sight and mind, my aim is at the social and the political dimensions of such a figure, not at the individual as such. I am less concerned with what happens inside of this strange subject than I am with how we respond to and address it. Between recognition and apprehension, the specter, the solitary other who comes before us, is what the following analysis engages.
Indeed, part of the argument here is that it is impossible for us to know what transpires inside the mind or soul of the other. The focus here, rather, is with what the solitaire does to and for its former community on its return; what it does, more broadly, to our community with its presence – to our community because the solitaire only appears in and through language, and comes to us as an extension of the same discourse that makes its solitude possible.

What about the witness who experiences something beyond comprehension, an event that momentarily displaces her from her discourse community? What of the song Wordsworth’s Reaper sings? Words we’ll never know…

Must solitude function by the suppression of a particular, strange voice? If narration is loosely defined as an “I” speaking to and of an “other,” what voice speaks of the perils – the inhumanity, the incivility, the violence – of solitude?

With the Romantic landscape of the nineteenth century far in the background of the following analysis, as an image to think against, At a Distance addresses more recent phenomena, many concerned with war, with scenes of destruction that, inverse of the expansion of consciousness that we might find in and for images of sublime nature, seem to crush and fragment awareness, the subject’s capacity and obligation to express herself. This inquiry addresses testimony’s relation to solitude, and analyzes how the witness gives voice to the solitude she experienced in the event of violence.

That speech and, in important and different ways, writing, emerge from solitude, and seek the interlocutor or reader, as if from a dark utopia before subjectivity identifies its speaker, is part of the thesis of the first three chapters, which address solitary figures and the language of solitude, solitude as a constitutive element of testimony. One aim of the long first chapter, then,
“The Specter,” is to identify a few types of solitary figures. These are not limited to subject-like beings. Indeed, materials and objects, the strange things encountered in solitude, constituents in and for any future testimony, are essential components of this consideration. Paul Auster’s reading of Maurice Blanchot, as the first part of Chapter One investigates, presents solitude not as a neutral space into which the subject might move but solitude as a medium, like memory and history, with which language and the writing subject’s memoir must forcefully negotiate. For Auster, this negotiation reveals how solitude is never one’s alone but is something relational, interconnected with other solitudes and solitaires, with the pain, isolation and loneliness of reflecting on disruptions in history, anamnesis, the breaks in lives, some familiar and close, others distant and quite strange, that push the writer and his community forward into an apparently seamless and self-contained present. The fracturing of this present – as material ruin or paratactic expression – is the focus of the second part of the first chapter, which follows Auster’s aesthetic of fragmentation with a reading of W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* through the lens of – in a kind of interrogatory dialogue with – Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*. The movement along this convoluted path is from the solitaire as such – from various kinds of solitaires – toward a question of expression, the testimonial itself.

Can the destruction, disaster, be spoken for, will it come forth? I think that the first chapter concludes affirmatively, the statement *can* come forth, but this statement is never to our satisfaction. Indeed, testimony always says more, or less, than we expect it to. Again, if the linguistic problem of the fragment – of parataxis, aphorism, aphasia – falls close to the heart of Chapter One, in the second part the problem is framed by Blanchot’s formula, by way of Derrida’s reading, “X without X.” The object without itself, being without being, with the threshold and liminality this suggests, is a device which, if simmering in Chapter Two, then
boils, and become essential, in the latter half of the dissertation, on performance, on the body and presence of the witness.

How the witness and the writer investigate and speak of the lives of solitary others is the task of the following chapters. “Object Lessons,” on Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, considers how material evidence – fragments, remnants of past scenes of destruction – always resists totalizing narration, explanation. Objects in Sebald’s novels, the argument goes, maintain a kind of objectness that does not align with, logically and cooperatively, the narrator’s attempt at objectivity. As with any account of solitude, something remains without the solitaire’s tale. I refer to this remainder as the object-as-object, a cipher that compels Sebald’s narrator to attempt other approaches to the past, other ways of remembering and recovering what is lost. The result is necessarily a fragmented, paratactic tapestry, one which gives the lie to testimony as mnemonic narration, exposing the impossibility for the witness alone to come forward and give a logical explanation for what was experienced. Her solitude, the chapter implicitly claims, is not of her choice; it is not a question of the community’s, or of the court’s, patience with this figure, in waiting for explanation. The words are not there, they will not come. And the community’s insistence for such words only perpetuates the problem of solitude – not only for the solitaire, our witness and narrator, but for the community itself. This problem is one of listening and responding to, in Blanchot’s word, *autrui*.

Much of the next third of the dissertation, beginning with “Naming Names” (and including the two chapters to follow, “Fiat Lux” and “The Disappeared”) might seem to take a sudden turn, a jarring jump into another world or book. Indeed, the jump is there – this is a stylistic choice – but the world or book are not so different. If chapters one and two attempt to identify types of solitaires and to describe manners of their expression, their testimony, then the
following chapters come to focus on the very scene of testimony, the linguistic engagement between solitaire and community. “Naming Names,” “Fiat Lux,” and “The Disappeared” were originally one very long essay that began as a study of performative language in Luisa Valenzuela’s *Black Novel with Argentines*. My initial plan, some years ago now, was to consider how performance and performativity in Valenzuela’s novel at once participated in and also resisted acts of interrogation and torture. Reading Jacobo Timerman’s memoir, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, around the same time, it seemed clear to me – if still requiring some of the dot-connecting of interpretation – that the truth regime operative in an act of torture was not so different from how truth functioned in a speech act. The problem of course was that in the latter – “I now pronounce you…” “I hereby find you guilty of…” – there is a definite context and limitation to the purpose and meaning of the statement, while in the former, in torture, such contexts and limits are not so clearly defined. Moreover, there’s the tortured body to deal with. This small nexus of ideas – interrogatory speech and torture on the one hand, playful speech acts on the other, and how speaking bodies participate in both scenarios – opened up for me all sorts of ideas, theses, possibilities and problems. The result, here in three chapters, is not quite to my satisfaction, but it’s a healthy start.

“Naming Names” sets up terms and concepts for the two chapters to follow. At its heart is an important distinction in how we think of performative speech, and this concerns what I call divine or sovereign speech and mortal (and later, rhetorical) speech. The former, like *Fiat Lux*, creates what it names, while the latter tries and fails to do the same – but is nonetheless, through this failure, equally productive, although in important and different ways. This distinction also sets out a difference between Lyotard’s *performativity*, as a concept of system oversight and management, from performance or the performative speech act proper, which, against systematic
operations, more often concerns immediate action, particular contexts and participants, the excitement of possibility, of potential success and failure wrapped together in a charged instant of becoming. I return to this distinction, between performance and performativity, in the final chapter, “The Hooded Man.”

The other key point that this section of the dissertation develops in anticipation of the final chapter concerns a special kind of inscription, an act of naming that painfully connects the body of the witness, and connects her statement, to the act of violence she testifies for and against. The argument, if I can put it simply, goes something like this: the witness is asked or compelled to speak out, to describe what she saw, to identify the perpetrator of the crime, but this act of naming risks not only misfiring, maligning the wrong person, it risks repeating a kind of physical harm – harm to the witness herself, since the interrogator also asked for names, and harm to innocent others; it risks, as I mentioned much earlier, the kind of statement that balances life against death, the statement that, unmade, could equal her own or someone else’s death, but made does not necessarily guarantee life. Analyses of such difficult, almost impossible, statements is essentially what “Fiat Lux,” a close reading of Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” and “The Disappeared,” a discussion of political and cultural valences of performative speech in Valenzuela’s Black Novel with Argentines and Timerman’s Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, amount to.

Here is another way to approach this second unit of the dissertation, which we might call “On the Performance of Testimony.” If the first two chapters raise a question about our question to the witness, a question about how we ask, and what we ask of, the witness, the following three chapters attempt to describe the burdens of the witness’s imminent act of speech. If the first part of the dissertation focuses on the discourse of solitude, the second half attempts to ground the
discussion in actualities, in bodies, in the ungainly multiplicity of solitude and of witnessing.

This idea, on the multiplicity of solitude, leads us to the final chapter, “The Hooded Man,” which addresses the images – one strange image in particular, in its singular plurality – from Abu Ghraib.

I have thought about the Hooded Man for a long time, and I still am unsure what to see in, and what to conclude about, this figure. The figure is an image of solitude that is frighteningly familiar and uncanny, of everyday life – only Americans, I’ll propose, could make such a thing – but it is also an awful extremity of the harm caused by this politics of solitude, of the potential harm caused by the technologies which disseminate being into networks of disintegrated-integration, of connectivity. Here is an occasion that demands a consideration of the ethics that has always been an implicit part of how we think of solitude and solitary experiences. As I said, I am not sure about the conclusions I draw from this figure. (But is it possible to be certain where ethics is concerned?) What I would like to believe is that its concealment, this covering, the uncanny closeness of the Hooded Man to us, indicates something important about what we condone in and for solitude. I would like to believe that so long as we do not question our assumptions about solitude, we not only remain blind to the suffering of others, we remain blind to the solitudes already around and about us, distancing us from each other. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be alone now and then, but if a solitaire like the Hooded Man gives us an opportunity to examine our language and ethics, an opportunity to find new words and new ideas for relating to each other – and not only to each other, but with, in fits and starts, in pain and anger, *autrui* – then I think the right thing to do is to take this opportunity, to speak out.

Such speaking out is what I hope this dissertation finally does. And with that, I’ll let it speak for itself.
1.

The Specter

Écrire commence seulement quand écrire est l’approche de ce point où rien ne se révèle, où au sein de la dissimulation, parler n’est encore que l’ombre de la parole, langage qui n’est encore que son image, langage imaginaire et de l’imaginaire, celui que personne ne parle, murmure de l’incessant et de l’interminable auquel il faut imposer silence si l’on veut, enfin, se faire entendre.

– Maurice Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire*

What is this specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside?

– Judith Butler, *Frames of War*

When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster… What remains without remains (the fragmentary).

– Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

Part I

*Solitary Things*

For Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*, solitude is less a neutral space of self contemplation than a mode of writing that is invested in problems of memory and representation.¹ What is particularly important about this nexus of solitude with writing is that the memories and representations that the narrator strives for hover in the proximity of historical events, namely genocide, that disrupt narrative continuities to the degree that they also interrupt

any possibility of neutral, solitary space. The inventions of solitude, Auster reveals, are the same devices that dismantle neutral space; these inventions, a manner of discourse, while perhaps initially desirable, come to expose the solitaire not only to the impossibility of solitary space as such but to the violence the pursuit of such space as a possibility inflicts on himself and others. Auster’s solitaire, that is to say, never precisely alone, always finds himself in strange, sometimes hostile, company.²

In order to try to extract ourselves from the paradigm of the solitary self, let’s begin with Blanchot’s distinction between the writer’s solitude of concentration and the solitudes apart from this embodiment.³ Imagining solitude without the concentration of the mind and self of the industrious author forces consideration of solitude without the organizing structures of subjectivity; this is a solitude of dispersion, a solitude not of gathering but scattering, of an aimless movement through and beyond the security of individuation toward an endless process-condition of divitudation. In this framework, of fragments severed from totality, of a foundational atomism, let’s consider the solitaire not as an expression of the self apart from the self, or the self apart from us, but rather as something unfit for community, an unincorporated multiplicity that negatively signals the community’s principles of engagement – an absence of the common that is nonetheless dialectically bound up with the common.⁴ Thinking of solitude apart from the self, apart from individuality, one begins to see how the concept soleness connects with principles of

² The idea that language itself is a part of this company – that the solitaire exists in, and is an extension of, discourse – has a history. This movement away from the Cartesian, Romantic, wanderer, toward a less self-secure subjectivity, and toward something even beyond this – homo sacer, for instance – is a point of inquiry evident throughout Maurice Blanchot’s work. Its development there, however, owes a lot to Martin Heidegger. Cf. Heidegger, “The Way to Language,” Basic Writings, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). “Yet language is monologue. This now says something twofold: it is language alone that properly speaks; and it speaks in solitude. Yet only one who is not alone can be solitary; not alone, that is to say, not in separation and isolation, not devoid of all kinship. On the contrary, precisely in the solitary [Im Einsamen] there unfolds essentially the lack of what is in common [der Fehl des Gemeinsamen], as the most binding relation to what is common” (423). I will return to some of Heidegger’s thought and language – specifically on the matter of enframing [Gestell] – in the final chapter.
⁴ Heidegger, ibid.
organization, order, law, the communal self and identity. As he is variously portrayed, the solitaire threatens the community he returns to not because of his epiphany in the wild, but because he signals to the community what exactly it will not (or cannot) look upon. He is a recalcitrant witness whose testimony we both want and cannot hear. Take the figure of the prophet, for instance, in Isaiah:

He had no form or charm to attract us,  
no beauty to win our hearts;  
he was despised, the lowest of men,  
a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering,  
one from whom, as it were,  
we averted our gaze,  
despised, for whom we had no regard.  
Yet ours were the sufferings  
he was bearing,  
ours the sorrows he was carrying… (Isaiah 53.2-4)

The solitaire represents to a community the disintegration of its governing principles. Moreover, since the solitaire is not diametrically opposed to these principles – he’s not a terrorist, for instance – he is all the more troubling to the community because he stands for something the community itself has rejected from itself, an unincorporated, disorderly multiplicity.

This reflexivity about solitude makes access to its objective characteristics – which could be simple to identify: it’s over there, out there – quite difficult, if not impossible. Its secrecy cannot be known in itself, but only as something tantalizing, something that is always rumor, behind a closed door, beyond a horizon of vision. Solitude is spoken about and spoken for, but never spoken from, as if in the field, live and unexpurgated. The discourse of solitude lives in our limited perspective as testament to something left out, something left over or left behind. The solitaire returns to the community as a remnant – but a remnant of what?

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Speak Out or Die

For The Invention of Solitude solitude is never particularized, and never for one self. Rather, Auster’s solitude operates in a dialectic of distance and proximity, in movements of endless retreat and unlikely engagement. We find at either ends of this book models for such solitudes. In the first part, “Portrait of an Invisible Man,” the father of the narrator, Sam Auster, is solitary, but not “in the sense of being alone.” He is solitary “in the sense of retreat. In the sense of not having to see himself, of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else” (16, 17). His solitude among others is a willful withdrawal of his attention and responsibility for others. In the latter part of the book, “The Book of Memory,” the narrator pursues his consideration of Jonah, the unfortunate prophet who, in flight from God’s request, retreats to such an extent that his capacity to speak – a characteristic essential for most prophets – is practically destroyed. Only as our narrator later realizes, “by plunging into the darkness of that solitude, the ‘I’ has vanished from itself. It cannot speak about itself, therefore, except as another” (124). The request to speak for another – and in this case, of God, to speak for the other of others – steals Jonah’s speech. How can he respond? He flees, putting distance between himself and the order, putting himself, finally, in the deepest solitude imaginable, in the belly of a beast in the heart of the ocean. He can’t, he won’t, speak for God, and thus even for himself; his desire for solitude is so strong that the spaces he enters in the world are not enough. He must also keep silent. His solitude, already an amazing flight to the ends of the earth, then expands in the onerous necessity of others for its narration; in the third-person, this prophet without a voice creates a solitude of such force that it becomes, in the other’s narration, not just his solitude, but
a burden of speech for others as well. How accurate, then, is it to assume *prima facie* the self-
possession of solitude?\(^6\)

Solitude has this peculiar reflexive quality. Paradoxically, the solitaire is never absolutely
alone; community, in a broad sense, with its laws of cohesion, is inescapable. Thus solitude finds
expression indirectly, in traces within the community it wants to reject. Because of this bind, any
account of solitude will necessarily miss an essential component of solitude: its silence. Speaking
of solitude reinstates the dialogic principles of narrative. But if the community is not aware of
this artifice, the solitaire certainly is. The impossibility of speech in solitude introduces a kind of
silence that is absent in any dialogic narrative, absent in all “conversation.” This silence is not
merely that of interruption, or of the patience of conversants. In his account, the solitaire’s
imagined interlocutor arises from a narrative condition that belongs to neither one speaker (the
self) nor the other. The interlocutor is an undecidable being. “Someone is there, where I am
alone,” Blanchot observes, on the writer’s solitude:

The fact of being alone is my belonging to this dead time which is not my time, or yours,
or the time we share in common, but Someone’s time. Someone is what is still present
when there is no one. Where I am alone, I am not there; no one is there, but the
impersonal is: the outside, as that which prevents, precedes, and dissolves the possibility
of any personal relation. Someone is the faceless third person, the They of which
everybody and anybody is a part, but who is part of it? Never anyone in particular, never
you and I. Nobody is part of the They. “They” belongs to a region which cannot be
brought to light, not because it hides some secret alien to any revelation or even because
it is radically obscure, but because it transforms everything which has access to it, even
light, into anonymous, impersonal being, the Nontrue, the Nonreal yet always there. The
They is, in this respect, what appears up very close when someone dies. (*Space* 31)

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\(^{6}\) See Carsten Springer, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 26, Mark Brown,
*Paul Auster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 28, and Ilana Shiloh, *Paul Auster and Postmodern
Quest* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), “He is alone to the extent that solitude is a universal human condition and
because all artistic endeavor is the product of a solitary mind” (22), for the kind of reading of solitude that I’m
working against. Also, a note on terminology: my “narrator” designates the subject behind the voice of the story-
teller, and unless otherwise noted I have assumed that this is one person throughout Auster’s novel; in the first part,
the narrator (the son of Sam Auster) speaks in the first-person, and in the second part he uses a third-person
omniscient mode.
The They who inhabit solitude is an indeterminable quantity between singular and plural being, between One and Everyone: “Nobody is part of the They.” An impersonal plurality grounds individual being, and this body is impossible to expose, impossible to witness, but still necessary for the I-Other structure. This plurality, an otherness before “I,” functions for Auster and Blanchot as an original invisibility, what, in another context, Blanchot calls the murmur of language (“where speaking always precedes itself” (Space 181)).

For Auster’s narrator, solitude becomes a keyword, a kind of touchstone which his narrative must always return to. Solitude, as we see in the differences between Sam Auster and Jonah, and between these characters and the narrator’s work as a translator (“every book is an image of solitude” (Invention 136)), carries with it various duplicities and incongruities, all of which begin in the question of the possibility of being alone. “[T]he sudden knowledge came over him that even alone, in the deepest solitude of his room, he was not alone, or, more precisely, that the moment he began to try to speak of that solitude, he had become more than just himself” (139). Solitude, as the background framework for any moment of expression, suggests a plurality or multiplicity about speech, as though in the imagined silence of solitude there remains an indistinct murmur of language. As in eulogy, speech about solitude cannot resolve a tension between its formal quality as monologue and its desire to be dialogue. Like the eulogist, the solitaire is caught between radical silence, an inaccurate or unfair monologue, and impossible dialogue.

In response to God’s request, then, Jonah’s flight and pursuit of solitude exposes a kind of ethical imperative for expression.

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7 On the solitaire’s silence, and in contrast to Blanchot, cf. Heidegger, “The Way to Language”: “Language, which speaks by saying, is concerned that our speech, heeding the unspoken, corresponds to what language says. Hence silence too, which one would dearly like to subextend to speech as its origin, is already a corresponding. Silence corresponds to the noiseless ringing of stillness, the stillness of the saying that propriates and shows” (420, my italics).
In the depth of that solitude, which is equally the depth of silence, as if in the refusal to speak there were an equal refusal to turn one’s face to the other (“Jonah rose up to flee from the presence of the Lord”) – which is to say: who seeks solitude seeks silence; who does not speak is alone; is alone, even unto death – Jonah encounters the darkness of death. (125)

The pursuit of solitude requires the turning away from one’s present relationships with others; the solitaire will not respond to the voice of others, the voice of anyone; at the sound of their voices, he speechlessly turns, indicating his decision to not reply, indicating his irresponsibility, and indicating his desire for solitude, the absence of others and the absolute silence of their absence. In the case of Jonah, though, this silence is tantamount to his death, ground-zero for the speaking being that nonetheless – living beyond death, “through death” (125) the narrator later posits – renews Jonah’s relationship with his own voice. Then, “in the darkness of the solitude that is death” (125) he will speak out.

Silence, harbinger of death, becomes the solitaire’s other. In the genesis of solitude, the solitaire faces up to this wager: Speak out, or die and never speak again. (As the narrator says later of the captive Scheherazade, “The story begins with the end. Speak or die… The story begins with death” (149).) Setting aside Jonah’s function for God, the solitaire here must establish the terms of his solitude: dead, he and solitude become nothing. Solitude, then, depends on this strange negotiation between being and responsibility: if the solitaire is to keep his silence – the contract of his solitude – he must eventually address a figure of death, and in this address compromise his solitude. Solitude is not an absolute condition, not a state of being with fixed borders, not a utopia: the solitaire communicates and negotiates beyond itself, with those who would terminate his solitude, his silence and absence. The delicate balance created by this negotiation describes the ethical parameter to solitude: it is not only the solitaire’s duty to respond to the other (even if this is his own silence, his imminent death), it is also the
responsibility of others, those he has abandoned, to address the solitaire in such a way – assuming that the solitaire will not entirely return, and not renege on his solitude – that the negotiation is maintained.

For Auster, solitude, an impossible aloneness that is simultaneously an impossible union, exposes a moment where discourse must negotiate differences between the same and other, between what is identifiable or nameable, and what is different. Still, this negotiation does not operate like a conventional deal, since the solitaire will never return to his community. But at the same time, the solitaire, refusing to return and reintegrate, cannot entirely escape community, since refusal presupposes a kind of demand, summons, or responsibility. So an inequality is established in this meeting: the status quo places the burden of communication on the solitaire.

Blanchot, in his discussion of the arrival of autrui, calls this inequality a “curvature” of space, by which he means a context wherein the linear (spatial and temporal) relations of conventional dialogue break down: “Autrui is not on the same plane as myself. Man as autrui, always coming from the outside, always without a country in relation to me, a stranger to all possession… does not enter into dialogue with me.”8 The solitaire as autrui will return to the community, and words will be exchanged, but not, as Blanchot writes, dialogically; solitude will persist. In this negotiation, solitude exceeds itself, becomes much more than the space into which the solitaire retreats. “[T]he moment he began to try to speak of that solitude, he had become more than just himself” (Invention 139). Solitude, the following argument posits, becomes powerful, not in silence qua death, but at the border between community and solitaire, where discourse finds itself out of kilter, and where it must necessarily, as Blanchot writes, respond to

8 Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 57, my italics. IC hereafter.
an impossibility. This is the point at which, for both parties, speech and death, response and murder, become momentarily, precariously, equivalent.

To review the schema I have described: The power of solitude lies in its capacity to create a situation in which the dyad speak or die becomes unavoidable. The genesis of solitude is a moment of ontological peril. The solitaire faces his own absence, and faces up to (as the others he abandoned faced) his own silence. He will die unless he speaks out; he’ll die unless his own voice comes back to him, to remind and restore him, as the voice of an other, to himself. In this division the solitaire becomes something more than himself; but this excess is not exactly the solitaire’s movement from himself to a place beyond himself. Rather, the solitaire evacuates the self; there is nothing left in the silence; and only on the brink of his death – in his commitment to the silence – does he discover the impulse to speak with a new voice, as something other than himself. It is not the same figure, then, who returns, not the Cartesian thinker, not even the solitaire as such, as an abstraction. This thing that comes to address the community is the subject that is apprehended, as Judith Butler proposes early in *Frames of War*, but not recognized; not of ours, but neither entirely other.9

Memory, here, “not simply as the resurrection of one’s private past, but an immersion in the past of others” (139), undergoes a similar split: at the limit of memory the solitaire discovers

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9 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 5. Nor is this figure, for the time being, *homo sacer*, insofar as the solitaire’s voice and statement disrupt the force of normativity that the community, not the sovereign, embodies. That the solitaire can speak out – indeed, that it must speak out in the face of death – sets it apart from *homo sacer*, who it could be argued is speechless in proportion to the force of speech owned exclusively by the sovereign. In fact, the sovereign and *homo sacer* are rather intimate in their cohabitation outside of the political body proper. Or, *homo sacer* is absolutely passive before the absolute force of the sovereign. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): “The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expressed precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment” (83). The solitaire, rather, is not absolutely passive: indeed, as *autrui* it exposes the community it addresses to the passivity its organizing principles seek to overcome, that is, to its essential disintegration. More on the question of passivity, below, in Part II.
his responsibility, in his participation in the lives of others, for others. Thus the solitary self comes to recognize at this limit his inherent plurality, his multiplicity. Contrary to the self-obsessed notion that certain radical conditions lead to the discovery of the other-in-the-self, as Kathrin Krämer’s otherwise fascinating reading of Auster’s work claims, this is the lesson of solitude: the solitaire’s movement toward pure individuality reveals the impossibility of such individuality. But is it that only the solitaire – emblem to the community of individuality – realizes this? Rather, the solitaire would say (or signify how) community begins not in contracts between individuals but in a memory of multiplicity, a memory of the primary condition of speech which momentarily balances the address to another with the threat to his life. The ethical dimension of solitude, the secret violence of speak or die created by being absolutely alone, excludes pure individuality and necessitates a kind of dialogue with others – a kind of dialogue since there is no equality between the voices of the community and autrui – a dialogue over and about difference that is the foundation of community.

What I’m calling the solitaire’s ineluctable decision between speaking again and dying is approximately how Cynthia Ozick, in “Metaphor and Memory,” defines metaphor. A memory of hardship (“bondage”) shared with others makes metaphor, and I would argue community, as well, possible. The solitaire remembers the moment he chooses to respond to the other – God, say – over his or the other’s death. “Without the metaphor of memory and history,” Ozick writes, “we cannot imagine the life of the Other… Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger’s heart” (279). Opposed to metonymy,
which would function in the trace of an element recognizable by both parties – the community, the solitaire – metaphor, which transcends historical contexts and can substitute one linguistic thing (an utterance, or another metaphor, for instance) entirely for another, captures the death-sentence of solitude, the moment when a response to the impossible becomes itself impossible to deny. Metonymy will always name what is already possible in a context-reality extrinsic to the expression: ships generally have sails in historical reality, thus “sail” metonymically denotes to everyone sharing that reality – a mercantile, coastal community, for instance – “ship.” Only through metaphor – “In the darkness of the solitude that is death” (Invention 125) – in its capacity to forcefully maintain difference, a juxtaposition that is not without its problems, does the peril of solitude come across and come back to the community. This return and connection is not precisely, as Ozick argues, in reciprocity (279), since the solitaire as autrui cannot speak on equal terms with the community. It is the necessity to speak, though, and in this frame of conflicted dialogue, of speaking in metaphors which communicate to some degree impossibilities, that the ethics of solitude begins to find expression.

**Solitary Statements**

In the rift between thinking and writing, thought works associatively and, in some modes, metonymically: one thing evokes an aspect of something else. In this movement, thought does not *name* objects. Thought only accounts for relationships, transitions, tactile immediacy. *Writing* names. More importantly, if some modes of thought (and experience) function paratactically – a process without hierarchical or logical descriptions – conventional narration works at reducing associations and ambiguities (between objects and phrases) and

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establishing the presentation of things as discrete and orderly units, as a hypotactic and iterable structure. That is, narrative structure facilitates narration, acts of re-telling.\(^\text{13}\) So what kind of narrative occurs here, on the side of our narrator’s thoughts? Is this testimony? Is this “a story that can be told from numerous incommensurable perspectives”?\(^\text{14}\) Is this “the witness’s obedience to the compulsion to speak,” where his words are “neither a reflection of the event (which is irretrievably lost to memory) nor unaffected by it”?\(^\text{15}\) The narrator of *Invention* offers glimpses of these aspects – a plurality of incommensurable accounts, his compulsion to speak about what cannot entirely be recovered – but is it accurate to conclude that his narrative is testimonial? If so, testimony to what?

Many responses to this book focus on the absence of father figures, and on the solipsistic impossibility of understanding another’s solitude. While these readings are probably correct, they are also impatient and shortsighted.\(^\text{16}\) Any discussion of testimony in this context – the son’s account of his absent father – that does not account for the enigmatic figure at the heart of the book, Margalit Lichtenstein, whose infant brilliance is noted only in her father’s buried testament (83, 84), fails at a responsible consideration of both the narrator’s testimony and what the narrator, directly or indirectly, witnessed. The motive in *Invention* for the narrator’s testimony cannot, in the final analysis, be identified as one particular thing, but is only evident in traces in his multifaceted account.


\(^\text{16}\) For observations on the self-evident fact that Sam Auster was an absent father, see William Dow, “Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*: Glimmers in a Reach to Authenticity,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39.3 (Spring 1998), 275; Derek Rubin, “‘The Hunger Must Be Preserved at All Cost’: A Reading of *The Invention of Solitude*,” *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995), 63; Mark Brown, *Paul Auster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 22; and Springer, 86.
The narrator’s language, to echo Lars Iyer’s definition of testimony, possesses “an affective force” (58) which cuts against the grain of conventional memoir or historiographic narration. This pre-discursive mode, as I said above, sides with the narrator’s thoughts and does not entirely communicate objective knowledge. He explicitly sets his words against unverifiable past “things,” events: “If there is nothing, then, but silence, is it not presumptuous of me to speak? And yet: if there had been anything more than silence, would I have felt the need to speak in the first place?... I can remain silent, or else I can speak of things that cannot be verified” (Invention 20). The form of this account reveals as much, in the absence of evidence, as any objective content would. The evidence lies in the telling, in the affective performance of

*Invention*:

I want to postpone the moment of ending, and in this way delude myself into thinking that I have only just begun... No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever. (65)

The words between the narrator and the object of his account become objects themselves, mediating and mobile particles that keep the silence of the end at bay. This silence is significant for our narrator not only because it will mark the absolute disappearance of his father in his memory, but will also demonstrate the end of dialogue between the solitaire and us. As Blanchot observes, on the language between the writer and his reader, and on the difference between written and spoken words, writing breaks the bond that unites the word with its speaker:

[Writing] is to destroy the relation which, determining that I speak toward ‘you,’ gives me room to speak within the understanding which my word receives from you… To write is to break this bond. To write is, moreover, to withdraw language from the world, to detach it from what makes it a power according to which, when I speak, it is the world that declares itself. (*Space* 26)

Writing in this sense generalizes language to a level of indifference. Our narrator’s performance, however, resists such generalization. His fragmented account aims at immediacy; and his
existence is inseparable from what he needs to say. As we found near the end of the first part of *Invention*, in the repeated reference to Blanchot’s story, whose narrator demonstrates the same compulsion – he would stop and release the extraordinary, but he is “no longer able to speak of it”17 – the narrator will not give himself over to someone else’s end, the third-person narration of the community, for instance. In this way, the affective force of his narrative constantly reminds us of this precarious condition, the identification of his being with his words.

The tension between the narrator’s voice and the body of objective knowledge his account might enter is exemplified in the scene late in the narrative when A. reflects on poems he wrote to a girl he was in love with: “[H]e remembered having written those poems. At that moment the equation became clear to him: the act of writing as an act of memory. For the fact of the matter is, other than the poems themselves, he has not forgotten any of it” (142). While A. had written the poems in “an attempt to capture the memory of that day,” it is not clear that his writing records what he wants to remember. If A. can’t recall “the poems themselves,” then his act of writing the poems recorded, not poetic particulars, but an act of remembering.

While for the narrator the act of writing becomes a physical manifestation of memory, the content of what is written is not necessarily identical to what is remembered. The content is forgotten in his writing. This displacement – another rift between thinking and writing – suggests a writer who, as Blanchot observed, does not strive for beautiful language; not all writers, masters of their craft, aim at distilling impurities from the language of representation. Rather, for Blanchot and A., the writer becomes the object of language’s scrutiny. What is finally written, then, essentially marks the writer’s disappearance. In a key passage of Blanchot’s, he writes:

The third person substituting for the ‘I’: such is the solitude that comes to the writer on account of the work. It does not denote objective disinterestedness, creative detachment.

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It does not glorify consciousness in someone other than myself… The third person is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say ‘I’; it is his not being himself. (Space 28)

Thus the irony, as Blanchot sees it, of such things as the writer’s journal. If his language underwrites his gradual disappearance, what can the journal possibly capture, confess? “It is a memorial,” Blanchot writes a few pages later. The journal alone, apart from its content, memorializes its lost author, and this remembrance is recorded in the writing – not the content, but the meta-content – which speaks for forgetfulness, the absence motivating and inseparable from memory (Space 30).

The act of writing remembers something apart from what is written. As a mnemonic device, writing does not evoke an object – or glimpse of “authenticity,” as William Dow claims (276) – as much as an association with something not written.18 Writing has a performative function apart from form and content: the activity itself, prior to form, serves the purposes of memory. Thus anything could be written (any content, in any form) if all that that writing serves is memory. This possibility releases the writing of memories (memoir, say) from the duty of objective recollection. Blanchot remarks in a difficult passage near the end of “Forgetful Memory” how the forgotten and memory are relational forms that consciousness (the subject) does not entirely control. What is absent in the forgotten, with its correlative in memory, is never entirely presentable; the absence always persists. “Forgetting is no more than the things forgotten; nonetheless, by a power of forgetting that surpasses us and greatly surpasses them, it leaves us in a relation with what we forgot” (IC 315). To overcome this power, however, is to reduce the relational form to a manner of identification; when forgetful memory is taken to be purely functional, a way to overcome the separation between the forgotten and the remembered,

18 In the same essay, also note Dow’s discussion of Invention’s “diaristic” form. William Dow, “Paul Auster’s The Invention of Solitude: Glimmers in a Reach to Authenticity,” 275.
the difference between the forgotten thing and its present memory is reduced to nothing. But for
forgetting to maintain its “poetic dignity,” Blanchot writes, “it must escape our mastery, ruin our
power to dispose of it, ruin even forgetting as depth” and always remain a mediating force apart
from (and between) both the remembering subject and the forgotten object. Otherwise,
pretending that the exercise of memory can plumb the depth of forgetting spins the subject into
the paradox, Blanchot concludes, of forgetting “without the possibility of forgetting” (IC 316).
The possibility of forgetting lives only in forgetful memory as mediation and not subject
subordinate skill.

The narrating subject, I would now like to consider, is not Invention’s focus. Like
Blanchot, Auster’s indifference to personality as such shifts our attention to the language of and
in solitude.19 The labor of narration and the labor of inscriptions for memory are the central
characters of this text.20 And in Invention’s capacity for testimony we see how the labor for
memory reflects the burdens for expression of its exilic and solitary figures. Against the notion
that a solitary self will somehow emerge from the conflicts of this text, there is instead a latent
multiplicity about the narrator’s project: he speaks in bits and pieces, paratactically, often in the
voices of others.

The Solitude of Testimony

In the aesthetics of parataxis, we find forms of detachment, the uncertainty of beginnings
and endings, and silences that compel other, further silences. The narrator is often reluctant to

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19 No character in Invention “develops,” as we say of novelistic characters; Auster’s characters appear and disappear
like shadows. On narrative personality for Blanchot, see Geoffrey Hartman, “Maurice Blanchot: Philosopher-
20 In addition to paper or screen, writing inscribes memory; the act of writing, I’ve claimed, marks the tissues of, and
for, memory. Keep in mind, as well, the performative qualities of writing and speech – the overt doing of things with
words – introduced here. Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which consider performative language in interrogation and testimony,
will revisit similar points.
speak; yet, dutifully moved by an unsettled event in his past, he must speak. Like testimony, this narrative emerges at the limit between representational language, memory, and historical events; a limit beyond which is the silence of forgetting or the silence of the unspeakable. “The first word appears only at a moment when nothing can be explained anymore, at some instant of experience that defies all sense. To be reduced to saying nothing. Or else, to say to himself: this is what haunts me. And then to realize, almost in the same breath, that this is what he haunts” (81). At the edge of meaning and narration, “reduced to saying nothing,” narration becomes austere and privative. The narrator waits for silence, the domain of haunting where communication breaks down and where bodies, in various conditions of being, confront one another without being able to address each other. At this threshold, language remains a possibility only through parataxis, a mode of discourse, N. Katherine Hayles has argued, suited for forms of linguistic disembodiment.21 Because of the separation of utterances from subjectivity – in the domain of language’s murmur (“[This] language without silence, of this infinite murmur opened near us, underneath our common utterances, which seems an eternal spring”22 – we find, particularly in the second part of Invention, “The Book of Memory,” an increased frequency of citation.23 The narrator’s words are very often those of not just an other, but of others, in a conflation of historical voices:

To repeat Pascal: “All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only: that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room.” At roughly the same time these words entered the Pensées, Descartes wrote to a friend in France from his room in that house in Amsterdam. “Is there any country... in which one can enjoy freedom as enormously as one does here?” Everything, in some sense, can be read as a gloss on everything else. To imagine Anne Frank, for example, had she lived on after the war, reading Descartes’

22 Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 181.
23 Also see Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 48: “Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to silence if one wants, at last, to be heard.”
Meditations as a university student in Amsterdam. To imagine a solitude so crushing, so unconsolable, that one stops breathing for hundreds of years. (83)

While the narrator uses the words of others to make his points, in the parataxis of citation the appearance of this evidence is not always predictable. The connections between writers are not always clear. Here, a room in Amsterdam pulls Pascal, Descartes, and Frank together. But does this metonymic chain lead us to conclude, with the narrator, that “Everything... can be read as a gloss on everything else”?

There is a tendency in Invention, and in responses to this text, to totalize solitude, to generalize an experience to such a broad degree that concepts such as solitude appear everywhere. Complicating the matter, however, is Invention’s fragmentation; it is not a conventional narrative in that it does not have an obvious plot, and does not propose a central problem and work at resolving this problem. I think the generalization of solitude, then, can only be read as an effect of the narrator’s condition. Generalization offers this transparent quality to the text: because of his condition, the solitary writer can only read his environment as a “gloss on everything else,” since “everything else” is not present to speak for itself. It is an absence of difference, of heterogeneity, in perception that is at once problematic but also revealing; difference is present – in the rooms of Frank, Pascal, and Descartes, for instance – but in solitude these objects only find expression in the narrator’s solipsistic voice.

Solipsism, however, does not explain the difference between Pascal’s complacent confinement and Frank’s imprisonment. The connection between these figures is implicit or else impossible for the narrator to articulate. What happens here is a shift from a form of metonym –

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24 The metonym here is more complex than the association of three writers in their respective rooms: the source of the metonym is not the room, or its house, but a structure connecting pleasure with meditation and free movement. One figure (Pascal) finds happiness by choosing to stay quietly at home; another (Descartes) chooses to explore the terrain of his enlightened world; the third (Frank), like a cross-road between Pascal and Descartes, innocently dreams of the happiness of free movement while imprisoned in her home, in her own land.

25 Ilena Shiloh’s “Solitude is a universal condition and ... all artistic endeavor is the product of a solitary mind” (Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 22) models many of the responses to solitude that Invention elicits; the claim also reiterates the notion of solitude as “complacent isolation of individualism” that Blanchot is set against (Space 21).
using a room to signify aspects of the lives of three historic figures – toward metaphor, where the law of substitution permits the gloss of “everything” by “everything else.” But the narrator cannot account for this shift. Where explanation would occur, following the thought of Anne Frank as a university student, the narrator succumbs to metaphor – which one might diagram as the transformation of Frank into Pascal, and read as “Anne Frank is a happy girl because of how quietly she stays in her room” – demonstrates how, following Bernard-Donals’s reading of Ozick’s “Metaphor and Memory,” an ethical imperative is impossible to contextualize. Is there any way to justify Anne Frank’s imprisonment? That is the implicit question in the narrator’s alignment of figures and rooms. And the shift toward metaphor – turning, as I’ve read the passage, Frank into Pascal – responds to this question with “No.” The narrator succumbs at the idea of substituting Frank with anyone else. So reading “everything” as an aspect of “everything else” is not, at face value, a positive assertion. In fact, this assertion, “Everything… can be read as a gloss on everything else” echoes a statement made by Edmond Jabès, in his interview with Auster:

> What I find truly fantastic is that when you call something ‘invisible,’ you are naming something, which means that you are almost giving a representation of the invisible. In other words, when you say ‘invisible,’ you are pointing to the boundary between the visible and the invisible; there are words for that. But when you can’t say the word, you are standing before nothing. And for me this is even more powerful because, finally, there is a visible in the invisible, just as there is an invisible in the visible. And this, this abolishes everything.26

> It is not, then, global connectivity that the narrator suggests in his formula. Rather, the “everything” he speaks of describes, in Jabès’s term, the namable, which is the presence of an unspeakable nothing. Imagining Frank as a university student, as a healthy member of an enlightened community, evokes for the narrator not the possible, the namable, but the suffocating

death of solitude. This juxtaposition, a moment of paratactic conflict, is where, in Bernard-Donals’s analysis, “Metaphor forces the unfamiliar to be spoken in terms of that which we know, and in doing so provides the impossible with a moral force: we are forced to make a connection that is nonetheless impossible to make” (100). The alignment of Pascal’s thoughtful solitude and Frank’s imprisonment is not, the narrator suggests, impossible to make. (Everything, after all, is an aspect of everything else.) By most possible standards, most categories of identification, Frank could be like another Pascal or another Descartes. The impossibility lies in the mystery of her interruption, of why Frank was made a prisoner in the same context that made most others thoughtful dwellers. Frank, in Jabès’s terms, is the invisible before or beyond the invisible of the visible.

That said, I don’t think the increased frequency of citation in “The Book of Memory,” and the aporia suggested by Frank, signify the growing complexity of a particular question as much as they demonstrate a dialectic of irrepressible speech, a plurality of voices discovered in solitude, against absolute silence. The solitaire’s monologue is unsustainable. Other voices emerge and invade, as we’ve already seen with Jonah, the space at the genesis of solitude. A.’s own memory persists in this way, an incessant murmur:

Then he must speak to it [his memory] in his own voice and tell it to stop, thus returning it to the silence it came from. At other times it sings to him. At still other times it whispers. And then there are times it merely hums, or babbles, or cries out in pain. And even when it says nothing, he knows it is still there, and in the silence of this voice that says nothing, he waits for it to speak. (124)

But the silence in this waiting is already filled, or spoken for, as Jabès would say; this namable silence is not silence by virtue of our recognition of its silence.

The silence of A.’s memory is quickly interrupted by what follows in the same passage, the parallel, paratactic, voice of Jeremiah. “Then said I, Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak:
for I am a child.... Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (124). The voice of the other – who will speak to and for the solitaire – is omnipresent. He’ll speak after us, after the “I” narrator, following the flight, say, of Jonah. This other appears as memory (internally), or God: it is a temporally protracted voice, a voice that experiences more of the world than the present “I” does. Paratactically, this speaker understands connections invisible in the horizontal plane of narrative (metonymic, historical) experience. And yet, the other-speaker, “As if from outside of that solitude” (124), cannot understand, and ultimately speak for, an essential component of the solitaire’s flight. When Jonah flees, he takes his singular voice, responsibility, and (however it’s going to manifest) his prophecy. God speaks to Jonah, and Jonah, turning away, refuses to answer. How could Jonah speak? How could he engage in dialogue with God? The third person narrator for Jonah, then, reveals more than just Jonah’s obstinacy; more than “Since he refuses to speak, we’ll speak for him.” The third person is not Jonah’s proxy. The third person cannot reflect Jonah’s will – which did not, and would not, agree to the other’s account. Thus the third person narrator reveals the prophet’s burden of responsibility. Jonah faces the impossibility of speaking for others; in prophecy, he will always be a kind of “third person singular,” always the “he,” or spokesperson for someone else. And since the prophet always represents an other, and never represents himself, his voice and speech function only insofar as they conceal a displacement of being.

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27 See Auerbach on verticality: the connection of paratactic events “can only be established if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence” (Mimesis 74).
The narrator’s wandering recollections find an analogue in parataxis, which presents narrative components serially, strung together without any explicit higher principle of organization. The inverse of this reading device – wandering content necessitating paratactic form – is equally useful to keep in hand: paratactic structure is a formal metaphor for wandering content. The collection of thoughts, the list and divagating record is cumulative: the content of the story requires such gathering forays, despite the labor this demands. “Again and again I have watched my thoughts trail off from the thing in front of me,” writes the narrator early on: “No sooner have I thought one thing than it evokes another thing, and then another thing, until there is an accumulation of detail so dense that I feel I am going to suffocate” (32). But is there an alternative for our narrator? Is it possible for his narrative, his “accumulation of detail,” to not become dense but light, translucent? One wouldn’t expect parataxis to slow down narrative movement; it is flighty, impatient, whimsical. Still, in its capacity to attend to minute detail, parataxis suggests a sense of dwelling, of stasis. Parataxis, throwing off laws of subordinating relations, has license to report ad infinitum on whatever falls in its line of sight. The potential immobility suggested by such unlimited and unstructured reporting, however, contradicts the formal feature of parataxis, namely that paratactic components seldom dwell for too long on one idea or in one place. Thus we should consider two kinds of “dwelling,” and two kinds of motion for parataxis. While the reader and narrator might shift quickly from one thing to another, the end, or purpose, of this shifting movement is never in sight; we are – like Sebald’s exiles – looking for a story in sand and seashells. We constantly move through a limitless diegetic world (a world which folds mimetic spaces into literary ones), but at the same time dwell, fixated, on particularities. Parataxis, that is to say, searches. If hypotaxis offers judgment, parataxis is the
investigation. In this way, the narrator’s paratactic and peripatetic motions are less indicative of impatience or some kind of stubborn insubordination about his character than they are indicative of necessity; parataxis is the effect in his narrative of an undisclosed event that is the cause of the narrative itself. Parataxis is not the narrator’s prerogative. But because of the event at the origin of the narrative, parataxis, as an effect of this event, is for the narrator and his audience the only mode of expression capable of recovering some understanding of what happened.

Coping with his father’s death, for instance, the narrator has no choice but to collect and sort through the minutiae of Sam Auster’s remaining things. About the “soapy lubricant” on the inside of his father’s ring, the narrator writes, “the lotion had been used to remove the ring from his finger. I tried to imagine the person whose job it was to do such things. I did not feel horror so much as fascination. I remember thinking to myself: I have entered the world of facts, the realm of brute particulars. The ring was gold, with a black setting” (65). Such particulars challenge the narrator in their resistance to generalization. This greasy ring won’t fit; its strange particularity doesn’t make sense. Even the hypothetical explanation for the lubricant appears to leave something out: “I tried to imagine the person whose job it was...” Altogether, the objects facilitating the narrator’s memory and construction of his father fail to restore the remembered original. Such things, then, challenge not only the narrator’s efforts but also a sense of being; such radical particles imply how some one in some mode of existence is irreducible and individual. And yet Sam Auster is divided; we’re cleaning up things of his. “From the house: a watch, a few sweaters, a jacket, an alarm clock, six tennis rackets... The blank photograph album, This Is Our Life: The Austers... Objects, it seems, are no more than objects... And sooner or later they will break down, fall apart, and have to be thrown away. I doubt that it will even seem to matter” (68). A tension arises in such paratactic lists between the project of memory,
recollection, the writing of the lost man, and the method of this project: the collection of objects (that are “no more than objects”) works against the project of memory that would somehow transform these objects (leftovers that are exhausted of use and meaning) into other objects, into meaningful things. As it is, the object lives alone, indifferent to its surroundings; the project of narration, this suggests, is to reduce this objective indifference and restore difference in order to prevent an ending where nothing “will even seem to matter.” Narration matters insofar as it makes the objects of the narrative important for others.

Objects, however, always raise difficulties for narration. The paratactic list, until it is subsumed by narrative order, represents an excess of particularity. Auster’s narrator, grasping at what is beyond the reach of his memory, communicates more than is necessary for the representation of an image; his repetitions and redundancies reveal his desperation in the face of memorial things that are not only out of reach but impossible to contain. Near the conclusion to “The Book of Memory,” the magnitude of the memorial project is signified by an incantatory, and restraining, anaphora: “… He remembers thinking the world was flat. He remembers learning how to tie his shoes. He remembers that his father’s clothes were kept in the closet in his room and that it was the noise of hangers clicking together in the morning what would wake him up. He remembers…” (166). Such excesses, Josh Cohen argues in “Desertions,” demonstrate “the doubled movement of writing,” an “aporetic motion” that occurs between the writer’s word and the object his eye wants to describe.28 “Trailing behind or running ahead of its object, writing is condemned to be both ‘never too late’ and ‘always too late,’ to await the promised beginning and to mourn the unrealized end.”29 The disintegration implied by the

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biographical précis (166) reveals the narrator’s incapacity to fully grasp the objects he needs for his narration. The repetition of “he remembers” might secure the remembering subject for the duration of this passage but it also demonstrates the narrator’s reluctance to move away from the possibility of A.’s remembrance; in pulling together this multiplicity of objective things and historical moments, all the narrator is certain of is the subject and his act of memory.

More than an idiosyncratic complexity for our narrator, or of his parataxis or the puzzles of memory, the fragment itself raises challenges for narration. What, precisely, is writing in fragments? Is such a text a former totality that, deteriorated by time, can only emerge in aleatory discharges; such that reading the fragment reads not only someone’s work but also traces of the impersonal force of history? Or can the fragment, and the work in fragments, be an aesthetic object in itself; that is, can the fragment ever represent formal completion? The fragment, it appears, lives between these conditions, as an aesthetic and historical undecidable. The fragment carries a solitude of its own. That is, we recognize in the fragment, in fragmentation, in its detached wholeness that reveals the inherent fragmentation of any individual or wholeness, a connection with the solitaire, autrui at our doorstep. Being alone, recall, presents us with a paradoxical oneness – or individuality – that is simultaneously a part of a greater whole: the solitaire, like the fragment, functions in a liminal condition between the absolutes of solitude and community. And, like the fragment, his detached wholeness reveals a veiled solitude inherent in the networks of community.

Contrary to the assumptions that the solitaire rebels, and that the fragment follows from a past totality, one might consider an inverse supposition: community rebels and totality follows fragmentation. Blanchot, in The Writing of the Disaster, suggests such inversions.

“Fragmentation,” he writes,
the mark of a coherence all the firmer in that it has to come undone in order to be reached, and reached not through a dispersed system, or through dispersion as a system, for fragmentation is the pulling to pieces (the tearing) of that which never has preexisted (really or ideally) as a whole, nor can it ever be reassembled in any future presence whatever. Fragmentation is the spacing, the separation effected by a temporalization which can only be understood – fallaciously – as the absence of time.\(^\text{30}\)

The fragment is, and is indicative of, system’s demand for order. Not necessarily disruptive, the fragment reflects the determination of coherence for the system; it is a product not of its own obstinacy but of our (system’s) fallacious name, a “temporalization” outside of time. Thus the fragment exposes a secret of form, which is namely, recalling Blanchot’s discussion of autrui in *The Infinite Conversation*, the exclusion of impossibility. In this regard, form does not respond to difference; form equates, form balances. So if the fragment marks any kind of disruption, or any kind of violence, then for Blanchot this disruption is equally a part of the formal system as it is anything that visits this system from the outside. In the primordial state Blanchot’s fragment imagines, form is what disrupts the presence and multiplicity of the fragment.

I make this brief excursus on the problem of fragmentation because I think the fragment’s relation to totality models an analogous problem with testimony. Responses to testimony always risk, in Blanchot’s terms, the fallacy of a name. Testimony *teaches* insofar as it necessitates a certain narrative potential for testimony, but this narration – the communication of the singularity of the event – must also communicate a particular impasse, an impossibility, for and about this narration; it must communicate a singular absence that forestalls and interrupts the negation of the witness’s experience by the generalizing aim of knowledge (Iyer 59). Testimony must, in other words, remain fragmented even in its potential for unity.

This burden for the act of testimony is evident in Israel Lichtenstein’s final words, cited by the narrator following his thesis, “Memory: the space in which a thing happens for the second time” (Auster 83):

I hid the material [of the archive]... To survive and remain alive after such horrible murders and massacres is impossible. Therefore I write this testament of mine. Perhaps I am not worthy of being remembered... I want only a remembrance, so that my family, brother and sister abroad, maybe know what has become of my remains... I want my wife to be remembered... Now together with me, we are preparing to receive death... I want my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit, 20 months old today. Has mastered Yiddish perfectly, speaks a pure Yiddish... (84)

Lichtenstein asks in this statement – words buried with archive material, all for the anonymity and uncertainty of the future – to be remembered, like the archival material itself, only as remains for his brother and sister; additionally, following numerous ellipses, he asks that his daughter, Margalit, who is practically an infant, be remembered for her gift of language, her precocious talents in Yiddish. The burden on language in this passage is several fold:

Lichtenstein’s words and the archive materials are buried in a Warsaw ghetto, on the eve of its destruction; they are destined, like Mandelstam’s words, for empty space, for nobody. For such buried, disembodied words, there is no telling whether or not they will surface in the future and communicate Lichtenstein’s testament, an account in response to the impossibility of the speaker’s survival. These are words, in Blanchot’s phrase, without power; they are the only way to respond to the exigency raised by the unknown (IC 65). As with Lichtenstein’s daughter: her gift of language is only for her parents, momentarily for some of their friends. Her prolixity we’ll never hear but can only know through its trace in her father’s testimony, which is itself – “To survive and remain alive… is impossible” – a trace of the man’s voice. This out-of-bound condition of the Lichtensteins’ words – the awful irony that the child gifted with speech (like Cassandra) cannot speak for herself – words expressed without a guarantee and without a future:
all testament works in this paradox, in that testimony, similar to prophecy, at once needs a temporal framework for speech but at the same time undermines this framework. Lichtenstein “speaks” to us of a moment that is out of time (in its wonder or horror) but that is also, for the witness, entirely of time, as a moment above all moments.

How does one respond to such words, to “events whose avowal demands an affective and immediate response” without “subsuming them as particulars beneath a universal”? Even apart from historiographical discourse, can dialogue on equal terms answer the pleas of testament? Testimony, while about an affective, immediate experience, could seek to expel the forces of affection and immediacy; the witness does not want the contingencies motivating his testimony repeated. In this consideration, testimony demands not an immediate response but an end to immediacy, demands a restoration of the logic of mediation that the witnessed event destroyed. In short, testimony questions an absence of mediation, the absence of a third party (logic, for instance) that would mitigate the extreme differences between one witness’s account and another, and between the witness and the event. For testimony to function beyond the perpetuation of nonsense – an oblique representation of the violence of the event – it must elicit answers that restore the mediating function of language.

This restoration, however, is the most vexing matter. As we have already seen, and as many discussions of testimony point out, the response to testimony that brings the witness’s words back into the fold necessarily fails to grasp the singularity of the event, and once more subsumes her words “as particulars beneath a universal” (Iyer 77). Such reception, it’s safe to say, is the easy part of this question. The complexity begins in considering how the response to testimony – like totality in the face of a strange fragment – cannot assert that testimony accounts

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for a breakdown in knowledge without undermining the body of knowledge behind the response. The witness speaks to and from our knowledge, but also of a condition without this knowledge. It is as though the precocious toddler Margalit, with her perfect Yiddish, came before us: she’s wonderful but also beyond explanation. So, while a body of knowledge remains – we hear the words of the witness – in the aftermath of destruction, this knowledge is no longer sorting and ordering in the way it was before, no longer seeking sameness. The figure of Margalit proposes knowledge as a totality reflected in and speculated by the fragment, the testament. This speculation is the inversion of totality I discussed above: testimony turns the body of knowledge around and proposes the primacy, and endurance, of singular statements. Margalit symbolizes how totality, not singularity, disrupts discourse. (Like Cassandra, cursed by Apollo, god of sun and revelation, the child Margalit symbolizes a threat – her inexplicable gift for Yiddish! – to systematic authority.) Thus fragmentary language – lists, paratactic assemblages, incomplete utterances – resists discourse’s power to objectify, instrumentalize, and name. Lichtenstein’s words incorrigibly let his testament – the things of the archive, his wife, friends, and daughter – stand alone and speak for itself. His voice, then, is subordinate to that of his powerless words, words without a reflexive “commentary,” without a higher logic. Imagining the knowledge of fragments – a fragmentary totality – then puts the reader in a similar predicament. Dispossessed of our autonomous voice, we respond to these words “without common sense and without a language in common” (Iyer 78).

32 In The Infinite Conversation, Blanchot observes how everyday speech functions with various duplicities: everyday speech, for instance, follows itself, always re-addressing and explaining itself. “The man who speaks can assist his speech; he is always ready to answer for it” (56). Speech for autrui, however, requires a “non-dialectical experience”: “The inequality in question signifies perhaps nothing other than a speech that would speak without leveling, without identifying, that is, without tending toward the identity implied by satisfaction and full understanding” (63).
From the side of the fragment, we discover how testimony exposes knowledge’s desire for, and power of, corroboration. In the absence of these accounts, we learn, not precisely through testimony’s content but by its solitude, of the event’s violence towards others and towards language. Testimony, even the plurality of testimony, functions by this incommensurability of the truth of witnessing with the truth of knowledge. “The need to bear witness is the obligation of a testimony that can only be given – and given only in the singularity of each individual – by the impossible witnesses – the witnesses of the impossible” (Iyer 78).  

We have seen a similar burden for language in Jonah’s dilemma. Encumbered with the power of prophecy, whether he speaks or doesn’t, the future comes down. Temporality is leveled out. The content of his imminent speech is stripped of significance. For Jonah, only the performance of language – like the performance of his silence, his flight from God – will have meaning. So it is for Israel Lichtenstein. The act of writing the testament and burying it with other texts testifies to more than anything actual speech could say. Like prophecy, the act of this testament reveals an impossibility of the future that everyday speech never grasps. Only this other speech (prophetic, testimonial) reveals the “abyss” hidden by the everyday, in that it consigns things that have not yet happened to the past, to an ‘already’ that is forever behind itself, and in this space between utterance and act, word after word, a chasm begins to open, and for one to contemplate such emptiness for any length of time is to grow dizzy, to feel oneself falling into the abyss. (Invention 127)  

So this speech, in its resistance to the ossifying forces of community, never transforms into what was said: prophecy, answering God’s request, or testimony, responding to an impossibility, transcends context and community, and thrusts the people of its narrative scope, “stripped of their power and separated from the possible” into “the bare relationship in which they had been

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in the desert and which is the desert itself.” 34 In this way *Invention*, from the side of the fragment, exposes in the solitaire’s silence the most difficult of dialogues that must occur at the threshold between the solitaire and community.

Part II

*In the Shadow of Annihilation*

There is a photograph that appears late in the third chapter of W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* that provides a glimpse of what is probably the concentration camp Bergen Belsen.35 The photograph breaks a single sentence into two parts, and separates these parts by two pages. “During the last War, the report read,” the narrator writes, “Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945, but immediately after VE-Day returned home from Germany to manage his great uncle’s estates in Suffolk, a task he had fulfilled in exemplary manner, at least until the mid-Fifties, as I knew from other sources” (59, 62). Syntactically, in its arrangement in this sentence between “1945” and “but immediately,” this uncaptioned photograph offers a view of how Bergen Belsen looked on the day it was liberated by Le Strange’s anti-tank regiment. This reading of the image, however, is anything but certain. The image itself is not clear; it is blown-up and out of focus. Those are trees, but what lies beneath them? Are those bodies? Where was this photograph taken – inside the camp? Outside? Structurally, the image also reminds us of a photograph that appears just pages earlier, of men standing in piles of dead fish. Without explanation, without a caption, the photo of Bergen Belsen reveals too much of itself, its pixels, its dusty, atomistic make-up, and

34 Blanchot, “Prophetic Speech.” 81.
sacrifices the realism of sharpness, of verisimilitude for this proximity of observation, this aspect of Bergen Belsen, for a point of surprise, shock, and illegibility. What do we see in this photograph? In the various ways this image interrupts the narrative, the introduction of George Wyndham Le Strange, we discern further interruptions, the impact of interruption in several contexts. Sebald does not make an explicit comparison between the industrialization of fishing in the North Sea and the industrialization of genocide in the concentration camp. The juxtaposition of images representative of these “industries,” the montage, rather, draws attention to both the excessive violence of the systematized destruction of life and to a particular incapacity of the narrator to put such violence into words. Richard Crownshaw sees equivalence in this proximity of images: “The contiguity of narratives of fishing and genocide induces a reading of these images as visually rhyming. The equation of the two ‘natural’ events is further underlined by the narrator’s anthropomorphisation of the herring in wondering what they feel” (54). As does J.J. Long:

This alerts us to the fact that the archival ordering produces equivalences, not hierarchies, which results in a reduction of qualitative difference to mere quantitative difference and thwarts the attempt to determine which textual events are more important, and which are less. This problem has generated considerable unease among Sebald’s critics, particularly in relation to the proximity of a description of the death of millions of herring, and a photograph of Jewish corpses at Buchenwald [sic].

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36 On montage I have in mind Walter Benjamin’s expectation for objects in The Arcades Project. “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (460). For exemplary analysis of Benjamin’s thought in Sebald, see Eric Santner’s On Creaturely Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). What I would like to identify as the strangeness of objects, as the object as object, Santner describes like this: “[A]t some level we truly encounter the radical otherness of the ‘natural’ world only where it appears in the guise of historical remnant. The opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with the materiality of nature – the mute ‘thingness’ of nature – is, paradoxically, most palpable where we encounter it as a piece of human history that has become an enigmatic ruin beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning, to integrate it into our symbolic universe” (xv).


I, however, want to emphasize the space created by the juxtaposition. Insofar as these images, and particularly the latter, go without explanation, without caption, the capacity of the images in juxtaposition to interrupt narrative continuity signifies more about violence and a moment of aphasia for the narrator than a reading which closes this space, erasing the difference, does. Letting one image interpret or speak for the other, that is to say, attempts to reduce each image’s disruptive force.

Remember, it is the narrator who manages an illusion of continuity in his account. He is the one who, always at work against a sense of imminent destruction, metonymically or metaphorically folds one thing, one object, into another. “Much as in this continuous process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures, in Thomas Browne’s view. On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation” (Rings 23-24). Early in the narrative, textuality is identified as an apparent source of continuity. (For instance, the narrator finds the account of Le Strange, cited above, in a newspaper; the photograph, curiously, emerges from an unspecified source.) In his consideration of Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson, the narrator observes how the figures in the painting “focus on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being” (13); these figures look toward a representation of the body rather than at the real thing that lies right before them. The idea of the book, then, becomes for the narrator an entryway toward security, the stability of physical form. The anatomical atlas depicted in Rembrandt’s painting generalizes the body in such a way that the particulars of understanding and knowledge overcome – at least for the narrator – the particulars of physical individuality. The book, and the knowledge it purports to embody, offers to the narrator an escape from individual deterioration. There is the body of Aris Kindt, opened and identifiable by his parts, identifiable even by his misaligned
parts – “That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt” (17) – and there is the anatomical atlas into which everyone looks, the textual site where the body is immune to the destructive forces of the immediate world.

The mediation of textuality offers the narrator positions of critical distance, coigns of objectivity that he implicitly acknowledges as contingent on, and often metonymically determined by, the object of his inquiry. As the object of his focus degrades, however – or, in the narrator’s paraphrase of Thomas Browne, “On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation” (23-24) – this position of critical distance is gradually undone, and the narrator is compelled to shift his focus toward the figurative potential in a fragment of the deteriorating whole; he is compelled to take up, of the “sheer number of things” (36), something else. Some of these things he makes narrative use of and some come into view and accost him, if momentarily, with inscrutability. Somerleyten is “famed for the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exteriors; those who visited were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began” (33). We begin to feel the increasing effects of this perceptual limit, or hermeneutic impasse, on the narrator. He narrates, that is, as if to postpone a little longer a “descent into the dark,” “the catastrophe” (24) he identifies in the works of Thomas Browne.

Indirectly, then, the narration admits to a kind of desperation: the antagonist of the narrative is not a single figure or character but a force, a negating multiplicity, that may have its foundation in historical materials but that takes on a metaphysical quality that haunts the present existence of the narrator and his world. Thus the present of the narrative, the occasional return of the deictic “I,” not only maintains a dialectic balance for recounting past objects, it also indicates its precarious relationship with this past: “I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times
when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past” (3). The threat of destruction is somewhat postponed by the narrator’s contrived continuity of the narration. We might think of such continuity as a kind of precocious speech, “language that is at once both a presentation of the object of memory and which is at the same time a presentation of the object’s loss and of that loss’s effect upon the witness.” The descriptive utterance performatively reveals how the object (the referent for description) cannot be fully presented, and thus expresses – in presentational terms, again – the effects of the elusiveness of the object and the incapacity of speech on the presenter. So the presentation of this object also functions as a kind of confession of the speaker’s: the object elicits a self-reflective response, as if the object asks the speaker to begin with, “To describe this object I must first say how it cannot be described.”

The Disaster De-Scribes

Let’s think of this burden for description as something like the solitaire’s conflict with speech, which sets his utterance up against, aligned with, his death. For Sebald, the object that represents the detritus of history is impossible to describe; yet the description must be made. Thus, as in precocious speech, an incompleteness emerges, an irrecoverable loss in and for the object and in and for the language used to describe it. Sebald’s objects do not function so much as fragments that, when reassembled, might form the whole by which we study and know our history. Rather, these fragments function merely as fragments, neither more nor less than these, as endlessly interchangeable pieces that are not susceptible to the sorting and ordering that would lead us, through them, to an understanding of the catastrophic cause of their dispersal.

While the argument, here, is not about the solitaire as such, it is about the object-ness of the object, and – as another object in its midst – the object’s relation, without connection, to the narrating subject, a relation that structures and enforces his solitude.

Scenes such as the brief description of Bergen Belsen complicate the relation between the object as photograph and the textual narrative. To what audiences do these disparate parts speak? Does the image respond to the text, or vice versa? There is, as demonstrated in the scene of Frederick Farrar’s death (Rings 47), a quiet determinism about Sebald’s metonymic tapestry. Elements, aspects of the image or figure often foretell the fate of the whole image. Of course, such elements are discovered in retrospect: they do not foreshadow as much as they post-shadow events. These elements gain significance in light of what happens to the entire object. This phenomenon is a constitutive element of The Rings of Saturn, and appears as a process only in retrospective reading or reflection. While a conventional reading would take the particular – the “black leaves” of viola labradorica; the names of Frederick’s sisters – and see this as anticipatory of what will happen to the gardener, the opposite happens throughout Sebald’s narrative: the reader is compelled not to anticipate the future – the future, in that the narrative, like testimony, begins with its ending, is always already known, from moment to moment – but to always read backwards, to always identify in present moments of destruction earlier seeds of this destruction in the narrative.  

The most stunning metonymic metamorphosis occurs with the death of Frederick Farrar, brother to Violet, Iris and Rose (46). One morning, while tending his flower garden, Farrar’s robe accidentally catches fire and he burns to death; his body is found beside “the tiny viola labradorica with its almost black leaves” (47), as if the flower and man in this tragic moment traded parts, burnt skin for foliage.  

Jacques Derrida, in his reading of Blanchot’s “The Instant of My Death,” remarks how, in testimony, often, “Death has already taken place, however unexperienced its experience may remain in the absolute acceleration of a time infinitely contracted into the point of an instant... Everything, all of it, has already happened because we know what is going to happen... It is over; it is already over from the instant of the credits” (Maurice Blanchot, The Instant of My Death, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 62). Testimony is a strange narrative because its conclusion is already known. The end of the story motivates its beginning, its telling. How does this phenomenon differ from any story that wants to be told? A force of necessity: the conclusion to testimony
Reading in reverse – following the logic of a retrospective narrative – underscores how in any present moment of the narrative, in the “sheer number” of things, no single thing has any more or less significance than anything else. (Recall the piles, heaps, horrifying mountains of mundane household objects in Resnais’ *Night and Fog.*) What the narrator accounts for in any present moment cannot, by this principle, foreshadow an event because objects in the present are too often indistinguishable. It is following moments, flashes, of destruction – Frederick’s death, the suicides of others, as we will see – that objects from these sheer numbers are recalled, made distinctive, and given a mote of significance.

Thus the death of Le Strange, with whom we started, reminds us of, and compels a return to, the death of Frederick Farrar. The body of Le Strange, who was “reputed to have been surrounded, in later years, by all manner of feathered creatures,” is found transformed by death: his “pale skin was olive-green… his goose-grey eye was pitch-dark, and his snow-white hair had turned to raven-black” (64). This metamorphosis provides meaning where there is otherwise just another death. For this narrative, characters such as Le Strange and Farrar are not entirely removed from the materials of their lives; the bodies of these characters incorporate the things they do and the things they possess. And on the body’s destruction, with the figurative return of these attributes to the natural world, we witness a reconfiguration, and persistence, of the character.42

This form of resurrection, however, is not redemptive. Objects are not saved or preserved in any way by these returns. Rather, the resurrection signifies a cloying persistence in the narrator’s life and memory of what was inexplicably destroyed, and of what remains, and will

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42 As the narrator, early in *The Emigrants*, comments: “And so they are ever returning to us, the dead” (23). W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (*New York: New Directions, 1996*).
always remain, out of balance, as an inequality. So does the narrator want the ghost to be fully present in order to redeem that individual? Is he searching, through the murkiness of places like the Albion Hotel – “Outside was the beach, somewhere between the darkness and light, and nothing was moving, neither in the air nor on the land nor on the water” (43) – for direct access to the object or figure in itself? The haunting remnant is irredeemable and the narrator’s desire for some full presence, totality, is primarily a desire for engagement, a dialogue with the lost figure that will reveal a secret to the source of the destruction he bears witness to. But this engagement will not free the haunting figure of its burden, and will not necessarily prevent further destruction. Instead, this persistence of objects, figures and characters signifies the narrator’s effort, as in testimony, at finding words for what lost witnesses could not say. The statement of the witness (of the first witness, who perishes) is a form of remains without remains; the statement is what is left, removed from what has been lost.

What Remains Without

Passivity in Blanchot’s The Writing of the Disaster does not simply describe a condition of being acted upon. The subject in the presence of the disaster doesn’t await its power. Passivity, in light of, and for, the disaster, designates a condition of being apart from the subject’s will; it designates a condition that is unrecognized, a condition that is coerced or discovered but that is not named or had its state called forth. In this instance, passivity operates insofar as it coincides with its own absence. “Words pass,” Blanchot writes further on, “to a past which has never spoken, the past of all speech. It is thus that the disaster, although named, does

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not figure in language” (31). As Naomi Mandel, in *Against the Unspeakable*, clearly and astutely remarks,

Rather than a simple dichotomy in which presence and absence establish, qualify, and reflect each other… Blanchot posits the concept of passivity, with its connotations of subjection and negation (the French *pas*), which enables Blanchot to speak of the disaster without incorporating it into such sense-making mechanisms as desire (which necessitates a distinction between a desiring subject and an object of desire), temporality (which necessitates a distinction between past, present, and future), and language (which necessitates a distinction between a writing subject and a written text). In other words: *Blanchot’s passivity in the face of the disaster that is Auschwitz makes possible a thinking about negativity that does not run the risk… of applying an enabling or productive framework to the Holocaust.*

The absence inherent to passivity, however, we must imagine in nondialectical terms: it is not, as Blanchot analogizes, the absence (silence) of an answer to a question. Passivity is beyond response or reaction. Like Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” (*WD* 145) passivity here eliminates the connective tissue between the question and the answer. Not a response, not a question, passivity is a preference (without preferring) for nothing, a form of utterance impossible in speech.

In Blanchot’s view, the writer who addresses the disaster does not want to write in, or of, household passivity; this writer cannot respond to the disaster with a tone or predisposition of helplessness. He can’t respond at all. Thus he pursues “a relation of submersion with the outside,” where he places “all his energy to not writing, so that, writing, he should write out of failure” (11). Such a task for writing we find in Auster’s work, in the character of Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, and also, to some extent, by the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*. These are figures for whom writing, and painting, are not affirmative acts, not acts demonstrating a command of discourse; rather, theirs are acts of desperation, actions anyone who wants to resist

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44 Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 49, my italics. The trouble with dialectical frameworks is a question addressed head-on in the final chapter of this dissertation, “The Hooded Man.”
the “questionable business” of naming, inscribing, recording would take. As Sebald comments in an interview, “You are not certain whether your intrusion into someone’s life may not cause a degree of collateral damage which that person might otherwise have been spared. So there’s an ethical problem there. And then the whole business of writing of course – you make things up, you smooth certain contradictory elements that you come across.”

Thus the writer maintains a figurative distance from his language. He doesn’t want these words; doesn’t desire this speech. The words that nonetheless come from him, then, primarily signify his failure at passivity, signify the irrepressibility of language. The result is a form of fragmentation: “May words cease to be arms; means of action, means of salvation. Let us count, rather, on disarray” (WD 11).

The passivity Blanchot writes of could never show, speak for, or represent itself. Like the disaster, passivity has no model. It is “destitute of power” (15). Passivity “matters to man” without “moving him” into “the realm of things that matter.” It affects us but does not demand necessary action. Inviting us toward the realm of impossible action, passivity “demands… our activity while simultaneously passing us, moving further from our passive/active desire – passivity moves away; the passive body is immobilized by his acts of passivity” (16). Like the God of Isaac Luria, who creates without presence (13), creates, that is, from without the site of creation, the force of this passivity lies in indifference: it is never our decision to be this passive. Passivity seizes (without our seizing) activity. Unlike anything else, passivity overcomes the subject; it holds the “I” hostage between being and non-being (18).

45 “The scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing” (The Emigrants 230).
When Autrui calls me, he calls me from passivity. Yet, in such passivity, it is not “me” who Autrui summons, since Autrui doesn’t, and cannot, know me: he knows only of others, the “I” apart from my active “I,” my safe and secure “I.” Thus his summons binds responsibility to passivity: *responsible action is not powerful*, it is not precisely active action, but a perilous movement of myself from myself toward elusive and passive alterity. So the responsibility in passivity “exceeds me.” And while it is a responsibility that is not for the subject to decide, it is a responsibility we experience in “Speaking,” by which Blanchot echoes Levinas’s notion of Saying. Speaking to *autrui* gives to, and invites answer from, “the impossible,” while what is Spoken, what is being “outside being,” reinstates the passive/active dialectic (20). Whereas speaking with Autrui demonstrates our responsibility in passivity, reflection on what is, or was, spoken, withdraws us back from responsibility toward the security of the active and autonomous “I.” Such responsibility, then, is difficult – as it should be! – to endure. In it I feel the demand for a return – from Autrui’s power and reduction of me to a passive not-self – to myself, to the “adverse I, to egotistical omnipresence, to murderous Will,” a demand indicative of our two distinct modes of discourse, “one dialectical” and one “neutral… cut off from both being and from not-being” (20).

In “Demeure,” Derrida offers a brilliant tool for understanding Blanchot’s difficult logic. This is the “X without X” formula. He writes:

A life without life, an experience of lightness, an instance of “without,” a logic without logic of the “X without X,” or of the “not” or of the “except,” of the “being without being,” etc…

The proof that we have here, with this testimony and reference to an event, the logical and textual matrix of Blanchot’s entire corpus, so to speak, is that this lightness of “without,” the thinking of the “X without X” comes to sign… the experience of the neuter as *ne uter, neither-nor* by bringing it together. This experience draws to itself and endures, in its very passion, the thinking as well as the writing of Blanchot, between literature and the right to death. (89)
I'll address the complexity of this formula below. For now, let's take the formula “X without X” as the first fundamental idea, a heuristic, for approaching Blanchot’s disaster. The second idea is that of neutral discourse, that is, of non-dialectical thought. We must try to imagine language – assertions, phrases, objects – that comes between the division in positing-negating. We must imagine an assertion that neither affirms nor denies, and yet is still meaningful. Our responsibility for others depends on this expression.

As with passivity, in responsibility we are seduced by the logic of something being for us, of our purposeful engagement with things of the world: with objects, with language, with others. So it is unnerving to think about the event that does not question us, our being, but negates all such questions (28). The idea of the disaster, then, is a study, a thought, of the potential insignificance of our self-acknowledged insignificance. It has no bearing on one person or another; it does not affect being. Not only “because there is no ‘I’ to undergo the experience,” but because, insofar as the disaster displaces itself in time, “there cannot possibly be any experience of it” (28). The disaster is always displaced. It takes place without taking place; without, before or after, itself. By such incessant displacement, never where it is expected to be, never where it is summoned, and never, precisely, what it is called, the disaster subjects us to the experience of nonexperience.

X without X is not a paradox. It is a hypothetical name for the effects of X – its name and what knowledge we’ve associated with this name – on X in its original condition.\textsuperscript{47} The challenge here is not to think of X \textit{in its past tense}, comparatively, seeing X in before and after, or passive and (presently) active, pictures. Blanchot imagines X’s condition – X’s other

\textsuperscript{47} X without X is not the same as “nonidentity,” which is a dialectical term. I’ve considered more elegant names for this formula, which is awkward, but realize that the simplicity, strangeness and awkwardness of the name itself, X without X, is perhaps the most suitable phrase for the device.
condition – as something “always already past of thought – that which, in thought cannot make itself present, or enter into presence” (33). Of this passivity of X’s “nothing else can be said except that it forbids all presence of thought.” This passive, recall, is always without being: it has no subject, no initiative; forbidding presence, it is of the past and (as a variant on Blanchot’s pun) of passage: the passive is never present, never in the moment and never secure in its identity. It acts only insofar as the subject responds to it in the presence of the other; responds to it without embodying it. This passivity embodies us; it is the subject before this subject, the subjectivity that identifies this subject. And yet, passivity cannot be reclaimed: like a clue of our being, of our passage, passivity, as a remainder, indicates being but cannot be retraced, gathered, sorted, and identified as this being. In this way, Blanchot’s passivity demonstrates remains without remains. “When all is said,” Blanchot writes, “what remains to be said is the disaster… What remains without remains (the fragmentary)” (33).

Let’s take a moment to try and piece this puzzle together. What are remains without remains? What separates these remains (the fragmentary) from other remains – remains with remains? If remains with remains, the ordinary type, are remainders identifiable as remainders, and as such, remainders that may have remainders – remainders that, so to speak, give off signs of being remainders – then the remainder falls into a sequential logic that leads our understanding from parts (remains) to a whole (the sum of remains). Remains with remains, that is, indicate wholeness. Remains without remains are severed from such wholeness. These absolute remains indicate remainders without indicating the sequential logic that would lead us to a complete object. The “without,” in this puzzle of identity, forces us to think of the irreducible atoms that make up an object before these come together in any identifiable form.
That is, “without” asks us to think about, as I discussed in Chapter One, the fragment as a primary form.

X without X: this formula describes the object before its appropriation by a category, its name and knowledge. What Blanchot is asking us to think about, under the threat of the disaster, is how remainders, even those of the ordinary type, always compel the application of a name, the identification process. And what “remains without remains” reveals to us is how the remainder, any remainder, is never properly named.

The remainder needs identification: it is always “A remainder of what?” The remainder reminds us of how the named object contains, and is constituted by, the mystery of undifferentiated non-remainders, of a totality that hides its possibility as multiple remainders. The disaster exposes this trick. “The disaster is the improperness of its name… [It] is neither noun nor verb, but a remainder which would bar with invisibility and illegibility all that shows and is said – a remainder which is neither a result (as in subtraction), nor a quantity left over (as in division)” (40). The remainder of the disaster is without reference, a remainder of what cannot be known or unified. What kind of remainder? “Neither a result… nor a quantity left over” (40). This remainder imperfectly suggests a previous accident, a non-process: nothing directly leads to this remainder. And still it’s here.

Remainders are never properly named. The disaster and its remnants exemplify this problem. “These names… the names of thought, when it lets itself come undone and, by writing, fragment. Outside. Neutral. Disaster. Return…” (57-58). When the names of and for the disaster fragment, mean without fully meaning, “sliding,” feeling the impact of the “absence which has preceded them,” they become remainders “of an outer language… a language we cannot even attempt to restore without reintroducing these names back into the world…” (58). Still, our
names, our endless reintroduction of the disaster in efforts to somehow secure the historical event in reason, even in a place beyond the reach of reason, still fragment, begin to immediately decay. The fragment, as I proposed in the earlier discussion of Auster, indicates fragmentation, other fragments. The fragment is never singular. Because of this quality, fragments find in the space between our frustrated dismissal of a name – for inaccuracy or inappropriateness, for instance – and the eventual exalted recovery of it, “what prolongs them”: fragments are “always ready to let themselves be worked upon by indefatigable reason, instead of remaining as fallen utterances, left aside, the secret void of mystery” (58).

Blanchot’s focus is on the fallen utterance, precisely on the “void of mystery” that the disaster exposes. He doesn’t want to name the void, and yet he can’t release it (the utterance, the void), so to speak, to the void. His narrator, imagine, is taken up by the force of passivity and, in his inquiry, feels responsible for this void, and yet incapable of doing anything about it. The attraction here is the failure of dialectical language, as I mentioned above, the second rule, after X without X, of The Writing of the Disaster. The wastes of dialectical thought are fragments that cannot be reincorporated into the whole, fragments that cannot be recycled. These fragments persist, hauntingly, irreducible toxins in the environment, markers of where, and how, the dialectic failed, and will continue to fail. Theodor Adorno, along this line, remarks “[K]nowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic” (Minima Moralia 151). These materials, Blanchot and Sebald suggest, do not

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48 The Holocaust, Shoah, Disaster, the Event, the Cataclysm? The problem of naming genocide in the Second World War is very clearly articulated in Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution” (ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992)) by Hayden White (43), Dominick LaCapra (109, fn 4), and Peter Haidu (279), among others. Also see Edith Wyschogrod, An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 14.
disappear: like the dead, they return to us, they haunt us as things “which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement.” The question always remains, then, of how to account for this material, that which has not, and never will, properly agree with historiographical purposes or conventions. The answer, Adorno claims, speaking for his friend Walter Benjamin, is to “bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically” (152, my italics). The intentionless we might think of as the force of passivity, the neutral. Here is the presence, radical passivity, of what falls between dialectical and undialectical thought: neither, nor, the object without itself.

The problem of identifying remains, the burden of the name in the aftermath of violence, is emphasized by Sebald’s narrator when he discovers, in the Southwold Sailors’ Reading Room, “a thick, tattered tome that I had not seen before” (93-94). This chronicle of disaster (95), a history in photographs of the First World War, seeks to record and index violence without imposing a moral view on such violence. The album then transforms – in his account, his memory – into a series of documentations of genocidal atrocities. “The article,” the narrator recounts, “began by describing a photograph taken as a souvenir by men of the Croatian Ustasha, in which fellow militiamen in the best of spirits, some of them striking heroic poses, are sawing off the head of a Serb name Branco Jungic” (96). But this particular image, and more significantly the particularity of Jungic, is subsumed by the “history of this massacre… recorded in fifty thousand documents abandoned by the Germans and Croats in 1945” (97-98). Accounting for massacre, “documenting” this kind of violence, creates a peculiar discourse.

49 The list, the catalogue, imagines violence as something removable from the moral discourse at the foundation of historiography. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997): “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?” (21).
Such an account might naturalize violence, aim at making violence seem out of the hands of these participants, particular men and women. On the other hand, the discourse seeks to align premeditated, systematic violence with everyday routines, with civil phenomena. These are human undertakings – but so human, perhaps, that we no longer consider them acts of rational agency. There is no individual in these photographs (except, perhaps, for the mutilation of his body, Branco Jungic). And insofar as “documentation,” then, speaks with a disembodied voice it becomes complicit in the fantastic metamorphosis and resurrection motif. In this way we see how Sebald’s narrator is critical of the image as mimetic window onto reality, and uncertain of the photograph as evidence.\(^50\)

The reconfiguration of figures – the seemingly endless processes of metonymic transformation throughout these novels; the precocity of speech – seeks, beyond destruction, signs of human order: silk out of ash (Rings 108). Is this denial of the material condition of things simply stubbornness on the part of someone who wants to carry on with his life; or does something else separate these two subjectivities – the narrator’s and ours, for instance – something beyond one’s willingness and the other’s stubbornness to see? Sebald studies this fissure between descriptions of destruction and what is ostensibly the presence (often in

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\(^50\) The **documentary aesthetic** in Sebald is a complicated matter which many critics have addressed. If we can simplify positions into two camps, I would side with J.J. Long or Richard Crownshaw, both anti-realist, graphi-readers, evident in the latter’s observation of how the “documentary effect of the images is cast into doubt by their non-correrespondence with the verbal text and *vice versa*,” even though it was the referential promises of both that provoked the reader into investigating the differences between them. The deconstruction of both orders of signification compounds the ambiguity of the ‘imagetext,’ making it dependent on the reader to fill its ‘fantastic gaps’ and become the subject of memory (remembering subject) in whom different temporalities coincide” (Afterlife 65). Mark McCulloh, on the other hand, writes, of the Bergen Belsen photograph: “The documentary evidence Sebald employs is presented in such a way as to circumvent the problem of Holocaust representation. Rather than reimagining the death camps... Sebald illustrates by pointing to outcomes and repercussions. He lets the picture of the corpses, obviously only a partial, even miniscule view of the full horror, speak for itself” (Understanding W.G. Sebald (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 65). Also see Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 188, and, in W.G. Sebald: *History, Memory, Trauma* (eds. Scott D. Denham and Mark R. McCulloh) Stefan Gunther’s article, “The Holocaust as the Still Point of the World in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*,” 287, and, on epi- and graphi-readers, Jan Ceuppens’ article, “Transcripts: An Ethics of Representation in *The Emigrants*,” 260.
photographs, but not always) of such destruction because where *representation* begins, where destruction enters discourse, is never clear. While the reader is implicitly asked to look – as if these photographs were images we might find in the newspaper – it is not so clear that the narrator is the one asking this question, whether the narrator is always aware of the images supplementing and interrupting his narrative, or whether, regardless of the narrator’s duties, the reader can *simply* look, as if the photograph were a clear window onto the real world. This burden on sight – which is particularly emphasized in sites or occasions of destruction – is evident, as well, in Sebald’s discussion of Hans Erich Nossack’s “Der Untergang,” in “Air War and Literature,” where he quotes Nossack, who writes of a stroll through the ruins of Hamburg: “It was so far beyond all comprehension” – the sight of children “tidying and raking a front garden” – “that we talked to other people about it, as if it were some sort of a marvel. One day we came to a suburb that had not suffered at all. People were sitting out on their balconies drinking coffee. It was like watching a film; it was downright impossible” (*Natural History* 41).

Still, I do not think Sebald asks his reader to distrust photographic imagery. His is not a question of artifice, of fakes. Rather, it is the context in which these images are presented, their emplotment, that shifts them into narrative things other than photographs. This is the “falsification of perspective” required for a representation of history (*Rings* 125). But the fact that the representation of an historical event is always *framed* by the voice of the historian does not mean that the historical facts of the event, traces of materiality, cannot be recovered. Remnants and witnesses remain. The question is how to let the witness speak – for herself, for others, and even for the broken objects left in the wake of destruction.
Insofar as evidence signifies, material traces have access to the truth of the event. But can such things speak for themselves?\footnote{See Hayden White’s “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth” for a critique of Berel Lang’s “literalist” approach to historical “facts” in Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,” ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 44. Lang’s view is articulated in his essay in the same volume, “The Representation of Limits,” where he writes, “Whatever else it does, figurative discourse and the elaboration of figurative space obtrudes the author’s voice and a range of imaginative turns and decisions on the literary subject, irrespective of that subject’s character and irrespective of – indeed defying – the ‘facts’ of that subject which might otherwise have spoken for themselves and which, at the very least, do not depend on the author’s voice for their existence” (316).} They might speak, but only from their particular contexts, in their rigid places. Removing such things to the museum, for example, diminishes their indexical power. The mystery of the narrative, then, lies in its quiet approach toward objects in their primary contexts. Indeed, such objects are representations mediated by the narrator; but still, for Sebald, many objects remain in our field of vision that possess what I’m identifying as strangeness, a quality that in the final analysis resists appropriation into discourse.

Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusc washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils. (68)

The narrator will not disrupt such things, not obscure the world in the dust of his passage or in the flourish of language. The discontinuities of the narrative are less rhetorical – less devices of narrative – than they are of the representation of objects, of already discontinuous, amalgamated, or broken things. The result of this discontinuity, then, is an anamnestic mode that, like intransitive writing, admits the presence of the narrator, the self-awareness of his voice, to the act of representation. He cannot fully acquire the objects of his account, cannot entirely, as a more transitive mode would, pick up and make use of such things. Or, if the narrator makes use of these objects, this use is only insofar as the object can be quickly transformed into something else, as if to defuse the mystery inherent to the thing. The active appropriation of the object in
naming the thing overcomes and negates the passive vulnerability the narrator feels in the presence of the thing, in the vestige it carries of destruction.

So the “Sizewell power plant,” like “a glowering mausoleum” (175) draws the narrator from his disorientation on a heath – a “scene of devastation” (174), “Nothing but dead silence” (175) – outside of Middleton. The power of this structure, a mausoleum for natural forces, reveals how nothing under the narrator’s gaze is what it seems to be. He transforms objects through his account. The complexity, then, of his account of destruction occurs in the process of synthesis and metamorphosis that his narration performs. If what he witnesses is the ineluctability of emptiness, the absence as sign of destruction’s passage, his testimony of this experience is the antidote to destruction: metamorphosis, the implied permanence of a multiplicity for all things. But is it, then, that language, or at least metaphorical possibility, undermines the threat of destruction? Does destruction overcome the capacity to speak of things in other terms; does destruction silence the witness’s ability to always find another term, another name, for what he saw, that is, to speak, in the act of testimony, not only of things as they were but of other things, of things as they might have been or could still be?

As the narrator accounts for it, destruction offers this potential for testimony. The witness never speaks of the event in-itself; thus all testimony wants corroboration. That is a rule for testimony. Derrida, in “Demeure,” calls this problem – of testimony’s lack – the universalizable singular case: the witness speaks for himself and only himself, but as an exemplary witness – and we treat him as such – he must be the model for all witnesses. But this apparent inadequacy of

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52 “The example [the witness] is not substitutable; but at the same time the same aporia always remains: this irreplacability must be exemplary, that is, replaceable. The irreplaceable must allow itself to be replaced on the spot. In saying: I swear to tell the truth, where I have been the only one to see or hear and where I am the only one who can attest to it, this is true to the extent that anyone who in my place, at that instant, would have seen or heard or touched the same thing and could repeat exemplarily, universally, the truth of my testimony. The exemplarity of the ‘instant,’ that which makes it an ‘instance,’ if you like, is that it is singular, like any exemplarity, singular and
testimony is not simply the negative force of the overwhelming experience on language – since
language never represents the event itself. Rather, testimony, in its pluralism, demonstrates a
kind of liberation from destruction, from the force of the past event, insofar as it transforms
objects of destruction into other things, that is, salvages what was destroyed into productive
language-objects for understanding.

Speaking of Disaster

The Holocaust is an event that is not entirely eventful. The problem this event raises for
historiography is concisely described by Michael Bernard-Donals in Forgetful Memory, where
he writes:

The path from event to experience, from what happened to knowledge of what happened,
is a discursive one: to make events available at all – to make them historical – one has to
speak them. But this passage from witness to testimony or from the immemorial event to
memory, is an impossible one if we think of it as recuperation or redemption of the
event… The Holocaust, as a break, functions doubly in this book: it is at once the
historical instance that, in Blanchot’s words, “ruined everything,” that forced us to
decisively change how we think of history and its relation to memory… and it also haunts
our accounts of how memory and its object – our representations of events and the events
themselves – come into contact with one another since 1945. (4)

Is “the event” without experience, without discourse, an event? Doesn’t “event” presuppose
someone’s experience of it as an event? The assumption here, then, is that events occur,
transpiring all the time, outside of any subject’s presence, any being who would be capable of
calling it, recalling it, or describing it as an event. The trouble with this assumption is that it
attributes significance (the significance of what the subject refers to as an event) to all “event”-
like occurrences. What should we call such non-subject present occurrences? Actions in the
world apart from subjective observation? But this word, “actions,” also presupposes a kind of

universal, singular and universalizable. The singular must be universalizable; this is the testimonial condition” (The
Instant of My Death 41).
agency. The problem, then, first of all, is that events as we conventionally understand them always presuppose the presence of the subject. The “availability” of events, as history or something else, is always, only discursive: there is no such thing as a non-discursive event.

But we speak of representations of events. Events are always and only discursive, always in language. What we call an “event,” then, is actually the translation of the event’s statement – pre-eventual signs – into a language, ours, of stable concepts and categories. And most events are not problematic. Events happen. We see and talk about events all the time. “How was your day?” “Uneventful.” Etc. As such, talking about an event is always, to some degree, talking about a representation of that event, and not about the event in-itself. In short, events are eventful only insofar as they are familiar, run of the mill, carrying and arriving with their signs, bells and whistles. But, again, what is the event in itself? What is the “presence” of the event? To clarify and adjust Bernard-Donals’s point, I would say the object of memory – the event itself, in this case – unlike other objects, objects in their materiality, in their various resistances to these observant subjects, objects of and for empirical knowledge, the object of memory is subordinate and obedient to the rules of memory. It follows from memory, and perhaps follows from forgetfulness. The event itself, now, is not an event until it comes into representational focus in memory or forgetting, whereas other objects can be said to function in full presence regardless of subjective recollection. Such things are “there”; events – not things in themselves, and perhaps this is the rub in thinking about the event as an “object” of memory – are less “there” than they are limited, serial “thens.”

The event for testimony requires special attention. We entrust this kind of event to heightened – critical, juridical – language. Bernard-Donals, in the context of the above citation,

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53 And what of traumatic events? All events return in language. The experience of the event, traumatic or not, is always displaced.
goes on to identify this kind of event as one of such enormity that, indicative of the tension between Levinas’s “saying” and “said,” it demonstrates the compulsion for the witness to speak out despite the fact of her awareness of how “anything said or represented reduces that enormity to a language… that can’t quite contain it.”

And yet the event itself is completely lost – both to history and to memory – unless it is said. (Forgetful Memory 5)

What is interesting here – assuming that one can witness some events before recognizing or calling the event an event – is that for some events the witness intuits how the event is not only more or less eventful than most events but more or less transformative, transgressive, disruptive – violent, to use the word loosely – than most events. The witness only feels the compulsion, and subsequent frustration, to speak of the event’s “enormity” if she recognizes, prior to speaking, prior to “the saying,” the event as an event! (The event cannot be called anything – of great enormity, beauty, grace, anything, without first being an event.) As above, insofar as the event functions only in its representation, in discourse, it cannot be recognized as any type of event, cannot be given any attributes, until it is, in a sense, already Said. In Saying, the event and its witness are nascent, growing together in a moment of raw, non-discursive engagement; it is only once Said – once the compulsion to speak about the event is fulfilled – that the event becomes recognized as something of “enormity.” This means that the enormity of the event has nothing – or at least nothing obvious, at this point in our thinking – nothing to do with the compulsion to speak out. The event’s quality comes afterward, in retrospect. And the compulsion to speak, then, has its source elsewhere.

The enormity of the event might better be described as a sense, to the witness, of the event’s radical uneventfulness. The witness experiences something that is so much more or less banal, or commonplace, that it seems eventful, but eventful – avoiding any descriptive attributes
– only insofar as the event dismantles its own eventfulness: the experience is at once so unremarkable (a non-event) that it possibly could become an event, but also, simultaneously, the experience stands out as an event by virtue of its banality, its uneventfulness. The enormity of the event, discovered in retrospect, first appears in a tension of non-identity: the series of thens, a sequence of “events,” leads the witness into confusion, into a perceptive state in which everything constitutive of the event becomes momentarily unidentifiable, unrecognizable.

What is an event?

The “event itself,” in considering the Holocaust, is a series of events of such extraordinary violence that “vexed” relations between the event and its representation are automatic, a priori: prior even to its representation, I think it is safe to say that the event itself has a vexed relation with the witness, who, compelled to speak of what she saw, witnesses partly because what she saw was so extremely un-eventful: violence (in this case) that was on the one hand non-eventful but on the other radically eventful. She is compelled to speak because of how the experience, like a touch of the disaster, momentarily displaces her as a sentient, sensitive subject; she experiences the cold passivity of an event without event. Her testimony will then address this instability of categories, a fragility of language.

What is lost in her testimony about the event, then – “aspects of the event that are felt bodily may be lost to reason and speech” (Bernard-Donals 5) – are not aspects of the event, but aspects of something about the event that were mysteriously uneventful; those aspects of the event that should not, according to our lexicon of stable concepts and categories, have also occurred. What is lost of the event, in fact, is what has been lost before, and what has thus never been experienced, or understood, as eventful. This is the experience of nonexperience. The epiphenomena of the event, what is perhaps “felt bodily,” that which is incompatible with reason
and speech, and that which does not contribute to the event’s eventfulness, is precisely what compels the witness to speak out.

*The Camp*

We invest objects with value that exceeds their material condition of being. Through this process of inflation – similar to the precocity of speech evident in Sebald’s novels – the objective or natural world is pushed further and further away from the narrating subject. His language trespasses on the events motivating reflection. (As much as the narrator, in *The Emigrants*, wants to avoid the “wrongful trespass” (29) of emotional identification with the men he’s writing about, the life and death written down is no less problematic than the one imagined: “Even what I ultimately salvaged as the ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched. So I hesitated to send Ferber my cut-down rendering of his life” (231).) The move to recall what happened, restoring what has been destroyed, cannot avoid, as Blanchot puts it, “the nostalgic return to the rule of a single tyrant” (*WD* 80), the ruler who, “perceived in forgetfulness” in the bygone times of natural happiness, is the source of justice and truth, who keeps everything in order. So long as tyranny appears natural, and all values are determined and given “invisibly, unconditionally” from above, then society moves toward the “alluring trap” (81) of natural law. And then, with the enigmatic, unidentified quotation, “Our gaze was turned to the ground” (81, Blanchot’s italics) – a phrase which is echoed structurally (iambically) and figuratively (of blindness) by the epigraph to the Paul Bereyter chapter in *The Emigrants*, “There is mist that no eye can dispel” (*Emigrants* 25) – Blanchot enters the camps. It is a sudden turn in *The Writing of the Disaster*, but perhaps there’s no gentle alternative, no logical step across this threshold. What, Blanchot asks, is the relationship between naturalism and life in the camp? If
the laws that function unconditionally and invisibly in nature are made visible in the camp, is the camp still of the natural order?\textsuperscript{54}

If there is nature in the camp, it is not nature of the earlier type, not a hidden tyranny. In the camp, where all “features of a civilization are revealed or laid bare” (81), the ruse of nature is exposed. The unconditional law remains unconditional, but its power is exposed as such. In the camp, then, a sudden purification of nature occurs, since the artifice of order in the “golden age” (80) is here dismantled: the power of the law – of construction, destruction, life and death – in the camp is transparent. The sovereign, who was usefully forgotten in earlier times, is here always present and always in memory.

This extraordinary presence of power – since in the camp power needs no artifice for expression – contaminates our memory and knowledge of what happened inside the camp. “Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in a relation with the most insupportable aspects of power” (82). Knowing about Auschwitz, to whatever degree this is possible, risks supporting “the most insupportable aspects” of its power, its horror. The horror of knowledge is that at its best it fails to refute or denounce the radical object whose aim is the extinction of knowledge.

The trouble here is in knowledge’s passivity, in its indifference to the horror of the camp. This problem is complicated by the fact that knowledge \textit{ought} to be indifferent to everything; indifferent even to something, like the camp, that could mean its destruction. That is, knowledge in good form isn’t contaminated by subjective desire or prejudice. Knowledge in good form goes

\textsuperscript{54} Discussion of Sebald’s idea of “natural destruction” often, most thoughtfully, turns to Benjamin’s distinction between mythic and divine violence. On this point, see Eric Santner, \textit{On Creaturely Life}, 114. What I have tried to focus on, however, is not Sebald’s position on the natural or unnatural, exactly, but on the juxtapositions he uses to complicate this distinction. I am more interested in the space created by analogies than in what falls to one side or the other.
forth unrestrained, risking its progress and existence with every step. The camp, however, unlike all other suspicious objects, is difficult to think about indifferently, as if this situation were comparable to other situations. The horror of the camp, let’s conjecture, is in how radically unique it is; the horror lies in its incomparability.\(^{55}\) (The camp is intransitive; only metaphors, which crush the logic of comparison, apply.) Thus knowledge, for this examination, necessarily duplicates something of the horror: without comparison, without simile, our understanding of the camp comes only through – and always in questionable form – its unconscionable repetition in language.

The Holocaust is barely mentioned in *The Writing of the Disaster*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Emigrants*. The *disaster*, we might conclude from this absence, entails not *more or less* of the Holocaust or Auschwitz – as if these historical objects could be fully described – but something other than, but in the presence of, these atrocities. I think this is a key point, and it is one I suggested earlier: the disaster is not exactly historical or eventful. It is an effect in our language, historiography, and memory, an effect that demands inquiry as to its cause. Thus this little book, a series of peripatetic scenes of questioning, sometimes surprises us: first, because the thing-itself, the disaster as an object of inquiry, is completely absent, and second because of an assumption we readers make, on entering this narrative, in identifying the disaster as one thing or another. What does this latter problem do? It subordinates the power of a thing like Auschwitz to the mystery of the disaster; it turns Auschwitz into a kind of off-hand remark. It surprises us.

Blanchot, at the end of a string of disparate statements – “And one more word” (80), on our suspicious adoration of theory, on the “natural” sovereign, and then on suffering, where he cites

without identification testimonial descriptions of *Muselmänner* – suddenly enters the camp.

Writing about Auschwitz, we might conclude from this, demands a kind of indirect movement, a sidling up to, a peripheral inspection. One is reminded, in Sebald, of the Ferber’s position in relation to the narrator: “His face had become a mere shadow” (*The Emigrants* 177); “Ferber himself, whom I had not noticed at first as I came in from outside, was sitting towards the rear in his red velvet armchair, a cup of tea in his hand, watching his visitor out of the corner of his eye” (180). There is no clear path in language, memory, history, to this place or figure.

Granted, to write is to renounce being in command of oneself or having any proper name, and at the same time it is not to renounce, but to announce, welcoming without recognition the absent. Or, it is to be in relation, through words in their absence, with what one cannot remember – a witness to the unencountered, answerable not only for the void in the subject, but for the subject as a void. (*WD* 121)

For Blanchot, the written word, as an erasure of its referent, aligns the writer with his forgetfulness. The written word testifies as “a witness” for what is “unencountered,” for what *might be* but is impossible to record in the writer’s voice, through this subject; testifies for the emptiness, the “void,” that the subject (writer) himself represents.

And yet we invest so much trust in our language, our writing. As Adorno remarks in *Minima Moralia*, we are always persuading ourselves of the permanence, the presentational capacities, of the written word. The transfer of thought into writing should be pure and systematic. Hypotactic narration, he writes, seeks to reveal “all the steps that led [the writer] to his conclusion,” so that the reader, and everyone else, might reproduce the outcome. This fantastic imposition on thinking, what Adorno calls “the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought” (80), not only limits the thought to “objectively” misconstrued representations, but also steals from thought its integrity, its uniqueness in the mind of its creator. “For the value of thought is measured by the distance from the continuity of
the familiar. It is objectively devalued as this distance is reduced” (80). The discontinuities, then, of thought in its primary mode, its difference, and distance, from everyday discourse, make the discourse of thought a unique and valuable form. More than the urge to reproduce thought, to lend it, so to speak, to others, the fantasy that thought can be reproducible, schematically or linguistically, mitigates its potential strength.

Adorno argues here for a kind of inadequacy, a kind of failure for things. Life, he claims, in its “actual course,” wavering and deviating – much like The Writing of the Disaster and The Rings of Saturn⁵⁶ – always seems to disappoint our expectations. But “If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it” (81). Thus the things and events constitutive of our lives always want to fall out of step, in disarray. And perhaps this chaos is less indicative of past destruction than it is of a present anxiety over maximizing order and productivity, and perhaps indicative of the destructive results borne by our frustrations about this effort.

So Blanchot would, in my view, not write about Auschwitz, and let the horror of this place function only in its multiplicity as thought. But the disaster demands a response: it pulls the writer from the security of self-consciousness, of the “I.” And so his language – the only alternative, if one must respond to the disaster – is paratactic, enigmatic, spare, self-effacing.

Naturally, ‘disaster’ can be understood according to its etymology – of which many fragments here bear the trace. But the etymology of ‘disaster’ does not operate in these fragments as a preferred, or more original insight, ensuring mastery of what is no longer, then, anything but a word. On the contrary, the indeterminateness of what is written when this word is written, exceeds etymology and draws it into the disaster. (116-117)

Etymology, as well, fragments. It is the history, in a word, of the word’s fragmentation. But for disaster – “when this word is written” – even the fragment, and the sum of fragments, is not enough. The disaster goes beyond – or continues after, or comes from beyond – any such summation. This excess, Blanchot comments, is not only of indeterminateness, which etymology

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⁵⁶ On the question of plot in Sebald’s work, see McCulloh, 15, Crownshaw, 58-59.
deals with. The disaster bears something like an infinitude of fragments (an infinitesimalness of indetermination); the fragment of fragments, an irresolvable redundancy that undermines any history etymology might propose.

Sorting, Ordering

Questions of industrial and linguistic productivity increasingly trouble and preoccupy Sebald’s narrator. The structures that he sees at a distance on Orfordness, “Ahead lay nothing but destruction” (235), abandoned laboratories wherein weapons of mass destruction were once processed, look to him like royal burial mounds of ancient times; here, “temples or pagodas” which “on a ground intended for purposes transcending the profane” become nothing other than indications of “the remains of our own civilization” (237). His disorientation, his conflation of various spaces, architectures, and historical eras, exposes an uncertainty in the narrator’s power of observation. In this extra-territorial space, the material signals that the narrator counts on for direction, for, in a sense, inspiration, are no longer present, or not stable. Is it a pagoda, laboratory, or bomb shelter? The site and structure, evocative of transcendence – of ritual that would release the spirit of material existence into the ether, the second life – are remnants of an industry of destruction. But the narrator’s confusion doesn’t miss the fact that even these remnants of industrialized destruction suggest another form of transcendence, another means of releasing the spirit from the material. The horrible juxtaposition, then, of a past ritual that brought a community together, to the more recent analogical ritual – that brought part of a community together in order to exercise imaginings of the destruction of all other communities – causes the narrator to seize up. “Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even now as I write these words” (237).
A similar silence is evoked in the closing pages of the novel, which focus primarily on the growth of the silkworm industry. The narrator cuts short his description of a work of Thomas Browne’s, the “Musæum Clausum,” an account of an imaginary library, to give his own account of the arrival of the *Bombyx mori* in the Occident. It came, as a cocoon, within a walking stick (273-274). That an object can contain other objects shouldn’t surprise us. The involution of things – to parallel the involutions of the narrative, the enfolding and redoubling of figures – implies how one thing is never itself alone. Objects possess interiors, an emptiness promising further, hidden significance. The object, then, like the bamboo cane described here, is always a potential symbol of metaphor: it is a device of passage, of invisible transfer across spaces of difference and incommensurability. The point of conflict in the final chapter occurs in how this potential for objects is limited, and even destroyed, by the cultural determination of the object for particular, productive purposes. So the *Bombyx mori*, as an object lesson for school children, usefully illustrates

the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, regressive mutations, and the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration. (294)

What the narrator does not go on to say, clearly, is how the organized life and death cycles of this particular insect predicts the systematic genocide perpetrated during the Second World War. This aphasia is suggested in the narrator’s final words on Thomas Browne. In a passage from Browne’s *Pseudodoxica Epidemica*, “that I can no longer find,” which tells of the ritual of covering mirrors with black silk “in a home where there had been a death,” the reader infers the imminent destruction underlying the narrative, an irrepressible disaster. As with the strange function of the photograph of Bergen Belsen, with which I began, this moment of literary

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57 The object as fragment, as I discussed in Chapter One, functions in a singular-plural case: the singular *fragment* stands for all fragments; the fragment is both a fragment and a sign of fragmentation.
montage – of Browne’s text, but also, as we’ll see, of the allusion to Kafka – indicates the narrator’s incapacity, or unwillingness, to name an object. The passage “he can no longer find” is of certain connective tissue, of a causal link between one thing and another.\textsuperscript{58} By losing this little piece, this fragment of Browne’s text, covering, as the narrator implies, the text as if it were a mirror with a “mourning ribbon” across it, so as to let the soul of the departed pass without a glimpse “of the land now being lost for ever” (296), the narrator, who does not return us to the hospital from which he started this account, ends with a figuration of his own death. That is, this moment of blindness – the passage is cited but only under the aside, the spell, of something “I can no longer find” – covers the medium of representation, a passage in which the narrator’s soul, Sebald suggests, departs in partial blindness, exiting without a glimpse at his double, that other self who spoke from a hospital bed.\textsuperscript{59} And so, revisiting the opening of the novel, it is no surprise to rediscover about our narrator that the window to his hospital room is “draped with black netting” (4), and to discover in our narrator what’s not entirely a man, but the empty shell of a man, one who identifies with Kafka’s bug, Gregor Samsa, and just as Samsa, when looking from his bedroom window, fails “to recognize the quiet street where he and his family had lived for years, taking Charlottenstrasse for a grey wasteland,” so does the narrator find his familiar city, “extending from the hospital courtyards to the far horizon, an utterly alien place” (5).

\textsuperscript{58} As with the photograph of Bergen Belsen, and its juxtaposition with the photograph of herring fishermen, where there is no causal relation between images, there remains a structural relation, one that speaks or signifies what is otherwise impossible to put into words.

\textsuperscript{59} First, a similar moment of explicit ekphrasis occurs at the end of The Emigrants, with the narrator’s description of a photograph that does not appear in the text. Second, the sequence of events I refer to here is complicated. Here is what we know: Between August 1992 and August 1993, the narrator walked the county of Suffolk (3); in August 1993 he entered the hospital (3) where he “began in my thoughts to write these pages” (3-4); \textit{a year after his discharge} from the hospital, an unspecified date, the narrator begins to assemble his notes (5); he concludes his “notes” in April 1995 (294). What is interesting to me is the time in “thought” of writing, in the hospital, compared to the time of actual writing, both durations unspecified, which is mysterious in light of the specificity of other statements: “a year to the day” (3) and “Today... is the 13\textsuperscript{th} of April 1995” (294). The “experience” of walking Suffolk, foundation for the entire narrative, is thus displaced several-fold: not only is it recalled in two separate intervals, in the hospital bed and then again in the actual writing, it is lost among dates specified and unspecified.
The novel concludes, then, with moments of blindness, desubjectification, and significant narrative gaps. As with anamnesis, the narrative is finally only recollection, not precisely memory, insofar as it misses moments of time, and misses conjunctive events that a hypotactic narrative, and that memory as mneme, would include. After all, the narrative is nothing more than “notes” that can be brought to a close (284). So while the narrative ostensibly ends – in an ending without ending – the reference to the beginning somewhat dis-closes this closure, and perpetuates a sense of disorientation and solitude.
To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Near the end of Alain Resnais’ 1955 film *Night and Fog*, the camera, gliding at walking pace down an abandoned track through the ruins of the concentration camp at Majdanek, holds on a strange object, and then pans, adjusting its gaze as a passerby would, to study this twisted, burned, metal frame. What, Resnais asks with this gesture, do we see here? I’ve watched this scene many times and I’m convinced that it is impossible to say, impossible to identify the object. All we might say is that this object – remnant of the violence perpetrated at the camp – in its particular illegibility, in its ruin beyond significance, signifies, at most, at least, a caesura in expression, the unclosable gap between referent and word.

A similar image occurs in the final pages of W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*. The narrator, visiting salt-frames outside of Kissingen, Germany, sits and contemplates “the long-term and (I believe) impenetrable process which, as the concentration of salts increases in the water, produces the very strangest of petrified or crystallized forms” (230). Then he provides a photograph of one of these forms. The object in the photograph doesn’t look like anything specific; the abstract image, rather, looks like too many things. It is a twig, a grape vine, a crack

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in the wall, a fractal. Like a tear in the page, like Resnais’ metal contortion, this image interrupts our reading habits, and compels a second look, compels us to look closely at what is ostensibly natural, but also intrusive and somehow unfit for the page. The image, in this case – and in most cases in *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Emigrants*, I will argue – demonstrates in its margins a break with its narrative context. This photograph finds significance in a semantic system apart from the textual one it is embedded within. As in Sebald’s reflections on the paintings of his friend Jan Peter Tripp, photographs in these novels reveal an “autonomous existence of things to which… we stand in a subordinate and dependent relationship.” How does this autonomy of things, a release of objects from the narrator’s grasp, appear; how does it happen? Why is it significant? The *process* of this release is varied, and we’ll examine some of these in the following pages hopefully to some conclusive results. As to the significance of what I will call the object as object, the object released from objectivity, I would like to argue how the distance, and space, created by this release, how the paratactic object finally resists the logic of mnemonic narration, provides a material analogue to the aphasic moment in testimony, to how, as we will see, the testimonial utterance must come to terms with unnamable objects constitutive of the past event.

In Chapter One, I claimed that collections of objects work against the work of memory that would somehow *transform* these objects (leftovers that are exhausted of use and meaning) into other objects, into meaningful things. The project of narration, then, aims at reducing objective indifference and restoring *difference* in order to prevent an ending where nothing, as Auster’s narrator posits, matters. Narration *matters* insofar as it makes the objects of the

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narrative significant, and important, for others. But how do objects become significant components in narrative? How do objects, as evidence, come to signify a past condition for our community of wholeness, of integrity? What becomes of these objects when we use them as partial indicators, metonymic clues, of a concealed or lost truth, the recovery of which is a necessary and present imperative? What happens, as we find in Sebald’s novels, when objects themselves – in their multiplicity, excess, strangeness, incompleteness – become more than merely examples of the reality of the narrative, devices of “objectivity” that should make the representation more credible, and assume a quality in the narrative distinctly different from, or in excess of, what they naturally are?

What Sebald accomplishes through forms of juxtaposition, what I’ll refer to as the montage of paratactic objects, and figures of distance, is a presentation of the object as object, the object in its primary, indifferent condition – indifferent because the object as something unrecognizable is without differentiation. It functions for the moment as something unlike and incomparable to anything else. While the narrator takes up objects – and we’ll include everything “taken up” by the narrator for the purposes of his exhibitive narration, i.e., the obviously material things like books, clothing, cups, plates, but also photographs, characters, elements of language itself – these objects are not fully objectified insofar as the narrator does not always explain, fully describe, or emplot such things. As if the narrator were searching for something in particular, he takes up and puts down myriad things. The excess of these things – like extensions of the pervasive dust in these novels – seems to either overcome the narrator’s capacity to use

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3 To modify this claim for the purpose of the present chapter, I would say mnemonic narration, one’s memory as a continuous narrative, matters insofar as it transforms strange objects into meaningful narrative units. Ultimately what the present chapter focuses on is how objects maintain significance apart from such narrative, and testimonial, demands. In short, how is the object as a constitutive unit of the event meaningful and still resistant to narrative? On the distinction between anamnesis and mneme, I refer to those made by Michael Bernard-Donals, Forgetful Memory: Representation and Remembrance in the Wake of the Holocaust (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 5, and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zahkor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 107.
them for his narrative, or, overcoming in a different way, reveal the narrating subject as being on equal footing with, or even subordinate to, the “sheer number of things” that fill his world.\textsuperscript{4} Such paratactic things cue, or condition, or in other ways define the narrator’s sense of exile and solitude.\textsuperscript{5} Take the Teas-Maid, for instance:

Apparently by way of a special welcome, she brought me, on a silver tray, an electric appliance of a kind I had never seen before. She explained that it was called a \textit{teas-maid}, and was both an alarm clock and a tea-making machine. When I made tea and the steam rose from it, the shiny stainless steel contraption on its ivory-coloured metal base looked like a miniature power plant, and the dial of the clock, as I soon found as dusk fell, glowed a phosphorescent lime green that I was familiar with from childhood and which I had always felt afforded me an unaccountable protection at night. That may be why it has often seemed, when I have thought back to those early days in Manchester, as if the tea maker brought to my room by Mrs Irlam, by Gracie – you must call me Gracie, she said – as if it was that weird and serviceable gadget, with its nocturnal glow, its muted morning bubbling, and its mere presence by day, that kept me holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged. (\textit{The Emigrants} 154-55)

Like Hurbinek’s word, “Mass-klo,” objects in Sebald’s novels reveal breaks in the breathless continuity, the precocity of speech, of the narrative.\textsuperscript{6} The object’s degree of illegibility, of inscrutability – which is always captured in analogy, the “as if” of the Teas-Maid’s “weird and serviceable” gadgetness – reveal in the narrative’s order, in its metonymic and metaphoric logic, discontinuities, an excess of materials that lack hierarchical organization. The narrative moves without pausing, but moves toward no obvious goal; it is plotless; it is an \textit{aggregative} account that strives for, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, a “constellation saturated with tensions,” or strives for, as in Blanchot’s discussion of the disaster, expression outside of dialectical oppositions.


\textsuperscript{5} What happens when such objects are alive? While the present discussion considers the narrating subject’s relation to the fragments constitutive of his testimony, the question of recognizability, as opposed to mere apprehension, regarding the proximity of \textit{autrui}, will be taken up in Chapter 6. See Judith Butler, \textit{Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?} (London: Verso, 2009), 5.

But if the narrative demands of its reader careful consideration of a spatial field – of the things that fill the space of recollection; constellations of memory; what I will eventually call distance in proximity – the narrative equally questions our understanding of time. The objects of memoir, objects as memorabilia, are not merely clues or traces of the past, not merely mnemonic devices for the narrator. In fact, objects in these narratives, coordinated by a narrator, do not add up to memory’s narrative, mneme. In his essay on the paintings of Jan Peter Tripp, cited above, Sebald writes:

Remembrance, after all, in essence is nothing other than a quotation. And the quotation incorporated in a text (or painting) by montage compels us... to probe our knowledge of other texts and pictures and our knowledge of the world. This, in turn, takes time. By spending it, we enter into time recounted and into the time of culture. (Unrecounted 93)

A similar question of temporality – pushing together questions of the reader’s activity, patience, and temporal expectation of narrative – is raised in Sebald’s comment on his “ideal reader”: “A picture, being visual information, can be contemplated, it does not have to be decoded in time. You can just sit and see [a picture], and the ideal reader for me would be a reader who does not just read the text but sees, who lifts out the perennial wasting which occurs in time.”7 For Sebald, the picture freezes the temporalization of narrative. “You can just sit and see it…” The picture – and let’s include in this category photographs but also ekphrastic description – elicits “contemplation,” a process which, for Sebald, removes the viewer-reader from the temporal process of reading. Sebald imagines, furthermore, that the text, like a picture, can be seen, “not just read,” and through this visualization realize the “perennial wasting” that all time, and the temporalization imposed by narrative, creates. That is to say, the destruction which Sebald’s narrators contemplate comes into being, into their experience, through a break with narrative:

their accounts live in narrative, and depend on narration, but, as Sebald suggests here, this narrative must also account for a sense of thought at a stand-still, a sense of the emergence, through the gaps of narration, of “perennial” destruction. If destruction occurs in and by time, then, without temporal sequences – the stillness pervasive in these narratives\(^8\) – there is no destruction. Paradoxically, then, the only way to understand such destruction is to imagine – seeing, not reading – the object, in and for itself, outside of the narrative whole. Thus the precocity of speech that we find in Sebald becomes a form of contemplation, not simply narration: this speech testifies to a form of seeing that attempts to capture destructive moments.\(^9\)

In one of the more lucid moments of Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, the narrator reflects “Speaking, writing, calculating, they are eternal conservers, conservers of eternity, always in quest of something stable” (90).\(^{10}\) Such figures, conservers, Blanchot sees as one of the many extensions of the disaster; he’s not (or his narrator isn’t) too patient with them. The conserver is the subject who uses language, who totalizes by nomenclature what is fragmented, to productively restore the world to a particular status quo, a condition in which epistemic power excludes alterity. Sebald’s narrators, on the other hand, are interesting in how they create distance between themselves and the strange objects they take up, take on, or speak for. They implicitly address fragments as aspects of alterity. Their approach is not restorative, as

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\(^8\) Take, for example, the stillness outside of the Albion Hotel: “Outside was the beach, somewhere between the darkness and the light, and nothing was moving, neither in the air nor on the land nor on the water. Even the white waves rolling in to the sands seemed to me to be motionless” (*Rings* 43).

\(^9\) To “speak precociously” is an idea Michael Bernard-Donals develops in *Forgetful Memory*, and one, in its application to the breathlessness of Sebald’s narrators, which I’ll return to. Bernard-Donals defines such speech as “a language that is at once both a presentation of the object of memory and which is at the same time a presentation of the object’s loss and of that loss’s effect upon the witness” (7).

\(^{10}\) Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). The narrator? For my purposes, I find Blanchot’s text a little more accessible than it otherwise is if imagining “the speaker” of the text to be an invention of Blanchot’s (as “the speakers” in *The Infinite Conversation* more explicitly are). There are consistencies of tone and theme in this difficult book that are easier to discern if imagining the text as not only a philosophical statement but also as a kind of story.
if to insert the object or past event into a present project, narrative, but to speak to the object in such a way that the enigma of the past, of where the ruin begins, ends and persists, remains enigmatic. They conserve, but in a different way: by leaving things as they are, touched, untouched. The distance I want to identify and examine in these novels emerges from this idea of touching without touching; that is, in moments of juxtaposition, one has the impression of a figure that is not fully represented. The impression I would like to think of as a figure without figure, the adumbration – as in dust or smoke – of what, in Blanchot’s terms, is of a past immemorial, from a past that was never remembered but is nonetheless functional in memory.

I mention Blanchot here because I need to introduce what is going to be a central concept in the following two chapters. Related to the presence of distance in Sebald’s novels, if we can refer to it in this way, is the concept of the object being without itself; the object without objectivity. This notion – described by the formula “X without X” – is fundamental to Blanchot’s The Writing of the Disaster. While I will attempt to explain this phenomenon in the next chapter, for now it is sufficient to say that in the juxtaposition of disparate things, a ceaseless process in these novels, Sebald’s narrators reveal conditions and qualities of objects that are liminal, fleetingly operating in both presence and absence. And Blanchot’s concept, a result in language and thought of past disaster, I think usefully captures this juxtapositional liminality. Moreover, the concept captures a sense of the passivity that overcomes the narrator when in the presence of destruction. In passivity, there is a sense of agency without presence; a sense for the subject, in the event of witnessing destruction, of being somehow without himself. As Simon Ward, in “Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W.G. Sebald,” observes, Sebald’s use of the passive voice in descriptions of ruins “implies the absence of, or at least a refusal to name, an agent in the process of ruination, something underlined by the use of natural-historical
metaphors.” Passivity – another central concept for *The Writing of the Disaster* – which I think emerges in the unbridgeable gap between the narrating subject and the object of his description, represents a force not of the narrator’s will, or lack of will, but of the remnants of destruction. The object as object is mesmerizing in this way; beyond description, it enters discourse and is “experienced” only at a distance and only passively.

*In the Shadow of Annihilation*

I started this analysis with the observation that the objects Sebald’s narrators take up in the course of their investigations are notably difficult to interpret. More than polysemous, objects such as the photographs of the herring fishery and of the concentration camp, in their juxtaposition, seem to fall between semantic categories. The reader might be compelled to study such things closely and at length; but the narrator, due perhaps to Sebald’s law of peripatetic narration, doesn’t share this privilege. In some respects, he cannot return to what does not make sense. This incapacity, however, does not prevent the return and repetition of illegible or inscrutable objects and figures in the narrative. While the narrator may not be able to return, he also, passively, is unable to resist the return of those things he could not at first grasp. This repetition reveals not precisely the uncanniness of objects cast in a certain light, but rather a kind of blockage, a disruption of knowledge and narrative that the narrator cannot overcome. At the same time, let’s also keep in mind Derrida’s description of Blanchot’s idiosyncratic syntax, “the hyphen” of possibility. Paratactic space, breaks in syntax, do not necessarily signify loss,

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12 The *levity* of parataxis is suggested by Jacques Derrida in this curious moment of analysis. On Blanchot’s “Dead – immortal” (“The Instant of My Death” 5), Derrida writes, “The syntax of this sentence without sentence, of this death without sentence of which Blanchot also speaks elsewhere, sums up everything in a single stroke. No verb. A hyphen, a line of union and separation, a disjunctive link wordlessly marks the place of all logical modalities; dead *and yet* immortal, dead *because* immortal, dead *insofar as* immortal (an immortal does not live)” (“Demeure: Fiction
violence or disruption: the space might designate, as Derrida sees it, a moment of excessive possibility. Still, this excess can be as paralyzing as absence.

The excess of objects, their resistance to narrative organization, challenges the objective of the narrator’s project. Such things are not precisely evidence, not precisely taken up by testimony as a corroborating voice, metonyms for the absent witness. The inaccessibility of the object’s meaning turns objects in *The Emigrants* into floating signifiers which can then be employed, read and interpreted, and spoken for in any number of ways. As the narrator observes early in the novel, “Dr. Selwyn was scarcely ever in the house. He lived in his hermitage, giving his entire attention, as he occasionally told me, to thoughts which on the one hand grew vaguer day by day, and, on the other, grew more precise and unambiguous” (11). Selwyn, recall, is introduced as “a motionless figure lying in the shade cast on the lawn by a lofty cedar,” where he’s discovered counting blades of grass! (5) Hence various precocities of speech in this novel, a certain relentlessness of narration: as if every blade of grass on Selwyn’s lawn needs accounting for, as if Selwyn’s thoughts could grow, at once, vaguer but also more precise. But such precocity, I want to argue, is not a marker of the uniqueness of our narrator’s skill, or the uniqueness or idiosyncrasies of his interlocutors’ memories. Rather, the excess of speech is a symptom of the narrators’ grief in isolation from others, their grief in detachment from the objects, the evidence, that would provide them with orientation in the world, and provide them access to testimony for what they witnessed decades before, in the years leading up to their forced or chosen emigration. Insofar as the object is removed from a sense of objectivity, that is, removed from the subject’s grasp (a particular blade of grass, for instance), it contributes to a

quality of solitude, of defamiliarization, and of what is incommunicable. By de-objectifying the narrative world, Sebald emphasizes various aspects of the solitude experienced by the emigrants.

The strangeness of objects in *The Emigrants* is most clearly displayed by the microcosm of Max Ferber’s studio.

The darkness that had gathered in the corners, the puffy tidemarked plaster and the paint that flaked off the walls, the shelves overloaded with books and piles of newspapers, the boxes, work benches and side tables, the wing armchair, the gas cooker, the mattresses, the crammed mountains of paper, crockery and various materials, the paint pots gleaming carmine red, leaf green and lead white in the gloom, the blue flames of the two paraffin heaters: the entire furniture was advancing, millimetre by millimetre, upon the central space where Ferber had set up his easel in the grey light that entered through a high north-facing window layered with the dust of decades. Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning out towards the edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavors and the most palpable proof of his failure. (161)

Ferber’s product is the process of construction in its entirety, a process which incorporates various acts of destruction. He erases and grinds away the calcified marks of his movement forward, of painting. But rather than seeing in this process an artist who looks *through* his production at what the image in any given moment proposes, at what the image promises for the future, I think Ferber instead tries to look directly at his production; he seeks an image as image, an image severed from the imagining, say, of its artist. Thus, while he paints and erases, paints again and erases in a protracted present, and *the aggregation* of this paint, its dimensionality, its coarseness, its destiny in defacement and as dust becomes what the final image indicates; the final image is always without finality itself. The process is one of constructive destruction, a negative aggregation or an aggregation not of constructive units but of the marks of deterioration. Objectivity, which would capture the energy of the artistic object and put it to use,
is here forestalled. What Ferber, and indirectly what the narrator, proposes is that the artist recovers the object as object by giving up the *objective* of his art – the “true product... and the most palpable proof of his failure” (161).

There are two aspects to emphasize in this interpretation of the relationship between the artist and his work. On the one hand, looking *at* the image-object and not through it, Ferber is blocked by the image; the image, and the work it demands, keeps the artist engaged and in place. At the same time, the artist discovers in this blockage a kind of distance, as I commented earlier, but a distance that only occurs in proximity, the distance of a recognizable difference or incommensurability. This relationship with the object, as Sebald comments on the work of Jan Peter Tripp, permits “the autonomous existence of things to which... we stand in a subordinate and dependent relationship” (*Unrecounted* 86). As Jan Ceuppens brilliantly points out in “Transcripts: An Ethics of Representation in *The Emigrants,*” the concept of the image in Sebald is pulled, critically, in two divergent directions: one position takes the image as *Vorbilder,* an idealized model with which to study the world. The subject in this position looks through the image at what it proposes for reality. (This reader of Sebald could take photographs as “documentary” evidence.) The other position takes the image as *Bilder,* a kind of picture-book that does not conceal its construction (as the mimetic transparency of *Vorbilder* does) and that requires attentive reading and rereading.¹³ That is, *Bilder* interferes with the open horizon of the subject’s imagination: it demands present work and engagement, as with a text. The idea of an object’s interference and the limit it establishes for perspective plays out in *The Emigrants* in various ways.

Like the catalogues at the conclusion of *The Rings of Saturn*, objects congest the movements of narration. Like Ireneo Funes, in Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Funes el memorioso,” the young man who remembers *everything* and who dies of pulmonary congestion, the detritus, the dust, all material marks of past ruin make the destinies of Sebald’s narratives impossible to find and impossible to escape. Thus objects, insofar as they are obscured or unidentifiable – the chimeric Teas-Maid, for example – seem to take on a life of their own. The facsimile or photograph of the object – of books, journals, newspapers – aims at deictic presentation, as if to say, “Look. Here it is. It is real.” That is how the facsimile of the newspaper headline functions: it verifies the truth of the narrator’s statement (*Emigrants* 22). But the reiteration (or return) in this context – a kind of material corroboration – is not so straightforward. We have, at once, the narrator, motivated by the newspaper, envisioning the belated recovery of Naegeli’s body to Henry Selwyn; we have the glacier, a geologic narrative and narrator – one of many earth-objects in these novels that tell stories – that puts forth the sign of Naegeli’s passage, remnant of his presence; we have, as well, Selwyn’s story, told to the narrator, about his lost friend. These various “accounts,” testament, all unfold from the presentation of the newspaper facsimile, an image which purports to be real and which, by implication, mitigates for the narrator the possibility of, in Selwyn’s account, figurative embellishment. The image grounds and naturalizes – aligning subjective language with geology, in this case – and thus corroborates the truth of Selwyn’s account.

However, the alignment of language objects with material evidence – objects in the natural world, objects in the set of the real – does not entirely clarify the narrator’s claim on “certain things” and their unexpected return (23). In fact the narrator suggests a tension between embellished figures, explicit and energetic metaphors – of birds, of flight, for instance – and
representations of reality. To put it simply, the story of the Oberaar glacier demonstrates a dialectic of what is literal against what is figurative, where the literal becomes a figure for the concrete, the present, the unchangeable, an idea which, in turn, is a figure for the narrator’s want of a reliable past, a fixed memory state. What is “ever returning to us” (23), then, are not only figures of fragmented materiality and corporeality, but also the capacity of the imagined dead to speak again, in fragments, hauntingly, for what we have missed and continue to miss. That is, the return is a re-emergence of a fundamental fragmentation in discourse.\textsuperscript{14}

The conjunction of the object with its capacity to haunt the narrator occurs in another “object lesson” (39), this one conducted by the peripatetic teacher Paul Bereyter. The narrator includes a photograph here which depicts a scene of schoolboys gathered in the countryside. Some faces are shadowed, blackened out; a hand, belonging to one faceless figure, remains on the shoulder of a fully present boy. This natural, or artificial, erasure of components in the photograph – leaving a spectral shadow where a boy should be – suggests the presence of a ghost in the image. Between figure and space there are these partial figures, shapes which are not quite in or out of the image.

They have ways of returning to us, these dead. Consider the formal strategy of using shadows in these novels as providing points of access, entries into not only what falls between representations of life and afterlife, but what falls outside of representation. The shadow, that is to say, is cast by an object beyond the domain of representation.

\textsuperscript{14} The object’s excess – that the “truth” of Naegeli’s return is broken into three disparate statements – undermines the singularity of the material evidence provided by the newspaper. The newspaper’s article only complicates the narrator’s understanding of Selwyn and his lost friend. Had the newspaper “spoken” alone, then the “truth” of its statement would be more credible than it is.
The Obscured Object and the Obscuring Subject

Obscured objects, things seen in translucency instead of transparency, figures in shadow, are integral to the fragmentary nature of the narrative. Where gaps occur – in different perspectives on events, in description – we find contrast, implicit shadows, moments where information is obscured by the observing subject’s position in relation to the event. So the narrator attempts to piece together various accounts, attempts to find continuity – a logical alignment – among disparate object-accounts. “It was not until I was able to fit my own fragmentary recollections into what Lucy Landau told me that I was able to understand that desolation even in part” (42) the narrator writes, speaking of the unfathomable emotional pain Paul Bereyter endured in his final years. The fragment, in this case, is a constitutive element of recollection; and the final memory-image is imagined as a complete and finite thing. The memory-image is a photo, a book, a stone, Bereyter’s “windcheater” (61). And the story of Bereyter, then, is a compilation of such things with the narrator’s conversations with various people, each view as “fragmentary recollections,” brought together toward a semblance of reality, of the lost person.

Obscurity, which reveals the fragmentary nature of recollection, isolates or enframes the objects our narrator pursues. These become solitary, defamiliarized things, things removed from the continuities of narrative memory (mneme). This solitude, however, since the fragment is never singular, paradoxically incites further solitude. Hence the solitary experience of memory does not belong only to the narrator. It is given to, by description, the object the narrator seeks, this Bereyter. The degree to which Bereyter is reconstructed by various means might summon the figure forth, but it also implies an increasing impossibility of access, Bereyter’s increasing solitude in the rigor and noise of the recollection, these objective testimonials. His solitude is
redoubled by the fact that he, like the narrator, conducted his own investigation into the nature of his identity. According to Landau, Bereyter “was gathering evidence, the mounting weight of which… convinced him that he belonged to the exiles” (59). Bereyter builds himself – in a construction parallel to the one we’re currently involved in; a construction within the construction – builds himself from characterological elements in what he reads. “Altenberg, Trakl, Wittgenstein, Friedell, Hasenclever, Toller, Tucholsky, Klaus Mann, Ossietzky, Benjamin, Koestler and Zweig: almost all of them writers who had taken their own lives” (58). A metonymic shift here occurs in how Bereyter’s perspective, of fragments and “shattered images” (59), extends from the narrative of fragments, of various incomplete images. As we’ll see in in greater detail in The Rings of Saturn, Bereyter incorporates elements of his environment – and of the narrative he lives in – into his body. Like Frederick Farrar in The Rings of Saturn, Bereyter undergoes, through narration, a form of gradual, “natural,” metamorphosis – as if his increasing materiality (or increasing objectification and corresponding desubjectification) might establish a body of evidence from which we might recover certainty, and understanding, of the past event.

Bereyter’s increasing blindness, however, underscores his inaccessibility as a stable figure. Internally, he is overcome by darkness. But with the disintegration of the physical Bereyter, there is a correspondent growth of the figure – in “evidence” – in the narrative. The accounts and photographic evidence gathered by the narrator speak proportionally to the degree that the original figure is silenced. Writing of the disaster, which the narrator is implicitly doing in his account of Bereyter, captures and places Bereyter into a passive, speechless position. Yet this silence is not entirely imposed. It signifies, I think, Bereyter’s relation with the disaster, a relation the narrator does not fully understand. Bereyter, I must emphasize, forces the narrator to consider the limits of his project, and consider the possibility of an incommensurate figure. Here
is, as Blanchot would observe, silence without silence; autrui, before or beyond dialectical productivity.

The object never functions alone, in and as itself. Figuration, as a kind of naming and appropriation of the object, negates the object’s strangeness and pushes the object toward objectivity. Bereyter’s fascination, as a child, with trains in Lindau exemplifies this transformation. The spectacle of the trains “so absorbed him that he never once appeared on time at the dinner table all that holiday, a lapse that his aunt responded to with a shake of her head... and his uncle with the comment that he would end up on the railways.”

When Paul told me this perfectly harmless holiday story, said Mme Landau, I could not possibly ascribe the importance to it that it now seems to have, though even then there was something about that last turn of phrase that made me uneasy... it struck me as darkly foreboding. (62-63)

In such ways – of passing along the object in language – objects are simultaneously inflated with significance (symbolic, premonitory) but also fragmented and altered by intersubjective dependencies, or by contingencies forcing the narrator into one perspective or another. “But Ferber himself,” the narrator later remarks, “whom I had not noticed at first as I came in from outside, was sitting towards the rear in his red velvet armchair, a cup of tea in his hand, watching his visitor out of the corner of his eye” (180).

The object’s fragility – it is inflated with meaning as it is simultaneously shattered – is exposed by the interruptive quality of the photographs. Some of the photos, as I have already noted, are cued in the text. Inserting a photo of a class of primary school aged children in the midst – following “distinguishable” – of the sentence, the narrator writes: “Paul, then aged twenty-four, did his probation year at the primary school in S, teaching, as I learnt to my amazement, in the very classroom where a good fifteen years later he taught a pack of children
scarcely distinguishable from those pictured here, a class that included myself” (47). Other photographs, like the one of the cemetery with which the novel begins, appear from nowhere, floating in the text with barely the evocation of a clue, a word, name, or metonymic element. But where do the photos come from? Can we assume that they all belong in some way to the narrator? Can we assume that every appearance of a photo or picture – every interruption of the text by these paratextual, supplementary materials – is controlled by the narrator? Or is there a way to read the images as a separate narrative, a parallel, counterpoint narrative; is the novel, then, a dialogue between the textual narration and an image-essay?

If the image doesn’t always respond to or correspond with its textual moment, its context, then we must consider its significance in the narrative apart from the semantic field of the text. And we must consider how such images interrupt, and block, the narrative, and consider what this interruption and blockage produces.\(^1\) Taking those images that do not correspond with their context as a set of narrative components apart from the primary narrative – that narrative in the voice and under the direction of our narrator – we might think about these images, anomalous fragments, as significant but significant in the context of a separate and distinct narrative. What does this accomplish? Parallel narration, where various narrative lines operate simultaneously, asks the reader to take some of the photographs as components in an autonomous narrative, and to read this narrative in juxtaposition with the primary (textual) narrative; the result is an implied third narrative, a synthesis of the two.\(^2\) If parataxis implies an overarching structural principle

\(^{1}\) Likewise, thinking of the photographs and text as competing narratives, what shadows are cast by the photos on the text and by the text on the photos? How will we identify this margin of interference?

\(^{2}\) On a related point, Richard Crownshaw uses the interesting concept of phototextuality. Where I am claiming the photos and text function in autonomous spaces, Crownshaw offers an interesting argument about their integration. Citing Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (27-28, 30, 35), Crownshaw reads phototextuality in Sebald as a form of “the middle voice”: “Taking a disruptive and disrupted form of representation, [the middle voice] can offer fidelity to the victim’s voice without claiming it. The middle voice is empathetic rather than over-identificatory, where identification is the ‘unmediated fusion of self and other in which the otherness or alterity of the other is not recognized and respected’ and in ‘which aspects not acknowledged in the self are attributed to the
(God’s logic, for instance, as Auerbach suggests), a principle left absent in such narration, then the paratactic difference between the primary (textual) and secondary (visual, iconic) accounts might offer access to the higher principle. And what do we find there? What story is told in the spaces between written word and visual icons or cues? A story about how and where the written word no longer reaches its referent, and how the picture, too, no longer represents what it ostensibly frames: that half-image, again, the figure, as in the photograph of schoolchildren (39), who is in and out of the picture, who appears in pieces – a hand, a hair, a shadow – but who cannot be said to be there or not be there.

In either case – the image as supplementary shadow to the text, or the text as shadow to the image – the relation between photograph and text suggests something spectral, luminescent and projective. Between the object as object and its image occurs the narrator’s precocious voice (writing), and we can think of this transcription as a kind of shadow, a trace, the outline of an object obscured by the narrative’s intransitive qualities. That is to say, the narrator’s transparency (his self-consciousness, his confessional tone), the precocity of speech, the formal other... and aspects of the other are taken into or encrypted in the self”; and where in empathy ‘one does not feel compelled or authorized to speak in the other’s voice or take the other’s place, for example, as surrogate victim or perpetrator,’ and this is fundamental to an ethical stance towards the other” (The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 79). Also see J. J. Long, W.G. Sebald – Image, Archive, Modernity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 123, 124, on the “mutual dependency” between photograph and text.

17 Figural interpretation, Auerbach writes, “establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. ... The latter ‘fulfills’ the former... [A] connection is established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally – a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension [a temporal (historical) extension]” (73). The connection between two events “can only be established if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding... The here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and which will be fulfilled in the future...” Parataxis suggests a site of conflict between the horizontal “historical” narrative and earthly content, a conflict between “on the one hand, a presentation which carefully interrelated the elements of history, which respected temporal and causal sequence, remained within the domain of the earthly foreground, and, on the other hand, a fragmentary, discrete presentation, constantly seeking an interpretation from above” (74). Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

18 The photo of the narrator on the beach (89) is another exemplary image of the half-figure.
strategies of metonymic and metaphoric continuity – metamorphosis, as we have seen – come between us and the object the narrator wants to represent. The shadow of annihilation that already lies on every new thing marks the dimensions of the relation between the object and its representation: the word is the shadow of its referent (*Rings* 24). The shaded figure or the erased figure then suggest a form of emptiness-in-presence, a form of figure without figure. The narrator reveals his nervousness of such figures (a nervousness equally of his own potential figuration) when he suggests his proximity with Landau or Ferber, and suggests his own presence to the reader in such phrases as “Today, as I bring these notes to a conclusion” (*Rings* 294). The shadow indicates, then, an exclusion, and through this, as I claimed earlier, a form of solitude. The solitary object – the object as object – which is close but unattainable, motivates and reflects the solitude of the reading and wandering subject, the subject as subject. Shadows in *The Emigrants*, that is, frame our narrator in such a way that he, as in the photograph on the beach (89), is emptied of agency, the passive shell of a figure.

*Keeping One’s Distance*

The solitude experienced by the narrator in *The Emigrants* is partly due to his frustration by figures such as Paul Bereyter. Incontrovertible statements, evidence of such persuasiveness that it would exceed itself as evidence and become the lost object itself – the event, the cause of destruction – are all inaccessible to the narrator. This frustration is also suggested by the distances he and his interlocutors keep from each other, from objects as memorabilia, and from the past. In a scene as fascinating for its use of shadows – as in the conclusion to the Bereyter account, “so low and inky black was the sky” (86) – as it is demonstrative of solitary distance, Uncle Kasimir brings the narrator to Pelican Island, on the New Jersey shore. “This is the edge
of darkness,” Kasimir says (88). “I often come out here... it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where” (89). A photograph of the narrator then supplements this account, and he is, predictably, blotted out in shadow, the silhouette of a figure on a gray shore. The narrator presents Aunt Fini in a similar fashion – as a figure at a limit, on an edge, “a long way away” – when he describes her protracted narration as one marked with “long pauses, during which she often seemed very far away and lost” (95).

The emphasis the narrator puts on Kasimir and Fini’s senses of alienation raises the question of what distances these figures, emigrants, have covered. Fini, whose name punningly evokes an end-point, embodies the distances she has travelled; she is “very far away and lost” in her act of narration, in a performance of remembering that carries her off, that sets her further afield than she already is physically. For Fini, memory metaphorically acts as a journey and a risk of permanent exile. By remembering, the narrator suggests, the subject is not guaranteed a complete return to the point of consciousness she left from. Remembering affects the body as travel does, as the labor of wandering over the land does. Kasimir, visiting the coast, because “it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where” (89), distances himself from a point of origin that has been lost. The power of this distance, of the gap between the solitaire and his community, is underscored by the loss of the origin. Kasimir feels distant, but he doesn’t know the magnitude of this distance because, to some degree, he has forgotten the specifics of where he came from. The plight of these emigrants’ functions in this way: the world they left, in a journey that defines them, is no longer accessible. The mark of being an emigrant, then, cannot be positively confirmed. The geographic determinant of their exile has shifted or vanished. In this way, their exile is redoubled: forced away once, in actuality,
with the destruction of their origin, they are forced away a second time, with the impossibility of returning.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the William Hazel scene clarifies some of what I mean here by geographic shift and disappearance, by the lost origin, and redoubled exile. Hazel recounts to the narrator how, in 1940, he learned of German cities and geography with the aid of a map and radio:

I studied the various regions on the map, from the Polish border to the Rheine, from the green plains of the north to the dark brown Alps, partly covered with eternal snow and ice, and spelled out the names of the cities, the destruction of which had just been announced: Braunschweig and Würzburg... (*Rings* 39)

With the destruction of each city, Hazel memorizes its location, the “symbolic pictures” and “emblems of features” associated with the place (39). The country, he says, “was burnt into me.” With the destruction of the referent comes the signified in Hazel’s young memory: he thus remembers a place, a Germany, that exists only in symbolic or emblematic terms. The actual place no longer exists; in fact, the actual place, experientially, *never* existed for Hazel. This puzzle of the original place’s relation to its symbolic existence is complicated, for Hazel, when he later learns that inhabitants of the actual place, from 1940, have no memory of the destruction which, for Hazel, was a catalyst for knowledge. “Even if you asked people directly,” he says, “it was as if everything had been erased from their minds” (39). In Hazel’s view, then, Germany is twice removed, twice erased, from reality: the first occasion was in the symbolic formation of the place in his imagination via the place’s actual destruction; but then, in his attempt to later discover something of the real Germany, he is bewildered to discover that what to him *constructed* an image of Germany in his mind *destroyed* the same place in the minds of others. Schematically, this suggests that an event like the total destruction of Hamburg, for instance, at once *constructs* an image or idea of Hamburg in the mind of the other – of anyone far removed
from the place in understanding, in knowledge – while also destroying the same place, actually and symbolically, in the minds of Hamburg’s inhabitants. The result of such an event is a horribly conflicted imagining of what Hamburg actually is. Here is perhaps an example of Benjamin’s thought at a standstill, a constellation saturated with tension, the point where the continuum of history must break down. Hazel’s object lesson models for the narrator the problem of all objects of memory: in the conflict between referent and its projection – in writing, in imagination – the narrative continuity of history breaks down.

If the solitaire is defined by the community he leaves behind, what becomes of him if that community – his reference point – disappears? What becomes of solitaires like Kasimir and Fini, when the potential of return, which is equally a potential for discourse – because the solitaire must engage his community with an account of his experience, and the community must respond in turn – is eliminated? These witnesses become, like the objects they hold on to in order to have access, however tenuous, to the past, unanchored objects themselves:

Aunt Fini now stood on the pavement in front of her bungalow, in a dark winter coat that was too heavy for her, waving a handkerchief after me. As I drove off I could see her in the mirror, with clouds of white exhaust about her, growing smaller and smaller; and, as I recall that mirror image, I find myself thinking how strange it is that no one since then has waved a handkerchief after me in farewell. (Emigrants 104)

The distances we have considered here are not necessarily negative ones. While Kasimir and Fini may never return to their origin, we cannot conclude from this possibility that they are only victims of a past event of violent expulsion. Sebald’s distances are narratologically productive: space in these novels always avails itself to transition and synthesis, simultaneous movement and stasis, a collapse of dialectical thought. (As in the reflection of the reflection, in the above passage: while Fini sends the narrator on his way, she functions for the narrator as an object removed from itself: not precisely “one” waving a handkerchief, but a reflection, an
As we considered in Chapter One, the dialectical relationship between the solitaire and his community is necessary for a certain ethical engagement, for a certain self-reflection on the part of the community; and it is important for both the solitaire and the community that their relationship maintain this productive, if tense, difference. We can think of distance in a similar way. The distance between the subject and the memory-object or perceived object is, as Theodor Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, not one of safe removal, but of tension. This unbridgeable gap reveals the omnipresent fragility of thought. “Vis-à-vis positivism,” Adorno writes, “it is fitting neither to insist on being right nor to put on airs of distinction, but rather to prove, by criticism of knowledge, the impossibility of a coincidence between the idea and what fulfills it” (127). We would be mistaken, then, to read in Hazel’s frustration or in the melancholy of Kasimir and Fini the refuted attempt to recover the lost referent. For Sebald, the distance between his narrators and the material world is necessarily unbridgeable; to close this gap would be to stop the work of memory as anamnesis. Distance, then, provides the space required for imagination to transcend, in Adorno’s words, “the inevitable too-little” (128) of the empirical realm. This is not to dismiss the recurrent melancholy of Sebald’s narrator and characters. Rather, I want to propose that Kasimir’s reason for going to the shore, to the edge of darkness, because “it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where,” is to actualize distance, to properly acknowledge its importance in his, and the narrator’s, projects of memory. They need to be at the edge of darkness before they can perform the work of memory; they need to be, that is, at a fissure delineating the boundary between memory and forgetting.

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The object as object has no relation to the perceiving subject. It engages us, as Blanchot might say, and as we’ll discuss in closer detail in the next chapter, by a relation without relation. This form of proximity occurs in the placelessness of the emigrants’ accounts, on the edge of darkness. To this sense of placelessness I will also add timelessness, a disintegration of temporality. Thus, the narrator concludes his conversation with Kasimir with a photograph, of which he says – following Kasimir’s remark “I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where” – Kasimir “took this picture, a print of which he sent me two years later, probably when he had finally shot the whole film, together with his gold pocket watch” (89). The edge of darkness, the non-place of testimony, here aligns with traces of time’s corruption: the photograph arrives belatedly, accidentally, with no explanation, but with, equally perplexing, Kasimir’s watch; as if Kasimir, in the narrator’s reflection – in a look askance, “from the corner of his eye” (180) – would dispossess himself of a relation to time.20

Temporality as a strange object for the narrator becomes evident in his paraphrase, and then actual recreation, of Luisa Lanzberg’s journal, a record of her childhood in the first years of the twentieth century. Besides the fact that this record – idyllic and written “with a passion that was beyond his understanding” (193) – is juxtaposed with, and in sharp contrast to, Ferber’s account of his childhood departure from Germany, an account of the final moments he spent with his parents, who are killed in the camps, there is within the account a curious echo of a fragmentary image we’ve seen before, and this fragment once again draws our attention to a question of time. Where the journal, externally, as an object taken up by the narrator, juxtapositionally proposes a strange temporal sequence – from Ferber’s troubled memories of

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20 For interesting analyses of the temporal dimension of the photographic image in Sebald that addresses Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida, see Maya Barzilai, “On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W.G. Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz,” W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma, eds. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, 205, and Crownshaw, 68.
1941 to his mother’s idyllic recollection of 1905 – internally, Lanzberg’s content reminds us of another journal, namely Adelwarth’s, by evocation of a similar question. (We are traversing, in this subtle figure, the landscape of memory in Adelwarth’s imagination.) Watching stag beetles in Windheim Woods, Lanzberg recalls how at times it looks as if something has shocked them, physically, and it seems as if they have fainted. … Only when you hold your own breath do they return from death to life, only then does time begin to pass again. Time. What time was all that? … Who was that strange child… with a tiny blue and white jay’s feather in her hand? (207)

The statement echoes Adelwarth’s “What does this mean, 24 September?” (132). Both questions indicate the burden of understanding one’s time, and the burden of reflecting on the past and making sense of the difference in the rates of time’s passage, making sense of events unfolding and of events still to unfold, all which determine the present conditions for reflection. The figuration of time, here, is like a landscape with myriad faults running through it, and in memory – looking down on the land, as Adelwarth would – these faults and the divisions of the land they create shift, growing and diminishing, pressing together here, separating there.

The mode of time for memoir, for language engaged in anamnesis, differs from experiential time. There is a larger, more inclusive present for this discourse. The narrative’s intransitivity indicates how the narrator cannot, finally, communicate (i.e., mimetically recreate) his memory (as mneme) or the objects of recollection within that space to others. Neither inside, nor outside, as Blanchot would say, the narrator speaks from passivity to, and for, these others. The narrator’s distance from such figures is evident in the transparency of his final assertions on his own work, on the laborious creation of the present narrative; but this present, like the past, is incomplete and porous, grasping at external fragments – because of its own inner lack? – at dust, floating signifiers, for meaning. Thus the descent of a feather, at Friederike Halblieb’s grave, a symbol adrift throughout the narrative, dropping in moments, like a blessing, from an
inaccessible dimension of the text: “The symbol of the writer’s quill… I imagined her pen in hand… bent with bated breath over her work… as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss…” (224-25). The feather, quill, pen, symbolize the multiplicity and ambiguity of objects, trace of the past, for the narrator, and thus symbolize the labor of “remembering, writing and reading” (193) and the necessary loss this work reveals and entails. The pain he feels by this identification – “as if I had lost her… as if I could not get over this loss” – is not simply of, via, a memory of Halblieb; not simply of memorialization. In addition to sympathy with those who suffer in the event of Halblieb’s death, there is a corresponding recognition of those who erase this writer from history. Juxtaposed with the image, then, we read how through the narrator’s own efforts “with my research and with the writing itself, which, as always, was going laboriously” he discovers “the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up” (225). The project of the narrative, then, writing against forgetting, is an effort to overcome such “impoverishment,” the “lack of memory,” and to question “the efficiency” with which the ruins of the war were cleaned away. In the proximity of Halblieb’s grave, and with the exclamatory uprightness of her feather, the narrator’s statement is perhaps the closest thing to a moral judgment – of the Germans, in this instance – that can be found in his text. The narrator writes what Halblieb could not; the narrator denounces the forces of forgetting that the Germans practiced, forces which led, for instance, to the ghettoization of the cemetery he presently attends. “[You] will find the Israelite cemetery if you proceed southwards in a straight line from the town hall for a thousand paces till you get to the end of Bergmannstrasse. When I reached the gate it turned out that neither of the keys fitted the lock, so I climbed the wall” (222-223). In this act of trespassing, however, we ought to notice not only
the marginalization, and neglect, of the Jewish cemetery: the narrator’s act also signifies the possibility opened up by the passage of destruction. That is, in this narrative world of disintegrating objects and of disrupted spatial and temporal relations, all effects of the disaster, the withdrawal of ordering principles, creative potentialities open up. The narrator does not write what Halblieb would have written, but he writes, because he must, nonetheless.

_The Questionable Business of Writing: the Lost Objects of Testimony_

Near the end of “Air War and Literature” Sebald remarks that if “those born after the war were to rely solely on the testimony of writers, they would scarcely be able to form an idea of the extent, nature, and consequences of the catastrophe” (69-70). His argument is built around an examination of the fiction and non-fiction that was contemporaneous with, or written shortly thereafter, the 1941 air raids on German cities; and in such texts he identifies clichéd language used to “cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend” (25).

Resorting to clichés, to everyday language that captures undisturbed representations of what happened causes those who listen to the witness to suspect inauthenticity in the account. The audience to testimony makes several assumptions: a) that everyday language cannot speak of such events, and b) that the witness should exhibit difficulties in expression (aphasia, stuttering), assume that she should exhibit, in her account, trauma. But perhaps it is the case that the ease of the witness’s account, the ease with which she can use everyday language to speak of the event, 

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reveals something else of the event: granted that this witness was there, the casualness of her account should remind us how the witness was severed from her “capacity to think and feel” in the aftermath of the event. Her account, then, has a degree of artifice, constructiveness, unnaturalness, a touch of the inauthentic because everyday language and everyday sense was paralyzed in the time of the event. Her account comes only in retrospect, in a process of recovering language. Thus to speak of what happened, as Sebald says, requires the supplement of “a synoptic and artificial view.”

Expecting signs of trauma in the account we also assume that the witness has, in the time of the event, the capacity “to think and feel” as usual. We assume some kind of sensory access to what happened. As Sebald argues, however, in the case of German witnesses, there was no sensory access to the event: sensation, like everything else in the bombings, was incinerated. Language must catch up with the subject. Speaking of what happened only comes afterward, in recovery. In other words, testimony performs more than objective reconstruction. The witness’s words do more than mere mimetic representation. This problem is evident in the conclusion to the novel.

The absence of a photograph in the final scene of The Emigrants complicates the function of the image as evidence, the image as presenting incontrovertible fact, in that the confessional tone of the closing passages offers a kind of transparency, access to the narrator, that photographs and other opaque objects do not.

It was an arduous task. Often I could not get on for hours or days at a time, and not infrequently I unraveled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralyzing me. These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to… but also the entire

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22 On the important differences between oral and written testimonies, and between the witness’s experience and the expectations of her interlocutor, see the second chapter, “Anguished Memory,” of Lawrence Langer’s Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 39-76.
questionable business of writing… Even… a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched. (230, 231)

The narrator’s frankness removes his discourse from that of the objects’, these things he wants to interpret.

The narrator’s hesitations to write about Ferber relates to his “scruples” of doing “justice” to the figure in narrative. Understandably, since the richness and complexity of Ferber’s life and character would raise challenges for any writer. But what does the narrator mean by “the entire questionable business of writing”? Would he choose silence over articulation, however “botched” the final draft? What is objectionable about the “business of writing”? The narrator speaks here of the questionable business of writing on the Holocaust, of, in short, fitting Ferber’s experience into the aesthetic form of narrative. The form, however, is unavoidable, and suggested by the parallels the narrator draws between his own work and that of Ferber. “So I hesitated to send Ferber my cut-down rendering of his life…” (231). The injustice of the process, if it occurs, would happen along the line of the narrator’s presentation of Ferber’s life, and of Ferber’s mother’s life (and of Friederike Halblieb’s life, as well) as if these were of his own experiences. Irresponsible identification with these others – the etiolation of the singularity of Ferber’s experience – is a risk the narrator cannot avoid, a risk that leaves its mark in his labor, in the “shreds and patches” of the final narrative.24

23 In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, “Ghost Hunter,” (in The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007)), Sebald mentions his reluctance to base his work on the lives of real people. He feels that such writing is intrusive. “It’s a received wisdom that it’s good to talk about traumas, but it’s not always true. Especially if you are the instigator of making people remember… You are not certain whether your intrusion into someone’s life may not cause a degree of collateral damage which that person might otherwise have been spared. So there’s an ethical problem there. And then the whole business of writing of course – you make things up, you smooth certain contradictory elements that you come across” (60).
24 I don’t have the space to explore the point here, but this “risk” describes the narrator’s ethical position in relation to the people he writes about. Edith Wyschogrod, in An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), describes this kind of risk in very thoughtful, if at times unfortunately abstruse, terms. The historian, she writes, “cannot renege on the impossible promise that precedes the recounting of events ‘just as they were’ and presupposes a constituency to whom the promise is given, the dead others who cannot speak for themselves. Inhabiting neither a region nor a territory – territorialization
In her essay “The Posthumous Sublime,” Cynthia Ozick writes of the concluding scene of *The Emigrants*:

In the conqueror’s lens, Sebald sees three young Jewish women at a loom, and recalls “the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread.” Here, it strikes me, is the only false image in this ruthlessly moving and profoundly honest work dedicated to the recapture of phantoms. In the time of the German night, it was not the Jews who stood in for the relentless Fates, they who rule over life and death. And no one understands this, from the German side, more mournfully… than [Sebald].

In Ozick’s view, Sebald’s reference to the Fates is ironic: these Jewish girls are victims of fate, not its actors or representatives. But should we then conclude with Ozick that Sebald distances his narrator from these young women by suggesting their destiny is nothing other than mythological destiny, an unfortunate turn of fate? Rather, if the scene is ironic, it is in how Sebald sees fate in these doomed young women – sees how they utter the fate of ruined countries and cultures, but utter, like Cassandra, in silence, on deaf ears. And at the same time this evocation is empty, insofar as the narrative up to this point has, if spoken of coincidence, not offered any mythological foundation for the destinies of its characters. Rather, the mythology suggested here is and is not about fate; it is precisely about an exodus of such narratives (mythological, teleological), an absence of narrative completeness. But perhaps this nihilistic sense can be folded into the mythological sense of the image, these young women as fate, in that Fate (a plural entity), and others of their species, are always out of reach: no photo supplements the narrator’s description, although the ekphrastic language here is quite clear. These young women live in a removed narrative-world, a meta-narrative for the doomed mortals of the

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becomes an instrument of suppression of the other – the historian abides with the voiceless dead in the non-space of ethics, of the promise, yet empirical truth requires that the other be reinstated in a nexus of concrete events. When the historian speaks in the name of the other, she preempts the speech of the other, whereas if she remains silent the other is consigned to invisibility” (38).

narrator’s world – and that insuperable distance is as integral to the unfolding tragedy as is the more material, literal components of this or that character’s actions and decisions.

My objection to Ozick’s reading of the concluding image is related to this view of the transparency of the narrative, at our access to the labors of its construction. I think Ozick takes the narrator’s understanding of “Work is our only course, they said” (237) as a misreading: the narrator, in Ozick’s view, does not fully appreciate the gravity and injustice of the girls’ labor. This might be the case, but we cannot read the narrator’s interpretation (and recollection) of the photograph without also considering the work – his only course – the narrator himself is compelled to complete. He too has a certain destiny. As Ferber says, entrusting his mother’s memoir to the narrator, the work of reading such a text “had seemed to him like one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks, with whatever work you have begun – in this case, the remembering, writing and reading” (193). On the one hand, the works done by the narrator and by the women in the ghetto are incomparable: the exploitative labor inside the ghetto will not be explained, justified, or redeemed through the narrator’s or anybody else’s work. But I think Ozick makes this assumption. Sebald’s “one false note” occurs wherein his narrator fails at understanding, and demonstrating this understanding through his work, the injustices endured by these young women. But could any work explicate such injustice? On the other hand, the narrator’s work – remembering, writing, reading – is incomplete. It is fragmented, “a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched” (231). Like Ferber’s, the narrator’s production signals the failure of its creator. The moral objection implied in Ozick’s critique, then, supposes that we cannot identify the “productivity” of these women with the productivity of the writer, since the women are murdered. But this would assume a “completeness” in the narrator’s work where the work of the
women failed – cut short by murder. I do not think we can make this assumption. All labors, all productions, in this case fail and are for naught.

*Summon the Witness*

An impulse of questioning precedes our understanding of the lost event. We might call this impulse a continuation of the event – a continuation of its devastation and dispersion, its ambiguity – in how the questioning is directed at witnesses, people who might otherwise want to go on with their private lives, undisturbed. Who’s to say, as Sebald reflects in “Air War and Literature,” that the witness ought to relinquish her “right to silence,” or that pursuing the witness does not risk causing a “degree of collateral damage”?  

Testimony does not need questioning, context and an interrogator; it does not need the frames of law to operate. Recovery of the lost event, on the other hand, needs testimony. This inequality of exchange, for communication – we need the witness to speak, but she doesn’t need to answer our questions – this inequality perpetuates a disruption that started in the event itself.

Then why testify?

One reason for giving testimony is that the disruptive effects of the event will persist anyways, regardless of whether one attempts to speak about the event or not. But in speaking about the event, there begins a possibility of dismantling the violence that the witness endured, through a working through of terms, names, identification, through corroboration with others, a possibility entirely absent in the choice of silence. The process of testimony, then, in Agamben’s terms, puts discourse up against what is not yet of discourse, of what is “non-language.”

Testimony speaks for what has not been said; more specifically, testimony speaks for the witness

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who cannot be present to give her own account. There is a kind of awaiting, then, in testimony, a kind of emergence of language. As in mass-klo, matisklo (Remnants 38), Hurbinek’s utterance: totally incomprehensible, the word lives, through Primo Levi, by the testimony of others. But the word is nonetheless ground-zero of testament: this is Hurbinek’s expression of what he experiences.

Testimony is the discourse that arises from the tension between the figure of the present witness who speaks and the figure of the witness, the first witness, who cannot be present. Her speech then performs desubjectification, or, as Agamben writes, “every testimony is a field of forces incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification” (121). Because of this displacement, in which one witness speaks for another, testimony is always incomplete; it always wants, as I’ve said, corroboration, other testimony, more evidence.

The aim of this chapter has been, broadly speaking, to consider the objective nature of such evidence and to consider how, through its accumulation, it is transformed to suit our narrative, memorial, and testimonial purposes. These objects – the witness herself, her testimony, photographs, the detritus, dust and remnants past events leave us with – are less deictic and empirical foundations for truth than they are like pieces in Michael Hamburger’s rebus, pictures that he had to “puzzle out… in order to cancel the monstrous events” (Rings 178). The object, in its ultimate inscrutability, is what remains from our effort at reading the whole in the part, what remains between, as Agamben concludes, the survivor who testifies and those witnesses who cannot (164).
3.

**Naming Names**

… One might logically assume that I thought I knew it all, knew what a political prisoner was, how he suffered in jail, the things a tortured man felt. But I knew nothing. And it’s impossible to convey what I know now.

In the long months of confinement, I often thought of how to transmit the pain that a tortured person undergoes. And always I concluded that it was impossible.

– Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*

*In the Space of Testimony: The Lone Witness*

Here is the witness: she comes forward of her own volition, or she is asked to come forward, to speak about an event. In some cases, others corroborate her account with their own testimony; at other times, her testimony stands alone, a peculiar statement the truth of which cannot be questioned or verified. In any case, the solitude of the witness is absolute: her presence, her utterance – these occur in the frames of unpredictability and uncertainty, in a kind of impossible dialogue, as Blanchot argues. Furthermore, while there is no predicting whether or not others will come forward to corroborate this testimony, the normative frame of testimony more or less makes this assumption.

For any event, there are witnesses who do not, or who will not, testify. Witnesses can remain silent for multiple reasons. This fact, that there are more witnesses than the singular one testimony suggests, forces yet another question on testimony: Why her? Why this person? Those who want testimony will find witnesses: in this way, the witness is not only a product of the event, but also a product of a system – of the court, the historian, the memoirist – that will seek the lost event. Witnesses are pursued; we invest them with a powerful trust, the capacity to verify the reality of the event. The desire of the witness, then, is not necessarily the desire of those who
ask her to come forward – not necessarily the desire of non-witnesses. So those who did not
witness the event want, for various reasons, the lost event to be spoken for by someone who was
there. She hasn’t come forward; she is asked to come forward. Giving her account, then, the
witness must consider why her testimony is so important to these people, people who have little
idea what the event was like, little idea of how it affects her. She would not speak unless asked
to. Her testimony is an act of generosity, a small act of grace.¹

What we mean by the lost event – the witness’s generosity reveals – is related to the fact
that there is a body of people who want the event recounted but who are incapable of making this
recollection on their own. This body needs witnesses and needs testimony to achieve this end.
For the court, the event is lost in a particular sense, and it is found by way of purposeful
testimony, by way of testimony that answers the particular ends of this group of non-witnesses.
But the event is lost to the witnesses insofar as they – in or out of court, with or without those
who need to hear their stories – will never be able to agree on what exactly happened. The latter
is the result of forgetfulness (and memory) and the perceptual and psychological impact of the
event on the witness; the former is the result of a particular question from a particular group –
from a manner, context, and collective decision to call the witness forth. An impulse of
questioning, then, precedes our understanding of the lost event.

It is very difficult, I have argued, to narrate solitary experience. This difficulty is often
associated with violence, with destruction. This study has considered, then, questions about how

¹ Testimony might be an act of grace, but does giving testimony give something away, in a sense, for nothing in
return? What could we possibly give the witness in exchange for her words, words that are absolutely hers alone,
words that she, beyond the secrecy of trauma, or simply beyond the privacy of privacy, might not even be able to
formulate but which are still, absolutely, hers? What we give: we listen, we respond, we are the other to this
solitaire’s voice. Or perhaps nothing is exchanged in and for the witness’s statement: it is not dialogue the solitaire
expects with his community. See Jean-François Lyotard, “The General Line,” Political Writings, trans. Bill
Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), on what I’ve called privacy
beyond privacy, “the secret existence” (109).
solitude is narrated, questions on the matters and materials, the evidence, in and of solitude, and considered an aesthetics of solitude, the forms of fragmentation in and of the solitaire’s world.

Now I would like to take the idea of the solitaire and consider a manner of speech that in certain ways instrumentalizes the solitaire for its own ends. What does solitude – its representation, or a threat or promise of solitude – produce for a community? More specifically, what power is generated for the community by speaking for or representing the solitaire? With the figure of the witness in mind, I would now like to ask: How do the questions we ask, or how does the manner of questioning, inscribe, so to speak, the body of the witness into an interrogatory discourse?

To offer testimony about a violent event is never a simple act. This we have seen and considered; that testimony examines the limits of expressibility and limits of language is incontrovertible. But what I would like to now consider is this notion of the “unspeakable,” of something beyond the limits of representation. I can’t accept the idea of the unspeakable, and I suspect that its circulation in our debate has unacknowledged consequences for how we think about testimony and violence. Indeed, I would like consider the unspeakable as a trope for expression and to then think about the forces or conditions that compel this foray into metaphoric language. If testimony on torture, for example, takes us to a certain limit of language (a limit we might also consider as another trope), then testimony on torture demands a kind of creative thought, creative expression, and also a special capacity to listen, think, and respond; in short, metaphoric understanding. Specifically, against Elaine Scarry’s position that opposes language and pain, the following inquiry examines how pain – and, more broadly, testament to violence –

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2 On categories of the unspeakable, see W.J.T Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror,” *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image Between the Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Bernd-Rüdiger Hüppauf and Christoph Wulf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 300. On the rhetorical strategy of “the unspeakable,” see Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006): “To say that something is unspeakable is not only to conjure ‘something’ and describe it; it is, moreover, an act of speech, a discursive move that produces knowledge even as it gestures toward knowledge’s limits. As a discursive move the unspeakable is informed by an articulable context that the concern with ‘transgression’ too often makes mute” (37-38, my italics).
finds expression through performative language. Pain is expressed by words that do things for our bodies more than they reflect or refer to objects in the world. Expressing pain performatively means that pain is created in an act of utterance for others to witness and respond to. Weeping, for example, as Ludwig Wittgenstein proposes in *Philosophical Investigations*, does not signify or represent sadness or pain: the act of weeping, through the lens of performativity, is one and the same thing as the pain.³

To cite a recent example: consider the following statements, testimony by men imprisoned at Abu Ghraib by US military personnel; consider how, and what, these statements perform, and how their performativity relates to the testimony they function as and to the violence they, in part, record. Directing our attention not to the constative aspects – the testimony as mimetic, as empirical record – but to, more generally, the performative content of the statement, let’s consider how words, in naming objects, both refer to and, in peculiar ways, create these objects and bring them forth into a precarious, hovering presence.⁴

*Kasim Mehaddi Hilas*:

When they took me to the cell, the translator Abu Hamid came with an American soldier and his rank was sergeant (I believe). And he called me “faggot” because I was wearing the woman’s underwear, and my answer was “no.” Then he told me “why are you wearing this underwear,” then I told them “because you make me wear it.”…

Grainer and the other two soldiers were taking pictures of everything they did to me. I don’t know if they took a picture of me because they beat me so bad I lost consciousness after an hour or so…

Now I am talking about what I saw:

They brought three prisoners completely naked and they tied them together with cuffs and they stuck one to another. I saw the American soldiers hitting them with a football and they were taking pictures…

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Not one night for all the time I was there passed without me seeing, hearing or feeling what was happening to me.

And I am repeating the oath: I swear on Allah almighty on the truth of what I said. Allah is my witness.

Mohanded Juma Juma:

In the second scene at the night shift, I saw a new guard that wears glasses and has a red face. He charged his pistol and pointed it at a lot of the prisoners to threaten them with it. I saw things no one would see, they are amazing. They come in the morning shift with two prisoners and they were father and son. They were both naked. They put them in front of each other and they counted 1, 2, 3, and then removed the bags from their heads. When the son saw his father naked he was crying. He was crying because of seeing his father…

They were laughing, taking pictures, and they were stepping on our hands with their feet. And they started taking one after another and they wrote on our bodies in English. I don’t know what they wrote, but they were taking pictures after that. Then, after they forced us to walk like dogs on our hands and knees. And we had to bark like a dog and if we didn’t do that, they start hitting us hard on our face and chest with no mercy… [A]nd they took pictures of everything.

These statements share some obvious similarities, all of which have performative qualities. The prisoners are threatened; they are ordered to act or speak in dehumanizing ways; they are insulted by derogatory epithets; they are forced, in some of the statements cited by Mark Danner, to swear to one truth or god and denounce others. In addition to these facts about the statements, however, what else happens in the statements themselves? What happens, for instance, in the attention brought to the presence of the camera in many of these scenes, in the relationship this object suggests between acting in a visual scene, a visual frame, and acting, as witness, as testament, in words alone? “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing,” Mohanded Juma states. What did he see? What did he see that cannot be captured on film? In what ways does performative language represent both what can be seen in the realm of reality and also what can be seen only in the frame of disbelief, in the imagination? In speaking or writing of torture how are performatives ambivalent, at once outlining objects or expressions of dehumanizing power but also in various ways reinstituting or duplicating such power? The
ambivalence of the performative, and the solitudes suggested by this oscillation, will be a recurring question in the following chapters.

Testimony is inseparable from a responsibility of addressing others. The performative dimension of testimony reminds us how testimony can never function alone, as a singular, enigmatic statement. It responds to a manner of questioning. Our analysis of testimonial language must take this dimension into account. If our questioning the witness objectifies this person, how does her own speech act (“testimony”) also desubjectify the speaker? How does testimony perform testimony? How does testimonial speech, prior to “giving” or “representing” or “describing” testimony, frame itself as testimony? Recognition of testimony as performative speech forms and completes a kind of speech act. Reading or listening to narrative as testimony is a way to do things with words. Testimony does not only, and does not simply, reconstruct, in constative terms, an event: testimony is illocutionary insofar as it occasionally names what it does – “Now I am talking about what I saw” – and perlocutionary insofar as it moves its audience to act in any number of ways. Taking testimony as a performative speech act, we must think about what the speech itself does and creates rather than what it additionally represents.

Does this performance offer for the witness a way of resignifying, as Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech*, or redeploying the violent language in such a way that it disarms the prior offense? If so, this would mean that testimony performs an important function for the witness, and for her community, apart from testimony’s capacity to restore or recover what has fallen out of the historical account: and this function, we will see, is forceful and as powerful as the dehumanizing epithets used, intentionally or carelessly, by perpetrators of torture and other acts of violence.
Like a sovereign, the performative *deems* its object into being. But in the space of the performative, between reference and use, there occurs ambiguity, liminality, an uncertainty that creates an anxiety of and for performance; it is impossible to say, of the ostensible content of the performance, what lies inside and outside of its frame. And insofar as torture incorporates performative speech acts, it uses such ambiguity to conceal itself: it hides its presence, its evidence within the uncertainties of this discourse. Moreover, the performative framework of interrogation produces a kind of solitude, isolating its participants through its operation. To be sure, there is ambiguity, and moments of alienation, in all modes of discourse. But for the performative, this ambiguity – between presence and absence, play and seriousness, use and reference or citation – is instrumental to its function.

Interrogation blurs the distinction between performative and constative speech. The interrogator might ask a question that *appears* constative – he wants verification of a past state of affairs: “Were you there at that time?” – but the question also carries a performative valence. Thus the interrogatee might reasonably reply “Are you serious?” or “What exactly are you asking me?” And thus the difficulty of “hearing” or otherwise determining the difference between the constative and performative question becomes a tool for the interrogator, a language device that further disorients his source, the interrogatee; and this device, instrumentalizing the play inherent in any utterance, is itself a performance, an exposure of how everyday language, simple and interrogatory phrases, always already participates in a liminal space of discourse.

*You Shall Have the Body*

Without question, performative speech interpellates, but the performative also acts upon individuals; its demand functions, as we’ll see, with a kind of atemporality and immediacy. Its
participants are not fully articulated subjects; or, in performance, the subjects who participate in
the speech acts also participate in a liminal space where subject-relations become unstable. Take,
for example, what Luisa Valenzuela, in her novel *Black Novel with Argentines*, calls “writing
with the body.” What does she mean by this, “writing with the body”?

a) *Writing*, along with (or beside) the body: the body comes along, as it were, with the
writing; the body as a passenger or observer;
b) using the body “to write”: “writing,” as “the body” interprets this act;
c) *writing* by means of the body: employing “the body” (in addition to the finger, hand,
brain, etc.) to write.

Note the tension implied in this list between the body as an active agent, the body as *the writer*;
and the body as a *passive source* for the writing (a phenomenon we’ll see more clearly in the
Kafka story discussed below). This tension bears a structural similarity to the presence and use of
cameras in the torture described in the testimony cited earlier: the image *records* but also
captures and inscribes the victim in humiliating terms. The pictures signify, and make
deployable, this humiliation. In any case, if it is impossible to say precisely how, in Valenzuela’s
novel, the body “writes,” it is certainly the case, and this is a deep query in the works of
Valenzuela and Kafka we will shortly turn to, that the act of torture inserts the body into
discourse; torture instrumentalizes the body as a site of discourse. This process compels us, then,
to ask: What is the relationship between the written word and the spoken; between the speech act
in voice and the speech act in writing? And how does torture, in particular, in its use of pain,
*force* the body, which would be the productive mechanism *for* the speech act, into being *the
product* of the speech act?

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The performative, as a linguistic element, is central to acts of interrogation and torture, such that what might be at first called “unspeakable” about torture becomes speakable in a particular, performative sense. Torture is speakable, in the event itself and as testimony, insofar as torture relies on performative speech acts. Where Scarry argued that torture destroys language, the broad argument of these final chapters will be that torture, in particular ways, expands the possibility of language. Interrogatory torture depends on linguistic structure, but at the same time tests the limits of this structure. Simply stated, interrogation and torture are highly structured language games.

Furthermore, perpetuating the idea of unspeakability mystifies the obscurity of the violent event, which perpetuates the notion of the irrecoverable subject, the solitary figure that, always seen at some distance, will never speak in its own terms. (The witness’s statement is always already framed by a manner of questioning.) In other words, assuming that the event is beyond words – unspeakable, unimaginable – interferes with how we receive the solitaire’s account. We do not properly listen to testimony when following the precepts of unspeakability.⁶

At the heart of this chapter is a question of performative speech, a question of the performance of speech between one and another that is highlighted by its containment, its isolation. As if spoken on a stage, this ordinary utterance is removed from an everyday context.

“I was there,” “I am him, I am the one who…”

If the solitaire establishes a form of discourse, his utterance stands for the content of the question he is asked to answer on returning. “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing.” The witness’s body is the limit of his testimony. His speech, and what his speech signifies as

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⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999): “But why unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical? … To say that Auschwitz is ‘unsayable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ is equivalent to euphemein, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. Regardless of one’s intentions, this contributes to its glory” (32, 33).
impossible to express, are the testament to the limit of what can be physically spoken of. His very body, I want to reiterate, signifies something of his experience: he has, actually or figuratively, been written upon by the experience, and we read this message, a kind of illicit writing, in his presence, on his return.

_Performative Tricks_

_Performance_ is an interesting term to bring to our discussion of testimony. It is a keyword, fraught with tensions and ambiguity. On the one hand, we think of performance as _an action_ or a series of acts undergone in particular conditions: a machine performs its function in a factory, for instance. A musician performs a piece of music on a stage or in a studio, for instance. To the latter example, we can also add that for the performance _of art_ – a rather broad concept that we’ll leave open for the moment – the performer usually participates in and with another object, a musical score, a text, and the audience to the performance understands the tacit _history_ of the artist’s engagement with this object. One performance of a piece of classical music or drama is only the most recent, the most present of a history of such performances. That object, the score or text, is the _sine qua non_ of the performance; the motive, the underlying code that the performer interprets in her performance. Thus, it seems, what we call “the performance” is not one thing, not one artistic object, in itself: performance implies temporality (a history, a sense of the present), interpretation (a capacity to read or de-code), and, more broadly, evaluation, in that a performance is always compared to prior performances.⁷

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This complexity for performance, the *engine* of performance, implies a fourth, important, dimension for consideration, and that is the relationship between what we might call the *inside* of the performance, what is *contained* by certain limits of the performer and performance, and what lies *outside* of this performance, namely the audience or evaluator. It is important to add that in order for the audience to evaluate the performance, the audience must already have an understanding of what the performance should describe, entail, or accomplish. In this way, the performance, in this classical sense, is controlled and always already limited in its function. But this control is not always perfect: performance gets away from us. This is part of its excitement, its pleasure. This intractable element is also part of the performance’s power, a power which may not always satisfy or please, but frighten, disturb, or even threaten. At this junction – where performance pleases, satisfies, and reaffirms an episteme, but also challenges the episteme – performance becomes interesting. Performance exposes its participants – performer and audience – to a liminal space of uncertainty. This space is essential to a community because it delineates, as Henry Sayre writes, “an integral part of – rather than apart from – the daily lives of both the performer and the audience, since it serves as a catalytic or transformative function for them (helping them, for instance, to establish new roles and new identities), and since it helps to create a new sense of collective celebration or accomplishment or to define a common task or goal, it could be said to be roughly equivalent to *ritual*” (101). For my purposes, I would like to focus on the catalytic function of performance, particularly on how the power of performative language – in name-calling, in threats, for example – transforms the participants in the performance, and even, when instrumentalized by one performer against another, has the power to harm in this transformation.

observes how the unspeakable always carries with it a unique time-frame: something is unspeakable *until the present moment of its invocation* (304).
For our purposes, let’s consider *illocutionary* statements as performatives proper, and *perlocutionary* statements as weak performatives: an illocutionary utterance does what it says, it brings forth what it names; a perlocutionary utterance might also do what it says, but this doing is diluted by other effects and consequences.

For example: I throw a rock and break my neighbor’s window, and my neighbor accuses me in public (on his front lawn, say) of breaking his window, with “You threw this rock and broke my window!” If I say, “I admit it. I did it. I am sorry,” and my neighbor says, “Okay. I forgive you. Just don’t let it happen again,” this exchange, and my confession, in particular, is *illocutionary* insofar as my admission of guilt elicits from my neighbor a statement of forgiveness; and because it is witnessed by others on the street, this scene demonstrates an act of contrition fulfilled by an act of forgiveness, acts which seem to go hand-in-hand. On the other hand, depending on how much we (observers) know about the perpetrator of the crime and the accuser or victim, we might fit what appear to be illocutionary statements into a larger schema. If a similar act had occurred before – with the same perpetrator, and the same victim – and then played out in the same words, and the neighbors concluded from this that the man who says “I forgive you” is a fool, and that, furthermore, they should all consider moving out of a neighborhood where one fellow breaks the window of his neighbor over and over without facing any consequences, then the exchange of words become perlocutionary. But this difference in interpretations is a subtle one; there’s subtext that requires explanation; thus the reading of the performance – as illocutionary or perlocutionary – is not immediately certain. Here, again – along the strange surface of performance – is an ambiguity that wants clarity. The force of the performative utterance, however, relies on this uncertainty. The force of the confession, for
example, arises from its play with (or threat against, if you will) an ostensible truth. Furthermore, the force of the performative, in the slipperiness between illocutionary and perlocutionary statements, which arises in this example in the difference between witnessing an act of contrition fulfilled by an act of forgiveness and an act of duplicity (duplicities which, depending on how much we know about the players in this exchange, could function in a game of one-upmanship, thus multiplying) might possibly affect not only the “players” but the witnesses as well. That is, in the case of deceit, the perpetrator is not only duping his neighbor – in fact, the neighbor in this case is the least of his concern – he aims at duping his witnesses, the others along this ordinary street.

*Risky Business, Promises and Threats*

We cannot separate performative language from the threat of being duped. Let’s set aside notions of sincerity and appropriateness of expression; notions of “normal” language; and note that, for any performative, the empirical conditions (who says what, where the speech is made, what constitutes the content to the speech) are almost irrelevant to the statement. What we must focus on is what “the utterance” (in a multitude of forms) does, how the utterance operates (as illocutionary or perlocutionary forms of persuasion, for instance) on its various recipients.

Judith Butler’s simple supposition – “My presumption is that speech is always in some ways out of our control” (*Excitable* 15) – undermines much of Austin’s idea of the performative speech act. Insofar as speech is sometimes “out of our control,” speech acts can be understood as speech finding agency: this is speech that acts upon the addressee as an instrument for its user, and not as an identifying quality of the user. Speech acts beyond the contextual parameters of the utterance. Insults repeat themselves in the mind of the insulted after the occasion of utterance.
Insults can be repeated and cited for different purposes, regardless of the original speaking agent. What we do with language in its capacity to address someone or something – and I think this is the double or simultaneous operation Butler suggests in “the circuit of recognition” (Excitable 5) sparked by the address – is use language and at the same time construct a future occasion for language or, in using language, we are used by the thing, this address, this utterance, of our construction.

The turn on action that “speech acts” connotes implies that words conceal the possibility of automation and substitution, that is, that one does things with words so that one does not need to do things with oneself. The performative, then, is at once, in Austin’s sense, an utterance that is not constative – not empirically verifiable – and also an utterance that acquires, in the concealment I suggest here, a kind of mechanism, an operativity that permits the utterance to act alone. Let us look, then, specifically, at linguistic statements as actions, as performances of speaking or writing subjects who function within productive mechanisms. Speech acts invent and circulate social and institutional categories; they can also, as we’ll see, forcibly transform these categories, sometimes at the pain of one subject’s re-naming, desubjectification, exclusion, or other compulsion to respond.

In its productivity, the speech act momentarily, conditionally, isolates its participants. In this framework, one utterance appears to need the response, the corroboration, of another; one utterance appears to carry with it a particular context of utterances, phrases. Here we witness an

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8 Speech acts produce, among other things, institutional names, categories, and participatory roles. See Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 75, 128. “The real source of the magic of performative utterances lies in the mystery of ministry, i.e. the delegation by virtue of which an individual – king, priest or spokesperson – is mandated to speak and act on behalf of a group, thus constituted in him and by him. More precisely, it lies in the social conditions of the institution of the ministry which constitutes the legitimate representative as an agent capable of acting on the social world through words, by instituting him as a medium between the group and the social world; and it does that, among other things, by equipping him with the signs and the insignia aimed at the fact that he is not acting in his own name and under his own authority” (75). I promise to return to this interesting passage later.
interesting transformation: in one light, the invention or re-invention of the speaking subject; in
another light, the denuding of the subject. Every sign, Derrida notes in “Signature Event
Context,”

can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given
context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely
illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the
contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring. This
citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an
accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not
even have a function called “normal.”

There is no “proper” context or condition for the mark, the grapheme; neither is there an
improper context or condition. The grapheme always carries with it its appropriate-inappropriate
possibility. I would like to consider the relationship between this possibility of the grapheme and
the force of the performative, hypothesizing that the latter is an extension of the simultaneous
coexistence of the normal and its opposite, “that (normal/abnormal),” which comes prior to any
condition of the normal. In other words, the performative is forceful because it plays with
(productively and mockingly) what is considered the normal context, and, indeed, “normal”
performatives. Which is not to say that performatives themselves are abnormalities of language
or expression: the distinction of normal-abnormal, Derrida argues, and I must emphasize, is not
clear for performative language. We are speaking of a liminal space and condition, a risky state
being like an “external place of perdition” that surrounds the safe “home” of speech – “its
internal and positive condition of possibility? Is that outside its inside, the very force and law of
its emergence?”

… what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, “non-serious”, citation (on stage, in a
poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality… without

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which there would not even be a “successful” performative… [then, paradoxically] a successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative... (17)

It is the artifice of normality in language, and how performative force exploits this artifice, that we must factor in to our consideration, below, of torture and its linguistic devices.

The force of performative language has the ability to harm in a unique way. To describe this force, we must carefully consider what I have called an essential ambiguity of the performative. Specifically, the ambiguity in and around the “sincerity” question turns performative statements into echoes of something an unpredictable tyrant, or sovereign (as I’ll discuss below), might declare. The rule of law, in this case, is secret and arbitrarily deployed.

This secretness and arbitrariness connects in interesting ways to the force of the performative. As J. Hillis Miller, in *Speech Acts in Literature*, observes of Austin,

The best approach to these questions is by way of Austin’s remarks about intention and sincerity. This is a crux in his argument. It is a place where, by what may be an ineluctable necessity, given his premises, he must contradict himself. He needs to have it two ways at once.

On the one hand, the performative depends on the intentions or sincerity of the one who speaks... In order for the performative to be felicitous, I must mean what I say, and must know what I mean and that I mean what I say, with no arrière pensée, no unconscious motives or reservations...

On the other hand, the performative must not depend on the intentions or sincerity of the one who speaks. If Austin’s theory is to be cogent, and if he is to attain his goal of securing law and order, the words themselves must do the work, not the secret intentions of the speaker or writer. For civil order to be maintained, we must be able to hold speakers and writers responsible for their words, whatever their intentions at the time.10

Around the question of the performative’s “force” – how its rule is obeyed, for instance – Miller’s logic is tricky. One cannot be sure if another’s question or demand, in a performative mode, is sincere or playful; and in this uncertainty, one takes a chance by assuming sincerity. I think that it is this assumption that allows words to do things; it is how words compel action. The

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logic is not unlike that found in one of Kafka’s parables, where two characters discuss how parables work, and one discovers that to win in reality (in sincerity, say) is to lose “in the parable” (or at the performative).\textsuperscript{11} Or, to lose at or by the performative – to be duped by the performative – is to accomplish something, to change something of reality. The exchange – of points, commodities, goods, ideas – goes through in the success of the performative; but this success is a kind of loss – it is a falling for the trick of the statement, it is the risk involved in assuming that one can hold another responsible for his words, which is the risk of assuming that spoken and written words, and not intentions, count for something.

We have seen this problem before, in questions of testimony. The witness’s burden is that he must speak for those witnesses who cannot speak. Matisklo, in this light, has a performative resonance. What the word means, how to decipher what looks and sounds like nonsense, is irrelevant to its function: the utterance alone performs and reveals the force of its testimony. And to hear the word, to receive this testimony, we must fall for this trick, must believe in the meaning of this statement that is nonetheless, and always, inaccessible and beyond explanation. What’s more, performative force, and the forces of testimony, are demonstrations of citation, of speaking for another (the witness who cannot be present) as the other. This is every witness’s responsibility and burden: to speak about and to represent not only what he experienced but what someone else experienced as well. To pretend to be this other person, to assume to know what she alone knew: in this way the performative, as testimony, begins to divide the speaking subject and to disembody, as we’ll see, the witness. It is hard to testify because of this burden, the risk of speaking in performative terms; one might otherwise avoid such language. But for the witness,

there is no alternative. Miller, in *Speech Acts in Literature*, articulates what I refer to as *force* as *responsibility*:

The witness I bear, the testimony I give, can be given only by me alone. I alone can bear witness for what I witnessed. Witnessing is absolutely individual, *sui generis*, unique, private, singular. Derrida draws an extreme conclusion from this, namely that no act of testimony can be verified. It is Derrida alone who knows what demand is being made on him by that other law, the demand that arouses his respect and that he cannot and will not compromise. Nevertheless, as Derrida also reminds us, the word “testimony” comes from *testis*, from *terstis*, meaning the third. The witness testifies as a third to some transaction between at least two others. … Another way to put this is to say that even the most exact repetition of Derrida’s words on my part does not exonerate me from responsibility. Far from it. That act of repetition or manifestation of iterability is a speech act that puts a heavy burden, debt, responsibility, or obligation on my shoulders. I am responsible for what I say even if what I say stems from an attempt to say again as exactly as I can just what Derrida says, with abundant citation to prove he said just that. (85)

Citation, then, does not merely copy, not merely reiterate what has come before. In performative speech acts, citation – which is integral to the act – does something other than copy or reiterate: it invokes, it offers to the participants in the act an entrance to the history of the statement. The invocation folds the present over a complex past, into a tradition of statements; it transforms the temporality of ordinary language. In this view, citation is ritualistic, and it renders some performatives, as Miller writes, apotropaic: spell-like, the performative can defend against a figurative or real accusation (90). But what’s important to emphasize here is the insecurity of the situation: the witness taking on the burden of speaking for another and exposing herself to an accusation of misrepresentation, the citation which requires a particular kind of responsibility, the suggestion of an accusation or threat that the apotropaic invocation of the performative suggests. Performative language, in opening its participants to a liminal space of discourse, disrupts contexts, disrupts those frames around discourse that determine who can speak to whom, and how this speech should operate.
The performative, as Miller goes on to consider, possesses not only a disruptive quality but a revolutionary attitude. The performative wants to invent *sui generis* its context and meaning, and to re-write its apparent tradition or history. If for Austin the present and the performative *follow from* tradition and history, for Miller (reading Derrida) the performative present *precedes* a tradition or history of the performative. But perhaps the performative does both at once: mysteriously atemporal but saturated with the present, the performative *also* offers access to this historical present insofar as it limits the participants’ relationship to the past or future. That is, the performative rather aggressively seizes its context. Indeed, as Miller writes, the performative “transforms the context it enters rather than presupposing it and being based on it. Such a speech act is a historical event in the sense that it deflects, in however small a degree, the course of history” (112).

But it is not clear that this seizure of the present context is well and good: we might also consider this a *severance* from the ordinary. Thus in performative contexts, a new sense of responsibility emerges, since the oversight, for example, of precedent, does not immediately apply. With a radically new context comes a renewed need for rules of engagement, an ethics for and of discourse.

*The Body and the Performative*

What I have referred to as the duping of performative speech could also be called a suspension of disbelief at the other’s statement, or the risk of fully believing, despite a visceral or intellectual reaction that suggests otherwise, in what the other says. Words function performatively when one responds in this way, by taking a risk in response, gambling on the possibility of humiliation. Indeed, performative language asks something of the participants’
well-being: beyond the abstract logic of discourse, to speak performatively is to speak with one’s whole body. To speak performatively is, at least, to present oneself as an embodied character who serves the function of the statement.

The risk of humiliation is just one kind of risk entailed by performative speech. (I suppose the participants in the performative might feel many other things besides humiliation as a result of what is said: pleasure or pride, or, in the case of a threat, powerful fear.) This somatic response is an important factor to consider. Miller introduces it in his discussion of Derrida’s lecture on love, “Je t’aime” (Speech Acts 135), and later connects the trust or belief demanded by this expression (“‘Je t’aime’ is always implicitly, even sometimes explicitly, accompanied by something like ‘I swear to you that what I say is true.’ The swearing is an explicit performative.” (135)) with the trust and belief demanded by another’s expression of pain. The love or the pain one feels has this performative dimension: it cannot be empirically verified by another. These are never constative statements. Thus

Our response to the other’s pain, our passion of pity in response to the other’s presumed pain, is a matter of belief. That is a way of saying that this response involves an implicit performative utterance, not a cognitive or constative statement. “I believe the other is in pain,” just as I believe the other loves me when she says, “Je t’aime.” (164)

How, then, can we ever be sure that expressions of love or pain are truthful? Thinking in terms of the performative, we circumvent this problem. The truth of an expression of love or pain is not precisely hidden away in the body like a signifier awaiting our interpretation. Rather, the truth of the expression, if we can call it that, lies in the performative dimension of the expression itself. That is, the truth lies in its statement and in the response it elicits. The expression, Miller concludes, alluding to and then citing Wittgenstein, is indistinguishable from the passion (164). This alignment of the expressive statement with the passion is counterintuitive if we think of passion as something that can be signified as words, or other manners of
expression, signify our ideas. Passion, we must consider, is of a different order than other inner conditions (the brain’s formulation of ideas, for instance). The paradox, Wittgenstein writes, on how one communicates pain – namely, that “a nothing would serve just as well” to “pain-behavior” “as a something about which nothing could be said”\(^\text{12}\) – disappears “only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please” (102). As Wittgenstein writes earlier in the same work, *crying in pain* cannot be defined by the statement *I am in pain*; or, *He is in pain* does not mean *He is displaying certain pain behaviors*: “The verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it” (89).

Replaces crying without describing it means that the statement becomes the behavior. As in a metaphor, the utterance becomes (merging with or consuming) its referent. So with performative speech: the statement creates its objects and context; emotional language creates its condition; crying in pain creates the body’s pain for others. The performative’s liminality, its non-referential dimension, brings attention to an instance, to a happening. Wittgenstein, not explicitly addressing performative language, still focuses on the paradox of referential language and pain:

“But at any rate when you say ‘I am in pain,’ you want to draw the attention of others to a particular person.” – The answer might be: No. I want to draw their attention to myself: (122)

“I am in pain” does not mean the same as “He is in pain.” The third person pronoun “He” indicates a particular, removed object. The “I” of “I am in pain” does not only indicate a

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\(^{12}\) To paraphrase: A nonsense-word, an empty signifier for the expression of pain, would indicate exactly the same thing to our interlocutor as a “sensible” word, as a signifier so meaningful that it left nothing to the imagination or further discussion. For example: If I break my arm and cry out in pain, this crying would signify just as much as my saying “I have broken my arm!” but it would not help anyone understand the pain I am enduring. All they could conclude from my crying or statement would be “He has broken his arm.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 102.
particular object for others, my interlocutors. It indicates, as Wittgenstein writes, *myself*, a concept which cannot be shared, and which cannot be fully communicated.

“I am in pain” does not mean I “have” or possess pain. How would one possess pain? *Pain*, here, is within the body. But so mysterious is the pain that it feels the other way round: that it has *consumed* my being, myself. Pain is not possessed, not had, but felt inside; and yet, to express this feeling the subject speaks as if this “possession” were inverted, as if he himself were on the inside of the pain. “I am in pain” is a metaphoric statement and as such contains a performative element (non-referentiality, unverifiability) and also a certain absence, an irresolvable mystery. The *point* of pain, the very experience of pain, cannot be fully described by the subject. “Pain-behavior can point to a painful place,” Wittgenstein writes, “but the *subject of pain* is the person who gives it expression” (101, my emphasis). Thus the strangeness of a statement like “I have pain in my hand. My hand is in pain. My hand *has* pain, here…” It’s not the *hand* that has the pain: it is the subject who gives the pain expression who *has*, who possesses, the pain.

But isn’t it absurd to say of a *body* that it has pain? – And why does one feel an absurdity in that? In what sense is it true that my hand does not feel pain, but I in my hand?

What sort of issue is: Is it the *body* that feels pain? – How is it to be decided? What makes it plausible to say that it is *not* the body? – Well, something like this: if someone has a pain in his hand, then the hand does not say so (unless it writes it) and one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face. (98)

What, then, *has* pain? Who can be said to *have* pain? The displacements here – between the speaking subject and the object of his expression – are several-fold and to pursue these details is, perhaps, frivolous work. What I would like to pause on, then, is the thesis that, first, performative language and the problem of the expression of pain share a similar structure, and second, that *pain*, despite this complexity, is in fact expressible, but expressible only in performative terms.
Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, offers many interesting considerations on the relationships between the act of torture, the pain experienced by the torturer’s victim, and the problem of speaking about such pain and such torture, but of these, it is a key point, on the expressibility of pain, that I take issue with. The crux of the matter is the oppositional structure Scarry sees in the relationship between pain and language. “Physical pain,” she writes, “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is heard” (4). “[P]hysical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (5).

Yet we have something we call “pain,” as Wittgenstein would say, something we refer to when we say “It is painful.” Indeed the expression of pain might challenge, and even resist, the subject’s ability to describe it, but this challenge is not insurmountable and does not, at the face of it, indicate that pain cannot be expressed or that the sounds pain elicits signify “a state anterior to language.” Rather, we should ask, once again: What does it mean “to have” pain? Pain how? Pain where? Whose pain? Before we can say that “to have great pain is to have certainty” and its inverse – “to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt” (7) – as Scarry argues, we must consider what we have when we make such a statement: this having, in light of Wittgenstein’s consideration, is not quite certain. Which is to say, precisely, that to have pain is to have doubt.

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14 The opposition suggested between violence and language, or between pain and language, is problematic when we consider how language itself carries and transfers types of violence, and within this potential to harm, a corresponding type of pain. I’m not speaking of the utterance as a device of anyone who intends harm, but of the utterance or epithet that functions on its own, repeating itself in one’s memory or in the casual banter of everyday discourse. It doesn’t matter who says the harmful word: the harmful word is harmful enough on its own. In this way we might say that language takes agency. See Butler: “How do we account for the specific kind of injury that language itself performs?” (*Excitable* 6).
Scarry’s dichotomy, with the phenomenon of pain up against language, is suspect from the start, since the statement “to have pain,” as Wittgenstein asks, is already peculiar, but not because pain lies beyond meaningful signification but because it reveals in language an unusual and uncommon mode of signification.

However, it is not clear that Scarry fully believes her thesis that pain resists language. Indeed, much of her analysis reveals how pain, and the pain produced in torture in particular, participates in linguistic structures. (And we’ll consider some of these, as we approach scenes of torture, in more detail below.) There is a language for pain, as Scarry argues:

Because the existing vocabulary for pain contains only a small handful of adjectives, one passes through direct descriptions very quickly and almost immediately encounters an “as if” structure: it feels as if…; it is as though… On the other side of the ellipses there reappear again and again two and only two metaphors, and they are metaphors whose inner workings are very problematic. The first specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain. Thus a person may say, “It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine”…

The trouble with pain and language is not, Scarry emphasizes, that pain is “language-destroying,” since (as we see here) pain often elicits creative and metaphoric linguistic structures. The issue is how pain compels one to speak in strange and extraordinary ways. More precisely, the issue is that physical pain should compel one, quite forcefully, to speak at all.

Hurting one’s interlocutor is sometimes an effective way to motivate him out of recalcitrant silence. But what will the victim say? How does the act of harming another – with or without words – become in itself a manner of speech, an element in and for interrogatory discourse? Immediately along this line of thought, Scarry points out that torture, and the statements it compels from its victim, fall into a framework of fictionality. While the act of torture, and the language it uses and produces, are real events – empirical evidence supports
claims of the occurrence of torture – torture and its discourse also use and produce statements of and about the imagination, statements which in another context might constitute a short story or what one person alone remembers of a prior event. Torture and its discourse is, in several important ways, performative. The participants in this scene enact, knowingly or not, a kind of script. The torturer asks questions because he must – it’s his duty to perform, to state questions and inflict harm – and the victim responds, as well, because he must. The content of these statements is far less important than the form and performance of the statements themselves. And both actors are aware of this; and this awareness contributes to the harm, and the pain, of the act. The awareness of the language-game of torture redoubles the victim’s pain because the pain, in his view, is real, but in the view of the torturer it is only another utterance in the performance. This stark difference in views reveals the use of fiction – the capacity to invest an unreal world with real significance – in its most insidious manner. “The idea that the need for information is the motive for the physical cruelty,” Scarry writes, “arises from the tone and form of the questioning rather than from its content: the questions, no matter how contemptuously irrelevant their content, are announced, delivered as though they motivated the cruelty, as if the answers to them were crucial” (29).

Still, that the reason to torture – the purported need for information – is a fiction does not tell us much about torture. On the one hand, there is no excuse for such cruelty. The logic of the sentence “[What] masquerades as the motive for torture is a fiction” (28) implies a possibility for torture’s factual motivations. It suggests that torture is separate from its motive, and that in this case the motive is fictional, but in another case torture might find, or align with, factual motives. But in order to think about torture as entirely and always an act of cruelty, regardless of its motive, we must think of this act as an act without motivation. This point is not paradoxical or
abstruse: my point, and I think it’s a simple one to make, is that in order to fully understand how torture is cruel we cannot think of the act of torture as we think of other acts; we cannot think of the act of torture as having a motive, as having any sort of justification. There is no rationale for cruelty: hence the power of this cruel act.

So is the cruelty of the act what we mean by the unspeakable when we consider testimony of torture as speaking what is unspeakable? That for any statement on, for any description of, torture, one necessarily narrates – fictionalizes and rationalizes – an act of cruelty? Perhaps it is unavoidable but testimony will invent distance between the act and rationale, a distance that allows for signification, for a reading of the act. (But, again, the power the act holds over the witness is such that it continues to harm in testimony which necessarily must invent what was not in fact present.) As Scarry remarks,

But as the content and context of the torturer’s questions make clear, the fact that something is asked as if the content of the answer matters does not mean that it matters. It is crucial to see that the interrogation does not stand outside an episode of torture as its motive or justification: it is internal to the structure of torture, exists there because of its intimate connections to and interactions with the physical pain. (29, my emphasis)

The distance between explanation or excuse and the act is false; it is invented by the torturer to justify his act. There is no actual distance between “the interrogatory statement” in the torture chamber and the act of harm. They are practically identical, but not because of a problem of language, of misdescription. Rather, torture and the torturer appropriate this power of performative language to confuse the difference between speech (or narration, as we will see in Kafka) and the act of harming the incarcerated. And this over-powering of the other’s body makes, as the torturer knows, testimony of the act of harm all but impossible: performativity, it
seems, crosses over, from the act of torture, from the interrogation, into the constative domain of testimony.\textsuperscript{15}

We have considered difficulties of testimony before but now, through the lens of performativity, new problems emerge. Testimony is especially performative insofar as it calls attention on the one hand to its invention of a scene by a statement, “I was there,” for example, but on the other to the constative expectations of its audience. In this way, the liminal space of testimony demands from the witness statements which want to function in two competing and exclusive ways: as fiction and fact, as performative and constative. Consequently, the witness, as a solitary participant in this language-game – a game of a broken performative utterance since the witness’s counterpart is missing – is made uniquely vulnerable. She risks, as we considered earlier, humiliation, exposing herself as something she can’t identify with. Furthermore, the publicity of testimony cannot be reconciled with the privacy of pain. If pain raises a question of private language, torture, and perhaps testimony of torture, ignores such privacy and such problems. The torturer – and, as I would like to consider, the audience for testimony – is not concerned with the utterance “my pain,” with the identity of the other, the victim, or with the relation between “my pain” and what the victim says. Pain, to the torturer, is incidental. It is one epiphenomenon of many that arise through his method, one device of many that he can control and employ to his end.

\textsuperscript{15} There are further interactions between acts of questioning and torture. Take, for example, in Kafka’s “In The Penal Colony,” the officer’s account of the apparatus to the traveler, prior to the operation of the machine. Here speaking in the proximity of the device performs a kind of torture: the tale of torture to the prospective victim of torture becomes a form of torture; the tale itself, as we’ll consider in the following chapter, is the first function of the apparatus. Likewise, for testimony, the narration of pain, the description of how one inflicted harm on another, performs (just as the officer performed) an extension of such harm.
It is the indifference to the other’s pain that is perhaps most difficult to understand about cruel acts such as torture. But this indifference is more problematic than an aberration in the brain and body of someone who commits torture. Indifference as a view which sees or frames statements as all-the-same is not excluded from a scene of testimony. Indifference threatens to contaminate any audience to the singular statement of a witness or victim. Because it is so difficult to comprehend a statement like “my pain,” one cannot but help hearing same-ness in an account of singular violence. This proclivity to familiarize, a priori, what is strange, to normalize even prior to discipline or the mechanics of institutionalization, to take the witness as “another witness,” is a device appropriated by the torturer. Torturers, Scarry observes in various places, redesign their work-spaces so as to conceal the crime they commit, and, in the domesticated veneer of this space, to somehow fool one’s conscience into seeing the ordinary in what is extraordinary, and to also disorient the victim who, treated like a prisoner, expects to inhabit the structural space – which, while dehumanizing in its own way, also provides a structure of safety for the incarcerated – of a prison. We might think of this deconstruction of the crime by means of the constructed artifice of the familiar as yet another discursive tool of the torturer. The torturer harms not only by physical violence against the victim, but by physically inscribing the body of the victim into the narrative space of the torture scene. Scarry traces this construction-deconstruction process in a brilliant riff on the word “host”: Civilization, she writes, by which she means the normal order of things, “in its language and its literature

records the path that torture in its unconscious miming of the deconstruction of civilization follows in reverse: the protective, healing, expansive acts implicit in “host” and “hostel” and “hospitable” and “hospital” all converge back in “hospes,” which in turn

16 As Derrida remarks in “Demeure,” testimony is a peculiar mode of discourse because it is a singular statement that always wants corroboration; it is a statement that resonates uniqueness in its confession of one individual’s experience but is at the same time never complete. As narrative, it is paratactic; it needs another witness, further testimony. And in this oscillation it becomes too easy to dismiss testimony as a kind of fiction. Maurice Blanchot, The Instant of my Death, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
moves back to the root “hos” meaning house, shelter, or refuge; but once back at “hos,”
its generosity can be undone by an alternative movement forward into “hostis,” the
source of “hostility” and “hostage” and “host” – not the host that willfully abandons the
ground of his power in acts of reciprocity and equality but the “host” deprived of all
ground, the host of the eucharist, the sacrificial victim. Even fictional representations of
torture like Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” where the lethal apparatus is an enlarged and
elaborate sewing machine, record the fact that the unmaking of civilization inevitably
requires a return to and mutilation of the domestic, the ground of all making. (45)

Of course, as if this obvious rule had gone tacit all along, torture is all the more violent in
its appropriation of domestic life, domestic values. The torturer threatens “the family,” kids, a
spouse: it threatens rape and emasculation. What’s more, by this appropriation, torture suggests
an affinity between the domestic and the violence it perpetrates. And on this threshold, between
the domestic and the dangerous outdoors, we might again consider a philosophy of solitude:
what forces apply against language in its movement from exile to the threshold of domesticity, to
the inner life of the community? Domesticity, where private language finds a public guise, is
where one can speak “inside,” intimately, but under the protection, and ideology, of the
domestic. This same phenomenon, privacy that is publicly ordained, is appropriated by the
torturer: publicly ordained police acts cover the illicit (and perversely intimate) acts of torture.
The dangerous extent of public ordination, of speech acts which name what we might do behind
doors, is perhaps no better exemplified than in the question Laurence Olivier, in John
Schlesinger’s The Marathon Man, asks Dustin Hoffman. The “dentist,” Olivier, torturing
Hoffman, who’s strapped to a dentist’s chair, asks, drill in hand, “Is it safe? Is it safe?” The
question contextually concerns the accessibility to some bank-secured jewels, but it is not
difficult to hear in the query various other objectives, various movements between a secure
inside and an insecure out.\(^\text{17}\)

The performative utterance most useful to the torturer is the threat. While the threat may be fulfilled or made “felicitous” in various ways, let’s consider here the relationship between the threat and the insecure outside. The torturer will displace his victim; he will disorient the victim, lead her to think that her physical being is out of place and out of line with the contextual structure of her environment. The victim is exposed to a figurative outside, a figurative exile. But in the logic of torture, this exile is not only produced by the torturer, the pain he inflicts, or even by the witness’s testimony. In the frame of torture, in its ability to deconstruct itself in the construction of a faux domesticity, torture determines a certain point of view, it determines, discursively, a way of seeing.

The solitary figure in the typical canvas of Francis Bacon is made emphatically alone by his position on a dais, by an arbitrary geometric box inserted over him, and by his naked presence against a uniform (and in its uniformity, almost absolute) orange-red background; yet while he is intensely separate from the viewer … he is simultaneously mercilessly exposed to us, not merely because he is undressed, unshielded by any material or clothing, but because his melting body is turned inside out, revealing the most sacred and secret parts of him. (Scarry 53)

A similar exposure occurs in torture, Scarry writes, “for the prisoner is forced to attend to the most intimate and interior facts of his body (pain, hunger, nausea, sexuality, excretion) at a time when there is no benign privacy, for he is under continual surveillance” (54). This way of seeing, a visual frame that is attached to the torture scene, isolates the docile victim even further. The mode of address, in this case, creates a mode of solitude. In terms near the heart of this project, the solitaire is solitary due only in part to his own acts: it is how we engage with the solitaire that is also responsible for his solitude.

Scarry’s analogy to painting, to describe degrees of the victim’s exposure in torture, is instructive in another important way. It crystallizes for a moment Scarry’s reliance on figure and figurative language in her analysis. (Note the analogical references to two-dimensional drawn,
sketched, or painted representations: “It is only the prisoner’s steadily shrinking ground that wins for the torturer his swelling sense of territory. The question and the answer are a prolonged comparative display, *an unfurling of world maps*” (36, my emphasis).) The subtle difficulty about her thesis regarding the irresolvable difference between language and the experience of pain arises in such moments of analogy. That is to say, Scarry indicates how descriptions of pain require metaphorical language. But this indication is not necessarily an oversight. Pain indeed does something to language. Just as the torturer’s threat is a way of doing things with words, the witness’s description of what she endured under torture will be performative, another way of doing something with words. And in both cases, the performative statement (the threat, testimony) does something inappropriate. These statements reveal a boundary for conventional language, and then cross it. Perhaps this is what Scarry means when she asserts that pain destroys language.

The tendency of pain not simply to resist expression but to destroy the capacity for speech is in torture reenacted in overt, exaggerated form. Even where the torturers do not permanently eliminate the voice through mutilation or murder, they mime the work of pain by temporarily breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their words, making it cry out when they want it to cry, be silent when they want its silence… So the torturers, like pain itself, continually multiply their resources and means of access until the room and everything in it becomes a giant externalized map of the prisoner’s feelings. Almost as obsessively narrow and repetitive as the pain on which it models itself, torture can be more easily seen because it has dimension and depth, a space that can be walked around in though not walked out of. (54, 55)

Is figurative language, then, our only access to descriptions of torture, of pain? What does figuration perform for torture, for our understanding – or visualization – of torture? Torture, let’s consider, is always already figured; it is pre-figured. It follows a route in a guide; it follows the body as a map. *Writing with the body*, in this sense, as Luisa Valenzuela uses this phrase in *Black Novel with Argentines*, is not precisely about the body but about a manner of discourse that uses the physical body as a figure for something else. Writing with the body assumes the body
possesses this figurative potential. The body as a room; the body as a mannequin. The tendency might be to take the body, in this phrase, as is; and to imagine the writing that could be done with this body and its discursive elements: its fluids and its papers. But in the context of torture, which appears to be an act of various prefigurations, I think the phrase is meant to be turned the other way round: discourse first, and then the body-figure.

Of course, torture exploits this hierarchy. Torture puts forward the thesis, motive or justification, that the imminent scene of violence is due to a certain silence, a lack of information or a statement. Because the victim has not confessed – or otherwise written or spoken certain appropriate, satisfactory words – her body will be figured, will be forced into, so to speak, the interrogatory mode of discourse. The pain she endures is in this way redoubled: the actual pain is echoed in the discursive pain that the torturer makes use of.

This shift in torture from the actual process to the figurative and discursive is of fundamental importance to our understanding of how torture – as a method and discipline in the force of law – is practiced. Insofar as torture manifests and activates a fiction of power, as Scarry argues, it is difficult to define, identify, and testify against. As a horrific act, torture functions so deep in the imagination that its actuality is unbelievable. What I would like to consider in the following analyses is the performative dimension to this incredulity. The actualities of torture, let’s hypothesize, are believable, first and foremost, through an understanding of torture’s relation to performative language. The reality in and of torture is the type of reality that emerges in performance: it is liminal and transformative, a space wherein the audience – the audience to testimony of torture – must understand how their security and distance as an audience is called into question; testimony on torture evokes an element of fiction that makes its audience complicit in the power and success of the fiction.
Two Extremes: Assembly Lines and God

When you get down to it, performance as a keyword for literary analysis is beautiful in its complexity. Performance reveals the play available in language between fiction and the structures of our imagination, and the real and empirical, reveals the endless oscillation between these frames. Accordingly, there are two further aspects, extremities, of performance that I cannot overlook before pressing on.

In “Parable and Performative in the Gospels and in Modern Literature,” J. Hillis Miller identifies two distinct kinds of performative statements, statements which by the act of naming an object bring the object into being. As in the creative Fiat lux of God, in this case a name establishes presence: “The ‘Let there be light’ of God produces the basic condition of visibility and therefore of knowledge. It allows things to stand in the sunlight and be seen” (147). Such a performative, Miller writes, following de Man’s analysis of Nietzsche in Allegories of Reading (119-131), is an act of Erkennen, or recognition that leads to knowledge. Another aspect to the performative, however, that of more mundane occurrence, such as the minister’s statement “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” does not carry the same force. It does not produce a basic condition for understanding and knowledge. Rather, it posits a condition for reality, and its success depends on the degree of acceptance by participants in the performative this positing elicits. That is, divine performative speech is magical, with an inherent power all its own: the statement incontrovertibly produces its object. Mortal performative speech, on the other hand, gains its power by participatory involvement: the ritual or ceremony, for instance, invests the statement with power. While the mortal performative, an act of Ersetzen (to posit), strives to be

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Erkennen, reaches for the power of a divine statement, it will never attain this condition. It is impossible for Ersetzen to have the force of Erkennen. But the mortal performative nonetheless implies the other realm of and for being, that of divinity. “I now pronounce you” evokes and echoes the Fiat lux.

In this resonance the performative creates for its participants something lacking from the divine statement, and that is a certain temporality and linguistic effort. If for the divine statement, the utterance is practically identical with its object, and this object afterwards stands for the word, for the mortal statement the words must always be repeated, be reinstated for the object to continue functioning: thus the iterative dimension to performative language. (Yahweh, for instance, seldom repeats orders.) This effort, however, is important and unique to the performatives we deal in. The positing, Miller writes, “remains a merely human positing, the making of a realm created by language, existing and sustained only in language” (147). While the mortal attempts to cross over into the other realm – according to Miller’s discussion of Kafka’s “On Parables” – the performative never permits this transfer, the acquisition of the divine power of speech. But this attempt is important because it necessitates the sustained participation of performatively speaking subjects. We might want to speak like God, but in the difference between our performatives we mortals create a realm of action that exists only in language; and in such speech acts, in the various rituals of speech, we create a certain force of speech – the force of a promise, or of a threat, for instance – a power not identical with that of God’s but a power nonetheless. And this power then necessitates further consideration of one speaking subject’s relation to another: in the effort performative speech requires, we practice and study a unique form of responsibility.
In other words, our language is always somewhat out of our control. The promise or the threat open the possibility of realizing either a recovery of control or its loss: we break promises and don’t follow through with our threats. We hold each other and ourselves accountable for what we say, and this requirement, a social convention, I’m arguing, is the unique form of responsibility inherent in our performative speech. The performative speech act enters the speaking subject into a frame that is both temporal and linguistic; the promise or threat await fulfillment, and the words that initiate these acts serve as a bond or a contract between the statement and its speaker. The performative word, in this case, is something distinct and autonomous from its speaker. So for the performative to succeed, “it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech” Judith Butler writes, “but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.

It is not simply that the speech act takes place within a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualized practice. What this means, then, is that a performative “works” to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (Excitable Speech 51)

The dissimulation of the gap between the utterance and the thing it calls forth indicates how our speech acts are not like God’s. But this difference lends the mortal speech act a particular power: we repeat performances of the imaginary objects. We possess, in a way, a collective imagination through performative speech that divine speech lacks: there is no space between the divine utterance and the object it creates. (There is no difference, in other words, between God’s reality and His Imagination.) It is how we forget the iterability of our words in performance that lends a certain power to these words. This permits, among other things, lies to fully operate, as well as testimony and confessions. The “accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force” inherent in
the performative is not, then, a fault of the performative or an infelicity – or act of deceit – of the performer. It is precisely what performatives do: performatives conceal, in the presentation and presence of the performance, the ritualistic convention, an endless iteration.

Furthermore, the power of dissimulation lends energy to – or reveals the energy inherent in – the performative. It is spoken again and again, over generations, in various contexts. Partly for this reason, of iterability, the performative does not bring about what it names. In short, as Butler writes, where a performative text “acts once, it can act again” (*Excitable 69*). The performative always leaves open the possibility of resignification, of a counter-performance, a redeployment, say, of the epithet in a different – critical, productive, or affirmative – context.

If we can call the divine-mortal distinction in performative language the *Fiat lux* problem, a way of thinking about performative speech as a type of figurative language, then the counterpart to this performative, a *ground* for performative speech, is *performativity* as defined and used by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. For our consideration of the relation between an act of torture and performative language, this aspect of the performative will become important.

Lyotard’s *performativity* addresses how, qualitatively, a complex system functions.¹⁹ Performativity in this sense is not performance as evocative of a liminal space but performance as the evaluation of a part or of a repeatable phenomenon in relation to other parts of a closed system. “The true goal of the system,” Lyotard writes – by which he means a technocracy wherein “the harmony between the needs and hopes of individuals or groups and the functions guaranteed by the system is now only a secondary component of its functioning” – “is the

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optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words, performativity” (11). Performativity is a form of maximizing efficiency. The system – and this system can be as simple as an exchange of words between two people, or as complex as the exchange of words, knowledge, and commodities within a society – performs, to put it very simply, according to an “optimization” of the relation between input and output, between the resources needed for continued operation for, and the products of, the system. Considering the musical performance analogy once more, to see the performance through Lyotard’s lens, we would examine not the myriad tensions between the performance and the musical score, or the tensions between the presence of the sweaty performer before the gaze of the audience; rather, we would look for an optimization between these various parts, look for (and evaluate according to) a state of equilibrium between the performer, the score, the audience, a state wherein the general interpretation of the score, expression by the performer, and reception by the audience agreed to some standard of appropriate performance.

Clearly, there are multiple ways to think about performance, the performative, and performativity. If for Lyotard, performativity is defined by the efficiency of a mechanism, for Austin, the performative is defined by the success of a ritual enacted in and by speech. Let’s take a moment to think about these two approaches of what it means to perform.

There is the statement, the speech act or utterance, and there is the ritual. Does the utterance come with the ritual? Not exactly, since the same words can be spoken in other contexts. The ritual, then, stakes a claim on the words for a particular purpose. So it would be a mistake to assume that the words of the ritual are inherent to, owned or invented by, the ritual. The words come first; the ritual second. The ritual is an orchestration, an appropriation of the words for a particular purpose.
So when we say “These are the words of the ritual,” or “To perform the ritual one must speak these words” we might suggest allegiance between the words and ritual but this is simply a suggestion, not a constative claim of truth or identity. After all, rituals change, rituals can be changed by having the utterances they depend upon change. Which is to say that for all our talk about rituals and their constitutive elements, we are speaking of a certain tone or manner of speech and context, speaking of a pretension for speech and context, a kind of consensual blindness, ignorance, or fantasy. While we might recognize that rituals change, to perform the ritual we act as if the ritual is inflexible. Performative speech of this kind – this pretense of the ritual’s formal rigidity – brings attention to the problem of manner, of, in Austin’s words, a kind of appropriateness, not, as Austin claims, the appropriateness of response-per-context, but the manner of investing in an utterance a mystical content that is not of the utterance, or even of the ritual, itself. The utterance is spoken like a spell, with apotropaic power.

The semantics of the statement, then, must include not only the rules of the performative: He says X, she responds, appropriately, with Y, etc. The semantics of the performative utterance are not reducible to such rules. The content of the statement, it seems, also includes this domain of ritual: a continuous history of such utterances and also a sense that the words, in their historicity, their resistance to the materials and contingencies of everyday life, put forward or evoke a magical aura, a protective quality that extends from their historicity to their speaker, penetrating the speaker.

The performative speech act as ritual remains iterable. This utterance is therefore partly removed from its context; it has no particular, appropriate context. But still it follows, functionally, the conventions of the particular ritual. Thus the performative utterance, Austin implies and Derrida I think makes clear, is unique in its capacity to appear (to be pronounced and
heard, written and read) both within and without speech conventions. In other words, performative speech, as a kind of meta-statement, draws attention to conventional speech and to what meaningfully lies before and beyond such speech.

In a way, Lyotard’s performativity – signified by measurement, quantification, evaluation – is not so far off from Austin’s performative, which signifies the speech process itself, the action, the participation. Performativity functions outside of the performance. It is an evaluative reading, it is retrospective, and in a way performativity is meta-performing: not simultaneous with the performance, but over-seeing it, reading – evaluating or measuring the quality of – the performance. For Austin, performativity is a quality inside of the performance itself. Like a rule of grammar, one performative utterance determines and predicts what syntactically should follow. Performance, then, generalizing from both views, suggests a removal and a framing, an action that is marked by reflexivity, a determining framework.

The performance, to conflate Lyotard and Austin, is an action done for the successful outcome of another action; an evaluation, for instance. Exceeding productivity or pragmatic speech, the performance of discourse or of the machine speaks to its success at accomplishing an end other than that designed by the sum of its parts. That is, the machine can be said to be built for a purpose; the utterance can be said to have intended meaning; but the performance of these constructions involves something that includes but exceeds this purpose and intention. Performance occurs when the construction fulfills this other, artificial purpose.

To return to an analogy: a violin is built of wood, with many specific parts. It is designed to produce a certain sound. The quality of this sound reflects the craftsmanship of the instrument’s design. But the musician’s performance with the violin acknowledges something more than what the actual violin might be materially reduced to. We might take the blueprint of
the violin and produce ten instruments in the exact same way. But these instruments would never, even in the hands of the same musician, perform in the same way. Performance, in other words, is something brought to, and invested in, the performing machine. As if answering a demand, “Say it like this…,” the performer speaks but speaks in a particular way, in a way decided a priori to be the most appropriate for the given context.

**Interrogation and Performative Duplicity**

Clearly there is an important relationship between testimony and performative speech, but we might also identify nuances of complexity in testimony by considering it in terms of *performativity*. Silence, the unspeakable, the evocation of the unimaginable, while in the framework of *performative speech acts* might indicate the liminal condition of testimony – that other realm in and of language that we approach in performative acts – for performativity such occasions complicate matters. Silence, recall, plays an important figurative role in the torturer’s discourse: it is an absence of expression by the victim that he attempts to fill through an act of violence. Figuratively, the torturer writes-away the victim’s silence; he inflicts further pain by taking up any of the victim’s statements into a narrative which justifies the torturer’s action. Silence, as well, challenges the performativity of testimony. Recalcitrance on the part of the witness, the very impossibility of distinguishing a refusal to speak from an inability to speak, marks, in terms of performativity, a degradation in the quality of testimony. But the same can be said for the successful outcome of torture. Here is where things get difficult.

It might be impossible to determine if one’s silence expresses what is unspeakable, what is unsayable, and what is a refusal to speak.\(^{20}\) W.J.T. Mitchell, in “The Unspeakable and the

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\(^{20}\) See Butler, *Excitable Speech* 27, 137, on the performative and interpellative functions of silence. Also see, for an exceedingly nuanced discussion of the question of silence in Holocaust testimony, Jean-François Lyotard, *The*
Unimaginable,” in discussing this problem, offers as an example for analysis the torture scene in John Schlesinger’s *Marathon Man*, where Laurence Olivier’s character tortures Dustin Hoffman’s. Where Mitchell hurries through his discussion of the difference between an inability to speak and a refusal to speak (a distinction that overlooks further significations of silence), I’d like to pause on this point, between inability and refusal.

First, *the ability to speak* entails refusal. To choose or refuse to speak presupposes the ability to speak. But to be unable to speak is not so much opposed to the choice/refusal of speech as it is a condition of a higher order. To take someone who cannot speak and conclude that he refuses to speak would be nonsense; likewise, to take someone who can speak but who refuses to, and conclude from this that he can’t speak would also be nonsensical. The point is that the dichotomy Mitchell uses is suspicious to begin with: in a statement of silence, it is impossible to determine whether this demonstrates refusal or inability. Silence would seem to signify, among several things, this particular kind of ambiguity, a moment of undecidability. But such ambiguity is inextricable from the torture scene; in fact, such ambiguity is instrumentalized by the torturer:

Laurence Olivier, the Nazi torturer, is interrogating Dustin Hoffman with the aid of a dentist’s drill, and he persists in asking him, “is it safe?” (safe, that is, to retrieve contraband diamonds from a Manhattan safe deposit box). Hoffman has no idea what the question even means, much less what the answer is, and says so, but this does not satisfy his torturer, who interprets his refusal to answer the question as a sign that Hoffman is concealing something.21

Let’s focus on this type of scene. To question with force, and answer under duress: how, in what ways, does the interrogator interpret the answer? He’s looking and listening for not simply

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content, the semantic structure of the source’s (the interrogatee’s) statement: interpreting “refusal” signifies something else, another semantic domain.

Soon Hoffman decides that he had better tell his torturer what he wants to hear, and reassures him that yes, it is safe – very, very safe. But of course Olivier is skeptical about this and continues to torture him, whereupon Hoffman switches tactics and tells him that it is not safe, it is very, very dangerous. By this point Olivier doesn’t know what to believe any more, and he carries on the torture… until Hoffman’s will is broken and he is reduced to howling animal cries of pain, unable to say anything at all. At this point, Olivier is satisfied that Hoffman “knew nothing – if he had, he would have talked” and orders his men to dispose of him. (Ibid. 302)

In this case, the torturer does have a “legitimate” question; he “believes” that his source has the information he needs, and that with the right combination of questioning and torture, this information will come forward, the source will “talk.” There are several ambiguities about the target in this case. That he does not respond in the right way indicates several things: he is refusing to speak (but he knows); he is speaking (but he doesn’t know), and says whatever he thinks the torturer wants to hear; he can’t speak, because of the pain he must endure (the assumption being, by the questioner, that his source’s demonstration of pain is merely a performance and not the real thing; that his source is merely antically refusing to speak). That is, the questioner needs to discern in every response whether it signifies refusal (or concealment of information), compliance (or absence of information), or physical inability (or that the torture has gone too far).

But there are further nuances and permutations of this schema. For instance, the source might very well refuse to speak but also not know anything: in this case, refusal does not necessarily signify concealed knowledge. Likewise, the source might speak, might confess, might in fact give the information that is demanded of him, but the questioner either won’t understand the response or won’t believe in the response – and then continue the torture. At some point, the scenario reaches a limit of logic and discourse; it is not a matter of describing the
proper situation or combination. At this point the discursive problem of torture reveals itself as not in fact a problem of language. In fact, in such a situation where one figure overpowers another, in the near absolute domination of the other’s will and being, there is no discursive and dialogic space. We might conjecture that the entire question of discursivity in the context of torture is in fact a fiction of and about torture. And what we are actually considering in our consideration of the relationship between torture and language is nothing more than a consideration of how one person destroys and disembodies another: language might very well be a tool for, a means to, this end, but it does not, so to speak, contain this event. Language, in this view, is beside the point. In this view, torture is nothing more or less than the cruel destruction of an individual.

The trouble with this assumption is that torture appropriates linguistic elements to enact and enforce its destructive aim. This is precisely the performative dimension in and of torture. We might want to separate language from torture, to argue that torture is not a discursive form, not a “kind of” question or mode of interrogation; to argue that it relies on figurative potentials in language, and that it acts like a demonstration of questioning – a wrong answer, for example, comes to identify with the infliction of pain – but that torture itself is essentially a physiological procedure, not linguistic. But such reliance (appropriation, but also mimicry and representation) and acting make it difficult, if not impossible, to say what is strictly the physiological procedure and the linguistic performance. Indeed, the torturer is a kind of raconteur, and torture itself a kind of fictional narration that explores, integrating, the possible and impossible, the real and the imaginary. Mitchell is quite right in stating that the real horror in and of torture is “its staging of the unspeakable as conducted by ‘ordinary means’ in order to force a subject to speak” (ibid. 302). Fiction, too, let’s not forget, is a staging or framing of what is unreal (and sometimes
unspeakable) by the “ordinary means” of language; fiction frames the unreal with statements of
the natural, the quotidian, the casually communicable. In this light, the torturer’s statement “We
have ways of making you talk” takes on frightening power, because the ordinariness of the
statement – the connotations of “Let’s have a conversation” or “Just tell me a story” – crosses
over in the context of torture into the domain of the extraordinary, the inhuman, which itself is a
trope of crossing over, a metaphor of the raconteur that describes how the unreal contains an
element of reality.

In the fiction of the torturer’s relation to the ordinary, speech is relegated to another
“ordinary means” of force. The content of the speech itself, in and for torture, is irrelevant;
speech is simply another instrument of force. “We have ways of making you talk” thus takes on a
complicated performative tone: the “ways” are not only about speech; and the “talk” which is
supposed to be the objective of these ways is not precisely, in an ordinary sense, “talk.”

Primarily, one wants to resist such a threat. One would refuse to answer such a threat,
because the response in this case performatively fulfills the threat. It would confirm the power of
the torturer. Then again, one must talk. In testimony, one must to some extent answer the threat,
“We have ways of making you talk,” even if the threat is simply recounted, a representation of
the threat, this finite process in the act of torture. The law, then, that prohibits speech – and we
might consider a corollary to the above threat, one’s plea “Please don’t make me say it, don’t
make me say such things” – that prohibits a certain kind of representation, is always already
undermined. The unspeakable will be spoken. What interests me in this paradox is how torture
seems to insert itself into this problem of language and representation: it is at once hidden from
view – and in this occlusion questionably legal but always inhumane – and too often revealed,
and revealed in ways that seem to participate in its regeneration. Something of the narrative of
torture itself seems to have a hand in the successful outcome of an act of torture.

Consider the production and reproduction of “justice” in Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal
Colony.” 22 The officer’s tale represents to the traveler what has happened, and what will happen,
with the apparatus — before the machine actually goes to work. The play on the prohibition of
inhumane treatment of prisoners in the penal colony, then, works on several levels: the visitor,
hearing the officer’s tale, in making his decision about the “torture” he witnesses, will
necessarily and inevitably repeat a version of the officer’s tale: prohibition will paradoxically
require repetition of the illicit act. But the officer surely knows this, and plays with, exploiting,
this paradox. And this duplication is a device of torture. To turn “the individual imagination
against itself,” which is what terrifying fiction performs, is to ask the victim to imagine himself
as an-other — to imagine his own body, his own subjectivity as that of another. 23 As if to say,
“Speak or enter this transformation.” Thus another aspect of torture’s product: the terror of
becoming one’s own double or evil twin. The victim is forced to imagine, and to endure, the
punishment, the pain and humiliation, that is not precisely his, the pain that should be the
experience of someone else. Thus, yet another doubling: the vertiginous descent into an immoral
justification for torture. Under the threat, or application, of pain, the victim is asked to imagine
someone else in his position; as if this substitution might be an acceptable one. With these
doublings, redoublings, and substitutions in mind, let’s now turn to Kafka’s story.

Much of Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” is concerned with two kinds of speech: rhetorical, on the one hand, and what I’ll call sovereign, on the other. The former aims at renaming and redescribing objects by the patient means of story-telling and reasoning; the latter identifies an object through force of command alone. The latter is similar to the *Fiat lux* addressed in the previous chapter. Things become interesting in Kafka’s story, then, when these two kinds of speech become integrated into the metaphors of the apparatus, the machine which executes justice, and of the law.

The officer who narrates and controls most of Kafka’s tale is a complicated fellow. He has plenty to say to the traveler about various people and events in the penal colony, but he also reveals in subtle ways a desire for efficiency, order, a certain transparency for expression. He is a strange character in that how much he has to say, the superfluity of his narrative, often rubs against principles of his narration, which would seem to call for clarity and brevity of style. So, one might ask, what’s wrong with the officer?

By drawing our attention to ideas of efficiency, order, and the transparency of expression, Kafka raises questions about the properness of proper names in the story. When the traveler interrupts the officer’s narrative, to question him about a part of the apparatus, the officer replies: “Yes, the harrow [*die Egge*]… The name fits. The needles are arranged in a harrow fashion”
The word “harrow,” in this case, structurally matches its material referent; and the utterance itself, “the harrow,” metaphorically reaching for its material origin, touches the referent, and finds a good “fit.”

This statement, however, is set in relief in its contrast to a multitude of utterances in this passage that, so to speak, don’t fit. Kafka’s atmosphere is rather murky and surreal; objects are out of focus or out of line with their ostensible normal conditions. The prisoner, for instance, is likened to an animal, one “so doggishly submissive that it seemed you could let him run around freely on the slopes and would only have to whistle at the start of the execution for him to come” (36). This transformed body correlates with the transforming situation: the performative, naming the man “doggishly submissive,” creates the situation for the appropriate metaphor. One would “only have to whistle” for the man to come. Additionally, the traveler, despite the officer’s tendentious lecturing, is not paying full attention. Following his query about the harrow-element, Kafka describes the traveler’s distraction by the sun; apparently it is late in the afternoon on a warm day, and with the descending sun in his eyes, the traveler becomes rather day-dreamy, museive. “He had not been listening with his full attention; the sun was much too strongly concentrated in the shadowless valley; it was hard to collect your thoughts” (37). “The soldier’s attitude, it seemed, was much like the traveler’s. He had wrapped the condemned man’s chain around both wrists, propped himself up with one hand on his rifle, dropped his head on his chest, and couldn’t care less about anything” (ibid.). So the traveler’s query hangs in this drowsy air as he tries to collect his thoughts. But the disorientation is further emphasized by the fact that the traveler and officer are speaking in French, which presumably the soldier and prisoner cannot

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understand. What language is spoken on this penal colony? Kafka doesn’t say. The *lingua franca*, however, suggests the colonization of the prison’s region; suggests a particular hierarchy and difference, perhaps, in class and race, between the soldier, who stands with the condemned man, and the officer. In any case, the prisoner and the soldier cannot speak, or cannot speak in ways that the officer and traveler might understand.

So Kafka structures an opposition between the rigor and organization in and of the officer’s narration and the environment, the *mise-en-scène* of the story; an opposition between what the officer *says and asserts* and what the traveler witnesses. We begin to notice a struggle between the clarity and accuracy of an utterance and its referent. The officer wants things to be absolutely clear for the traveler; and in various ways, he anticipates the traveler’s questions, imagining himself in the other’s position. He strikes us as the kind of officer who rehearses this sort of presentation. So when the officer states “The actual execution of the judgment, however, is reserved for the harrow,” and the traveler responds with “So what is the judgment?” – “You don’t know that either?” said the officer in astonishment, biting his lips (39) – we ought to pay attention to the performative nuances of the exchange. Which is to say, the officer’s response is ironic: *he knows very well that the traveler doesn’t know the judgment.*

The judgment is at once the particular sentence for this condemned man; but also the “mechanism,” the “design” of administering justice. The traveler asks about the particular sentence; the officer responds by describing (rather tortuously) where judgment, in the context of the machine, comes from. The traveler asks, in a sense, for speech, for dialogue; the officer hears in this request a question about form. But then the officer’s point of view seems to shift, and he speaks of a more general judgment: “Our judgment does not sound severe. The harrow will write the commandment he has violated on the condemned man’s body” (39). And then, vacillating, of
the particular judgment: “For example, on the body of this man… the harrow will write the words: Honor thy superiors!” (ibid.).

The performative statement, a commandment, “Honor thy superiors,” functions on several levels here. At its basest, it will be the “command” asserted by the machine to the condemned body; felicitous or not, it is a performative between machine and body – a kind of “play” or “model” of performativity, insincere insofar as it is demonstrated by non-subjects, two mechanisms. On another level, then, the statement is recognized by the condemned as representative of the words of a judge: the machine is for the condemned his judge, and he should “receive” the sentence as he would receive it in the “real” situation on which this model is based. On yet another level (and, in fact, we might extrapolate to some distance here) the performative functions between the officer and the traveler. In a certain light, by a certain receptivity, the officer is warning the traveler, as if to say, “In this place, we honor our superiors, so you, as a visitor here, ought to also honor thy superior.” All of this, as well, most importantly, is a dramatization of what will soon happen, a performance for the condemned man. The irony, of course, is that the condemned man can’t understand French (40), the language of the performance. In this way, the performance is disembodied, reduced for the condemned man to little more than gesture, mechanical movements of the players, the officer and traveler in a scene of lopsided conversation.2

The potential for this warning, the very force of the officer’s performative, implies that the traveler does not fully grasp what is about to happen. The officer has the upper hand in this

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2 The performative as gesture has an analogue in the symbolic force of political slogans. Any billboard or other public statement possesses a similar force of gesture: the slogan does not need a body, a speaking subject, to express or practice its force on the public. The officer’s statement “The principle according to which I decide is: ‘Guilt is always beyond all doubt’” (40) bears a similarity to multiple bill-board signs and political slogans that we find in Valenzuela’s Black Novel with Argentines – “Mens sana in corpore sano” (101), posted over the entrance to a labor camp – and Jacobo Timerman’s Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number; the Perónist statement, for example, “Reality is the only truth” (25), functions in this way.
language game. (Or, whether the traveler knows more than he’s revealing or not, so long as the officer continues to narrate, and to control the narrative of the execution and apparatus, he controls an aspect of the traveler’s perspective and understanding. He is defining the elements of the language game.) Still, the traveler has some strength in being a stranger in the scene; intellectually, he can appeal to other epistemes, other legal structures. Kafka offers this insight: “The account of the legal procedure had not satisfied him. Nevertheless, he had to remind himself that this was a penal colony [dass es sich hier um eine Strafkolonie handelte], that special disciplinary measures were necessary here, and that military procedures had to prevail throughout” (41/20). This is a penal colony: in this performative space, the recognition of a place’s proper name permits the proper comportment of one’s body or self.

On the other hand, the traveler’s reflection is a rather strange statement. Indeed, because the place is a penal colony, it might be expected by a traveler that “special disciplinary measures” are sometimes applied, measures that only pertain to the colony; measures, that is, that would appear unusual, perhaps unusually harsh, elsewhere. But what’s peculiar here is that the subject of these measures is not exactly a member of the “colony.” The penal colony is a place where prisoners are kept to serve their respective sentences. There are guards, prisoners, and auxiliary staff, janitors, cooks, secretaries, doctors, etc. But the subject of the judgment in this particular case is an orderly, a servant to an officer. He is not explicitly described, prior to his conviction, as a prisoner. So we must question the traveler’s assumption that the “military procedures” of the penal colony apply to all residents of the colony, prisoners and nonprisoners alike. Because this

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3 The Oxford English Dictionary does not have an entry for “penal colony.” The sixth entry under “penal,” “of or relating to punishment,” is “used or appointed as a place of punishment or correction.” The cited examples for “penal colony” are relatively recent, beginning in 1820. The German word Strafkolonie means practically the same thing, a “colony” for or of punishment. In both cases, however, the ambiguities between the specific site of punishment or incarceration, those who are subject to punishment, and the remaining space and population of “the colony” persists. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/view/Entry/139985; accessed August 21, 2012.
implies that the traveler, and perhaps the officer, cannot, in looking at a man, distinguish prisoners from their captors. What kind of penal colony are we on?

Judgment, now, as a performative, can potentially transform any subject into the condemned. Hence the glance between the condemned man and his somewhat sympathetic observer: “With a sort of drowsy persistence he [the prisoner] continued to direct his gaze at the spot the officer indicated; and when the officer was now interrupted by a question from the traveler, he too, like the officer, looked at the traveler” (40). The prisoner imitates the traveler-observer because he too is a kind of observer, another “traveler” visiting this operation.

The connotative reverberations, then, of the officer’s statement “And now the play [das Spiel] begins” are multiple and frightening.

The uninitiated observer notices no outward difference between punishments. The harrow appears to operate uniformly… In order to make it possible for everyone to examine the execution of the judgment, the harrow is made of glass [the harrow, in other words, is transparent; an observer can see through the device to where the needles inscribe the sentence]… And now anyone can watch through the glass as the inscription takes shape on the body. Won’t you come closer and have a look at the needles? (42)

The performance of the word “play” here connotes various things: on the one hand, the officer speaks of the action of the apparatus. This is to say play as mechanical performance. The apparatus is turned on and it runs like clockwork. And to the “uninitiated” the details of this running are invisible: it looks, the officer suggests, like any machine (of judgment). On the other hand, the play implied here is the drama of judgment. It is the operation of the machine and the passion – “the only thing wrong with it is that it gets so filthy” (42) – of the incarcerated. Though the officer’s aside, “it gets so filthy,” also implies his or someone else’s sort of passion: the machine’s only problem is that it can’t perform justice without making a mess, that is, without
causing – unnecessarily, to the mechanically minded – some form of material disarray, disorganization. The machine’s ecstatic recklessness will require cleaning.\textsuperscript{4}

And now the play begins. The officer goes to great lengths to help his guest see, without actually turning it on, how the machine operates. For a long while, he only describes, he narrates, the machine’s performance; he acts out a relationship, and pretends to participate, with the machine. “When, to make it as vivid as possible, he [the officer] acted out actually catching the water at the mouth of the drainpipe with both hands, the traveler raised his head and, groping backward with his hand, tried to return to his chair” (42). The officer’s desire to explain how the machine works to the traveler, before letting him witness the actual thing, reflects several things. First, explicitly, the officer wants the traveler to understand what he will witness; and he assumes that a thorough explanation of the parts – a formal and functional description – will lead to an understanding of the purpose, the meaning, the very sentence or judgment that it is the machine’s purpose to create. Second, the officer’s punctilious description – “Here you see... two sorts of needles in multiple arrangements. Each long one has a short one next to it. The long ones do the writing...” etc. – implies how the witness, in the machine’s performance, might not take in the nuanced complexity of the machine. That is to say, watching the machine in action might be, the officer’s antics suggest, less interesting than looking at the machine turned off, up close and in detail.\textsuperscript{5} The officer here is like a conductor who, for a symphony, might describe in words the complex beauty of a musical passage but who knows how such beauty, in performance, will

\textsuperscript{4} The German word “Spiel” denotes, as well, “game,” a word that further complicates the machine’s “performance,” as if the sentencing and the penitent’s passion where unreal, and only a modeling or mimicry of the real thing.

\textsuperscript{5} The attention to details is further underscored by the glassness of the harrow, this symbol of transparent justice. Because of this feature, observers can come close and see, witness, the actual and detailed differences between punishments. The witness of the machine, of justice, can see the needles at work, at the very event of writing the sentence. Otherwise the machine would either look as if it were meting out the same punishment or sentence for every particular offense and/or that the sentence was determined in secret. Transparency, here, is to witness the act of creation. But this event does not explain the derivation of the sentence, which is perhaps one of the key unfathomables about this story: who controls the machine?
be missed, overwhelmed by complexity, unnoticed by the “uninitiated” ear. Indeed, we might consider if the officer even wants to activate the machine: the imagined flow of bloody water into his hands is more evocative to the traveler than the actual thing will ever, possibly, be.

On the other hand, what I have called the officer’s passion and antic behavior also serves a pragmatic, unaesthetic purpose. In the imaginations of the traveler and of the condemned man, the machine is already at work. The officer’s performance, in this way, is a part or extension of the machine: the inscriptions of judgment have already begun. *Description*, this naming process, here becomes a device for the infliction of pain. These details, the officer’s “Won’t you come closer and have a look,” metaphorically needle the attention of the traveler and the condemned – “like him, the condemned man had also accepted the officer’s invitation to have a look at the harrow up close” (42).

*Reading with the Wound of the Eyes*

What I have described and focused on so far, in addressing peculiarities in the officer’s narration, have obvious performative and constative aspects. In one view, the officer attempts and desires to speak, and in some ways succeeds at speaking, in constative terms. He wants his narrative to reflect the truth about the apparatus and its inventor, the Old Commandant. Yet, in another view, the officer is a brilliant performer, and his narrative has few connections to what could be considered the empirical truth of the apparatus. He simply says too much; his precocity of speech betrays in him a kind of nervousness, an anxiety about how the traveler will respond to the imminent event, the execution of justice.

The play between performative and constative language becomes increasingly explicit in, and important for, the story. The constatist in the traveler wants to know who or what controls
the machine: the officer’s description is all well and good, but where precisely in the machine arises the ability to make a judgment? How can the machine reason, read, interpret? “There, in the scriber [Dort im Zeichner], is the mechanism that regulates the movement of the harrow, and this mechanism is calibrated to the design that corresponds to the text of the judgment. I am still using the designs of the former commandant” (43) says the officer, in terribly convoluted words. So the “mechanism” that controls the harrow, that which writes the sentence, is “calibrated” by the text of the judgment. But is this the particular judgment or a general statement? It is not clear. It is suggested that “the designs” in the possession of the officer, a text of some sort, are general, not particular – since these are the designs of the old commandant. But the crime we’re about to see punished is hardly a couple of hours old.

The mechanism, whatever this is, must read the “design that corresponds to the text”; it must interpret this text in order to articulate the design. How will this happen? The officer willingly shows the traveler the very text, “the designs of the former commandant,” as if this revelation should speak for itself.

The traveler would gladly have said something in the way of acknowledgment, but he saw only labyrinthine lines intersecting at various points, covering the paper so thickly that it was an effort to detect the white spaces between them. “Read it,” said the officer. (43)

We can’t help but love our officer. He’s so earnest and so helpful. His command, this performative, “Read it,” suggests how hand-written documents, when put before our eager eyes, offer such lucid statements, explanations of everything – “I know everything now,” said the traveler” (43). But this is not an ironic scene: the officer seems to believe that the reading alone will lead to comprehension, believes, as demonstrated in his repeated insistence on the “naturalness” of the machine, that the truth is self-evident, that it is, if complex in details, materially unconcealed to the observer. This particular text, however, “the design that
corresponds to the text of the judgment [und dieses Räderwerk wird nach der Zeichnung, auf welche das Urteil lautet, angeordnet]” (43/25) is anything but transparent. Complexity doesn’t begin to describe its circumlocutions. “It can’t be just a simple script; after all, it’s not supposed to kill right away but only over twelve hours, on average; the turning point is calculated for the sixth hour. So the genuine script [my emphasis] has to be surrounded by many, many ornaments; the real script encircles the body only in a narrow belt; the rest of the body is meant for adornments” (ibid.). What is going on? we ask, in attempting to see things as the traveler sees them. What are these transformations and doublings, these scripts and bodies doubled over? The officer, one must keep in mind in these labyrinthine lines, is referring to a piece of paper that he holds in his hands, for the traveler’s distanced scrutiny. “The script,” presumably “the text of the judgment,” is not simple; it is “surrounded” by ornamentation – superfluity that is designed to prolong the punishment. But there’s a second encircling going on and that’s done by “the real script,” which “encircles the body… in a narrow belt.” Is the officer still speaking of the paper in his hand? The body of this text, its essential argument or judgment? So – to try and find a thread of escape from this tangled presentation –

a) the “genuine script” is surrounded by ornamentation;

b) the “real script” surrounds a specific part of “the body” (of the text, and simultaneously, by the magic of metaphor, that of the condemned);

c) what remains of “the body” is space for ornamentation.

The turning point in this description occurs in the object of the body, which is both that of the condemned man and of the space of and for inscription. And through the officer’s description we see how “the text of the judgment” creates a space – a kind of paper or page, let’s imagine – that is at once inanimate and dead, as actual paper, and animate and alive, as the flesh
of the condemned man. *This judgment*, that is to say, conflates the inanimate with the animate, materials of human productivity with the materials of the human body itself.

The apparatus has “bowels” [*das Innere*] (44) but not an engine. And the officer’s treatment of, and his approach to, the apparatus is like that of a child with a doll, imagining the inanimate object come to life. His detailed narration of what the condemned “man” – since he speaks in general here, from vast experience (44) – does during the duration of the machine’s performance reveals the officer’s remarkable imagination, a nuanced game of realism:

After two hours the felt plug is removed, since the man no longer has the strength to scream. Here, in this electrically heated bowl at the head of the bed, we put warm congee, from which the man, if he so desires, can have whatever he can lap up with his tongue… It is only around the sixth hour that he loses all pleasure in eating. At that point I usually kneel down here and observe this phenomenon. The man rarely swallows the last mouthful, he just rolls it around in his mouth and spits it out into the pit. Then I have to duck; otherwise it flies into my face. But how quiet the man becomes around the sixth hour! (44)

The officer wants to closely observe “the man” in order to, simply, watch him eat; he wants to watch the man eat what is offered him while he is being punished; studying, we might conjecture, the limit of “normal” behavior in an otherwise exceptionally dehumanizing situation. Only after six hours does the man lose “pleasure in eating”!

More importantly, though, the officer is enacting, as a story-teller, what he claims to have witnessed, narrating for the traveler, the condemned man, and the drowsy soldier, how the machine works, that is, what periodically happens *in the penal colony*. In the way the “text of the judgment” is duplicated through the officer’s complicated use of “the body,” Kafka’s story is gradually being duplicated by the officer: the officer *is acting like* the narrator of the narrative he’s enframed by and subordinate to. He *wants* the story as badly as he wants the old commandant; he *wants* the traveler’s absolute attention because without this he gives up some
control of the reading mechanism, that is, of the *presentation and interpretation* of the machine. He needs this control because, as has been implied, “the apparatus,” the penal colony itself, is indifferent to whatever lies within it: it does not distinguish between prisoner and nonprisoner. It efficiently and mechanically performs justice. And an incorrect interpretation of justice, let’s conclude, determines who goes in the machine and who stays out. Or, more accurately, it is not precisely *interpretation* that is at stake in the lesson, but a *repetition* of the words of the law. Indoctrination, rather, is foundational for an understanding of justice in the penal colony.

The pressure the officer applies against interpretation becomes increasingly evident in the attention Kafka brings to acts of reading and observation. The condemned figure, for instance, does not *read* his sentence *with his eyes*. Nothing is that clear or straight-forward for these subjects: the man “merely begins to decipher the script, he purses his lips as if he were listening hard. You’ve seen that it is not easy to decipher the script with your eyes, but our man deciphers [entziffert] it with his wounds” (45). The condemned does not *read* his body as one reads a text, as the traveler attempts to read “the designs of the former commandant.” Rather, the condemned reads the sentence, his judgment, with his body, by his wounds. Consider the sentence carefully: the condemned “deciphers” the script “with his wounds.” The wounds are his means of reading the sentence; the wounds are not exactly *the writing* of the sentence but the mechanism for reading. This act and scene is difficult to visualize. Is it a physical quality of the wound that assists reading? Or is it the pain associated with the wound that performs this function? *The wound substitutes here for the eyes: the wound* is the means of access to the graphematic world.

Turning this schema around, Kafka asks us to consider – in the officer’s attention to vision – how the eye, as the means of access to the world, is also, in the penal colony, a kind of wound. *To see* (the world), in the world of the penal colony, is a metaphoric remnant or scar of
past harm. But what “body” is harmed by the eyes? More precisely, imagining the eyes as wounds, or marks of harm in a body, what imagined body has been harmed? To visualize the world, to “see” in and through the officer’s descriptions and explanations, is to submit one’s body to an attack. So we note the officer’s repeated askance gaze on the traveler, reading his expression: “From the side the officer looked uninterruptedly at the traveler, as if he were trying to read his face for the impression the execution [Which has not occurred; it has only been described to the traveler and condemned man by the officer] – which he had, after all explained, at least superficially – was making on him” (45). As Stanley Corngold, the translator, mentions in a footnote, the officer is looking for signs in the traveler’s expression that would reveal something of his understanding of what’s taking place, as if the story of the judgment alone might mark the face of the man. This duplication of the process, of the execution of justice, in narrative implies that there are some things one should not directly see: narrative, in this case, is the vehicle that conveys the idealities of the event without its actualities.

I mentioned above that the officer appears to believe in a materially unconcealed world; he believes in a world that, with close observation, reveals its truths, its mechanical design. But in this scene another quality of the officer’s begins to emerge, a quality that has been present, if latent, all along, and this is his understanding and use of rhetorical force; and truth, in this regard, is anything but empirically verifiable. Truth – reading the traveler’s face “for the impression the execution… was making on him” – is here dependent on certain qualities of narration, of how “the execution” is represented in language. What a cagey fellow, this officer.

But the traveler is no fool. He has reserves. He has, in Kafka’s portrayal, something of a conscience. “The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were beyond all doubt” (46). So he is moved by the officer’s story, though not toward the action the officer
perhaps intends to motivate; rather, the traveler is tempted to interfere in the procedure, motivated by his sense of the present violations of justice and humanity. But why, we must ask, is he in this situation at all? Why visit a penal colony? He, *Forschungsreisender*, is not just any traveler, but a particular kind: he is a researcher who follows behind explorers, a man who will return home with his findings. Additionally, he *is*, as suggested much earlier in the story, when the officer tries to flatter him, a respected figure, a man of some stature: he “came with recommendations from high authorities” and he

had been received here with great politeness, and the very fact that he had been invited to this execution appeared to indicate that his judgment on this court was desired. (46)

But the traveler is increasingly discomfited and embarrassed by the officer’s narration. More is at work here than simply the story about a machine and its processes. “The officer had evidently forgotten who was standing before him; he had embraced the traveler and laid his head on his shoulder” (48). In this way, the officer begins to admit nostalgia, begins to confess – “I want to tell you something in confidence” (47) – a feeling of loss, sadness, frustration with the present. But the traveler is not only an observer, and his discomfort at these words and gestures indicate how the officer requires something other than observation from the traveler: he wants *confidence* and a kind of friendship or compatriotism. The officer wants the traveler *to see things* as he sees them; wants the traveler to identify with his, the officer’s, position.

The officer’s antics performatively break down the borders of appropriate action and behavior. What the traveler expects to observe – he was formally invited, after all, to this execution – is formally structured in his expectation. The officer will conduct an execution, etc. But what the traveler actually observes is something else, and this difference (between his expectation of observing an execution and what he actually observes) emerges from the officer’s performance: more than dereliction of duty, the officer, speaking “in confidence,” is pulling the
traveler/observer out of his assigned position; from the position of formally invited observer to something complicit in the officer’s action.

A new narrative begins to unfold here, in this moment of confidential confession. Here begins an account of a future scene, a story about how the traveler will act, and about how the new commandant will respond. Notice how the officer, through his narrative, in fact does very little in the present tense, says very little that could be called constative. He speaks primarily in performatives, naming and inventing scenes that do not actually exist in the world. He puts words in the mouths of others, and fictive scenes before the traveler’s eyes, implicitly directing the traveler’s imagination and discourse. “[You] will not keep quiet (I am still speaking from the commandant’s point of view)

since you are sure to rely on your own tried-and-true convictions… And so you will probably not speak out against the procedure with all the force [Kraft] at your command, as perhaps you might do at home. (49)

So we come to the heart of Kafka’s story, on a point concerning the force of speech, or how to move people, actually and figuratively, to do certain things: on how to do things with words, namely, to feel, to see, and to believe by words alone – recalling the officer’s aside, earlier, “I have something of the old commandant’s power of persuasion [die Überzeugungskraft] but none of his authority” (47).6

Speaking for Others, a Force of Voice

There is power of persuasion (Überzeugungskraft), and then a certain force of voice (Macht), a power which, apart from persuasion, bears the potential to harm. This force of words (like the force of a machine) has the potential to cut the flesh of the condemned man’s body. A

6 Kraft and Macht. “... die Überzeugungskraft des alten Kommandanten habe ich zum Teil, aber seine Macht fehlt mir ganz...” (35). Macht connotes one’s political power over others; kraft connotes the power of a machine or the power of logic. Macht is one’s ability to persuade and convince; kraft one’s capacity to authorize.
command to harm, for instance, spoken by the right person, is equivalent to the harm itself. *The force at the command* of the traveler is not precisely that of persuasion. What the officer refers to is the force of a sovereign, or figure of authority, of the law, to *create and to enforce the creation* of what he states. The officer does not mean in this instance that the traveler will speak *diplomatically*, rhetorically, with restraint in order to preserve certain political relationships. What the officer refers to is the traveler’s ability, in his home-court, to make orders that will be obeyed; his ability, that is, to decree.

The play between persuasion and the sovereign force of voice is outlined in the officer’s speech that follows: “But the commandant doesn’t need that [the traveler’s statement, his view or opinion] at all. A passing remark, merely an unconsidered word is enough. It does not even have to represent your true opinion as long as it seems to serve his purpose” (49). The commandant, the officer implies here, has already made a decision on the matter; and when he issues the decree, it will be followed. The machine will be dismantled. So the traveler’s *opinion*, his statement on the issue of the machine, is no more than a performed *pretext* for the commandant to make his move. The traveler, the officer imagines, *can say whatever he wants, can say anything*, and the commandant will respond with his predetermined sovereign decree.

Rhetoric, *Überzeugungskraft*, would be practiced in a court of law, and part of the traveler’s discomfort about the officer is the absence of such a quality of speech in his narrative. The officer, like the machine, *enforces, imposes* a justice without rhetoric, imposes the force, *Kraft*, of language. On the other hand, the officer is rhetorically sharp enough to recognize that even though the traveler imagines a place for rhetoric – as he is, to the officer, “conditioned by European points of view” (49) – he still understands the possibility, and practicability, of *Kraft*. Even he, the traveler, the officer suggests, uses and has used the force of speech *as* command.
The implication is then that the traveler-observer cannot object to the entire “machine,” since some of its parts are recognized as constitutive of the discourses of both systems, the traveler’s European, and the officer’s.

What is fascinating about this moment, however, is how the officer, using Überzeugungskraft, pushes toward and appeals for the other kind of speech, the sovereign command, that speech which would nullify further legal argumentation. Like a good lawyer, the officer helps his audience visualize the future scene, making fiction reality:

But how will the commandant react…? I can see him, our good commandant, immediately shoving his chair to one side and hurrying onto the balcony; I can see his ladies streaming after him; now I can hear his voice – his ladies call it a thunderous voice – and he speaks… [Speaking for the Commandant, in this future scene] ‘And so, from today on, I decree [ordne ich an]’ – and so forth… (50)

Following this imagined statement – according to the officer’s tale – the traveler is silent. The decree determines the law, not the elements of the traveler’s report.

But the officer, again, in his rhetorical acuity, asks the traveler to identify with his position, draws the traveler up close. In the silencing of the traveler, in the officer’s story, the machine and the officer himself – “both I and the work of the old commandant” (50) – are also silenced. So the officer wants the traveler not to simply speak, or narrate, but to speak in an authoritative way, to speak like the machine, efficiently and mechanically, with sovereign force. “I’m not asking you to lie, not at all; you should just answer briefly, for example…” Note how, in this example and the ones to follow, the officer not only continues his fiction, “In the Penal Colony,” now dubbed “the plan” (an echo of “the design” of the Old Commandant), he, more importantly, instructs the traveler on how to act, on how he might play his part in a performance of this story. “Yes,” the officer imagines him saying, “I saw the execution,” or “Yes, I’ve heard all the explanations.” That’s all, nothing more. (51)
Then, in the name of all those assembled here, I submit the question.” And now you step up to the railing. Place your hands for everyone to see, otherwise the ladies will grab them and play with your fingers. – And now, finally, you are about to speak. I don’t know how I can bear the tension, the hours to the moment. Don’t hold back in your speech… (52)

And, as the officer imagines the scene, it does not matter what the traveler says here: what is important is the tone of voice, the manner of his presentation: the “roar” [brüllen] or “whisper” [flüstern]. What matters, finally, is the force of their presentation, of this choreographed performance of testimony. “I’ll take over and do the rest, and believe me, if my speech doesn’t drive him out of the conference hall, it will force him to his knees, so that he must confess: Old commandant, I bow down before you” (52).

The officer’s plan, it is clear from this, is to restore the old regime, to be recognized by the New Commandant as a superior, as the presentation of the Old Commandant himself. The officer wants to hear a confession. The officer’s plan, this vision of testimonial, is a method of compelling a particular speech act from his adversary, the new commandant. As with the machine, which, after hours, transforms the body of the condemned – “How we all [the officer, with children on his knees] took in the expression of transfiguration from his martyred face, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of this justice finally achieved and already vanishing!” (48) – so too will the traveler’s testimony, as the officer imagines the scene, transform the commandant.

But we can’t ignore how this performance is not one of forceful speech, sovereign speech: it might contain elements of sovereign speech – the content of the traveler’s speech, for instance, is irrelevant: it’s the manner (hard or soft) of his speech that counts – but it is in the end the execution of a carefully wrought rhetorical move. Which asks us, then, in the analogy the officer suggests between what he will do to the commandant and what happens to the
condemned man in the machine, how is the machine’s performance rhetorical? The machine is not only this machine, this singular structure. The “apparatus,” it is now clear, is a method – in speech and in physical force and threat – of inscribing the sentence, of writing a form of justice. But this method, we’ve seen before, is not one of interpretation. This is not a reading and reasoning lesson: it is a rudimentary writing lesson that operates by mimicry. This is a lesson in gesture, in how to physically comport oneself.

“But look closely at the sheet,” said the officer and came up next to the traveler in order to read it along with him. When that did not help either, he waved his little finger high over it, as if in no case must the sheet be touched, in order to make it easier for the traveler to read. … Now the officer began to spell out the inscription letter for letter and then read it again in context. “It says, ‘Be just!’” he said once more; “now you can surely read it.” (54)

Since the traveler cannot decipher the writing on the officer’s paper – script described as “labyrinthine” earlier – the officer reads, spelling out the words “letter for letter,” the order to the traveler. But this too isn’t sufficient: the quick reading lesson fails at convincing the traveler. “Maybe,” he says, “I believe that that’s what it says” (54).

The officer is a lonesome figure. He has lost the old regime, which he was loyal to; lost his comrades. And here, in a laborious effort to convince the traveler – of the necessity and utility of the apparatus – it finally appears to be the case that even the language of the orders the officer follows is a language only he understands. The two men might communicate in French, but those aspects, the content, evidence, of his narrative that would convince the traveler, appear to be beyond the officer’s ability to communicate. Such details might be written down, inscribed on these papers, but only he, it appears, knows how to read the script; which, in its solitude, amounts to little more than another form of ciphering.

The page that the officer takes from his folder is a kind of code, software for his machine. “With great care he embedded the sheet in the scriber and appeared to rearrange the machinery
completely; it was very arduous work…” (54). The machine runs on these orders; they function as the internal logic, the design and code that the machine (the scriber, in particular) must follow. The traveler’s inability to read the orders, then, is not precisely a kind of illiteracy. If this script or code runs the machine, and is only comprehensible to the officer who oversees the machine’s operation (but even that is a great assumption), then we might see the code as a substitute for ideology – the rules of conduct that the officer has internalized and the traveler hasn’t, rules, furthermore, that the officer is not fully aware he follows. Thus an explanation of his procedure is impossible.

Walter Benjamin remarked about such obscure codes – the program for the machine, rules of conduct for the officer – that their very opacity compels followers like the officer toward obedience and order. If the parable (“In the Penal Colony”) is a performative critique of oppressive law, for instance, the specific law, Benjamin posits, is not presented or accessible in the parable itself.

All we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine. In every case it is a question of how life and work are organized in human society. (122)

Which is to say, if the officer could successfully communicate these designs to the traveler, if the traveler could read and interpret the Old Commandant’s plans, then the order the officer ostensibly enforces, and the execution of the law, would collapse and fail. The ambiguous design between officer and traveler draws them together in a productive union; the opacity of the design is more meaningful, in its capacity to lead these practitioners of the law, than the content of the design itself. A certain form – the apparatus, manner of conduct, the designs – subordinates the individual’s desire to interpret and understand the orders. And partly for this reason, there are no

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individuals in the story, only nameless actors, practically allegorical figures. Similarly, the traveler’s taciturn role is counterpoised by the officer’s voluble one, though neither, silence on the one hand and a precocity of speech on the other, demonstrate any kind of confident understanding of the apparatus. Rather, both figures seem nervous, in precarious positions, shivering like animals under the threat of an imminent, irrational strike.8

The fact that the officer and traveler speak a language that the guard and prisoner do not understand establishes a boundary of speech and understanding that participates in the formation of the roles these characters play. A manner of speech is inseparable from one’s public function. The commandant speaks in a particular way; the officer speaks in particular way; even the women, generalized and invisible in the story, have a manner of speech (“whispering”). Furthermore, the officer imagines and narrates the future event of the traveler’s speech before the commandant, which is essentially a prescription of a formal speech act. We might think of such manners as consequences of implicit censorship, but not censorship that deprives the officer and company of a freedom of expression as much as it (in its forgotten origin) forms its speaking subjects and the appropriate productive domain of their speech. As Judith Butler observes, the “notion of productive or formative power is not reducible to the tutelary function of the state, that is, the moral instruction of its citizens, but operates to make certain kinds of citizens possible.

8 Regarding the relationship between the Kafkan individual and the technology that puts forward and manifests the reality he lives in and experiences, Benjamin writes in his “Letter to Gershom Sholem on Franz Kafka” that a description of the individual’s experience only comes about in retrospect, by means of the technological processes that command reality and that seem determined to destroy all individual experience. “I would say that this reality is now almost beyond the individual’s capacity to experience, and that Kafka’s world, often so serene and pervaded by angels, is the exact complement of his age, which is preparing to do away with considerable segments of this planet’s population.” Kafka’s individuals emerge from this destruction or from its imminent occurrence. See Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 325-326.
and others impossible” (Excitable 132). Kafka’s characters each reflect different aspects of state, and institutional, formulated speech. Even the apparatus possesses its own kind of speech and obeys such linguistic boundaries – as these are defined and overseen by the officer. The trouble begins when the officer’s body – since his body is a phrase in this language game – enters and submits itself to the machine, since the officer can’t both oversee operations and enter the operation at once.

In this way, the officer is paradoxically within and without the apparatus. “To move outside the domain of speakability,” Butler writes in the same passage, “is to risk one’s status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one’s speech is to consummate one’s status as a subject of speech” (ibid. 133, Butler’s italics). The solitaire and the officer, removed from the domain of speakability, might speak but only at the risk of being identified as “asocial” elements, at the risk of being taken in by the social but institutionalized (which, in a sense, is a what happens to the officer: the penal colony takes him back). The question, however, remains: What are the parameters of speech on the border between the asocial figure and his community? More precisely, what counts as “impossible speech”?

The officer possesses a kind of impossible speech in “the designs” he keeps tucked away. These are unspeakable to everyone but himself. Like an exiled figure, in reading the designs, the officer is at once within and without the linguistic domain of the colony. He is on a border between states – indeed, he narrates life on this border, describing the conflict between the old and new regimes. In his silence, in his submission to the apparatus, as we have already considered, he seems to enter one of these sides – though it is not clear which, since as the apparatus (emblem of the old regime) destroys itself, the new regime’s relation to the old is likewise destroyed.

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By the same stroke, the traveler, who takes up the mantle of narrative possibility –

“Go home,” he said. The soldier might have been ready to do so, but the condemned man felt the order like a punishment. He pleaded with clasped hands to be allowed to stay... The traveler saw that commands were useless here and was about to go over to the men and drive them away. (Kafka 57)

– then finds himself on a new boundary between the domain of speakability and solitude.

If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject is called into question. The consequences of such an irruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is “falling apart” to the intervention of the state to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration. (Excitable 136)

As with the condemned man, who is charged, according to the officer, with threatening to bite his master; this prisoner, who speaks like an animal, “Throw the whip away, or I’ll eat you alive [oder ich fresse dich]” (41/19); so with testimony, with trauma as the unspeakable. The solitaire faces certain consequences in and for his return and re-engagement with his community. How will he speak about his experience? Any statement of his risks speaking the unspeakable and compelling the “state” to secure him, to isolate him, again, answering the solitaire with solitude; responding to the unspeakable with the force of disciplinary language, with incarceration.

Why does the officer submit himself to the apparatus? What causes his change of heart or mind, what motivates this decision? We might say that the officer, persuaded by the traveler – persuaded by the traveler’s inability to grasp the system of justice the officer has just tried to explain – realizes the injustice of the apparatus; or that the officer, for mysterious reasons, comes to pity the condemned man; or that the officer, absolutely committed to the apparatus and its successful operation, realizes that his body alone is the final component needed for this outcome, a complete demonstration of the execution of justice. I think these reading hypotheses, with the exception of the second – there is little evidence to suggest that the officer feels anything for the
condemned man let alone anyone else – are valid, and there probably are a few others we could muster up. But the fact remains, I think, that it is impossible to say exactly why the officer submits himself to the process. Perhaps, as well, where explanation finds its limit, performance begins. The only way to demonstrate the apparatus’s function is not to describe its parts and their relative, relational purposes; it is to participate in its operation. Which is another way – let’s consider, insofar as the apparatus is more than its mechanical parts, its material presence – of doing things with words.

So a second performance begins. Whereas in the first, the officer narrated the procedure of execution – for the traveler, the condemned, the soldier – now he participates, in silence and as a character, in a re-telling of the same narrative. And whereas the condemned man was the participant/victim/audient in the first version, he is now a passive audience member. “The condemned man, especially, appeared to have been struck by the intimation of some great reversal. What had happened to him was now happening to the officer…” (56).

These actions, however, second acts, are not so much acts of agency as much as acts in and of performance. These characters follow rules, follow a script. Whereas in the first part of the story, each character, with the exception of the traveler, acted rather indifferently to the entire procedure, as if the execution was a foregone conclusion – as if the steps taken had been taken by similar characters before, many times; these individual bodies don’t matter – now there is a similar determination to these acts. Even the officer cannot address the condemned man or traveler as individuals, not apologizing or explaining or being just to these men, as much as he simply acts in accordance to an ideological script. He has no choice but to submit to the machine. And this submission through performative acts is yet another way the apparatus dehumanizes these characters. Without individuality – marked, I think, by the officer’s silent and determined
entry into the apparatus; and by the impossibility of understanding why he takes this action – the
officer, and by implication the other men, is *mechanized* by the apparatus. His understanding of
the machine *is like* his understanding of another person, himself, the Old Commandant, the
traveler: “If it had been clear before that he understood the machine well, it was now almost
staggering to see the intimacy he enjoyed with it and how it responded to him” – *humanizing* the
machine in exchange for the mechanization of the officer’s body – “He had merely brought his
hand near to the harrow when it raised and lowered itself several times until it achieved the
correct position to receive him” (56).

The machine, too, is a character in the narrative. What is violent about this story is not the
explicit description of inflicting harm on a restrained, living body, not what is *obviously*
nightmarish about the apparatus. It is here, in Kafka’s suggestion that the apparatus is alive, that
it responds to the warm presence of its master, moving its parts by its own volition “to receive
him.”

Now, of course, he *[the officer]* could no longer reach the crank; neither the soldier nor
the condemned man would be able to find it, and the traveler was determined not to
budge from the spot. It wasn’t necessary; the straps had hardly been fastened when the
machine began to run; the bed vibrated, the needles danced over his skin, the harrow
swayed up and down… Everything was still, not the softest humming could be heard.
(56)

The machine runs smoothly, contentedly, with one of its own kind on its bed. By the
magic of homeopathy, the apparatus recognizes something of itself in the body of the officer, and
vice versa, and this union allows for the full execution of justice. The apparatus can then, so to
speak, be put away. Case closed. But even here, with the imminent conclusion to the case and
story, and the dismantling of the machine, there is a sense that proper form – even in the absence
of the officer’s guidance – must be maintained, that someone must still oversee the procedure of
a proper execution. This becomes the traveler’s new responsibility, his indoctrination. At the
sight of the machine’s gradual disintegration, the traveler is “deeply uneasy; the machine was obviously falling apart… he felt he now had to look out for the officer, since the latter could no longer take care of himself” (57). There is the gentlest note of irony in this statement, “to look out for the officer,” as if the officer still held his office. This suggests that the traveler – this observer, this witness – does not entirely understand what he is witnessing. He is blind to the fact that the execution is underway; blind to the fact that the apparatus has fulfilled its order.

Furthermore, the performance of justice is more complicated than either the officer or the traveler realize. As the apparatus dismantles itself, the operation and structure of justice in the story is equally undone. That is to say, for the execution of justice to be fully functional justice must have the power to dismantle – or to dissect, and judge – itself. This does not mean that justice makes itself irrelevant in the end of Kafka’s story. Rather, the apparatus’s disintegration suggests a dimension to its power that is out of the hands of its human employers and observers.

The apparatus, then, despite its fulfillment of justice with the body of the officer, still remains something of a puzzle to the traveler and to us. It exposes something of the traveler’s ideological blindness and naiveté. “… Now, however, after the last wheel had left the scriber and he bent over the harrow, he had a new, even worse surprise” – since the traveler had listened to the officer’s presentation and description of the machine and, even if not fully convinced, believed something of his narrative – “The harrow was not writing, it was merely stabbing, and the bed was not turning the body over but merely lifting it, quivering, into the needles” (57).

Note as well, the traveler’s curious reflection: “This was not the torture [das war ja keine Folter] that the officer had wanted to achieve, this was plain murder” (57/64). But what is this

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10 Folter: torture. Another word in German for torture is “Quälerei” (torture, torment) which connotes bodily pain (qual, qualvoll) more than “Folter”; we might even say quälerei conveys more of the body’s transformation through torment or pain than folter does; that is, quälerei implies something of an interrogation followed by the subject’s confession. Folter is only, simply, the act of torture.
distinction in the traveler’s view between torture on the one hand, and murder on the other? Would the traveler accept this form of justice – *torture, not murder* – as execution, given the proper circumstances? Do we hear in the traveler’s remark the possibility of his persuasion by the officer, the possibility of his understanding of how the apparatus should ideally work? *It tortures the condemned, but does not murder.* And insofar as the traveler sees a murdered corpse where he should see a tortured one, perhaps the apparatus has failed in its operation. The body of the officer is not *transformed* in the way torture transforms its victim. On the other hand, if the apparatus *has* successfully run its course, then it has also revealed the lie about the officer’s narrative: there is no transfiguration of the condemned. “It [the corpse] was as it had been in life; no sign of the promised deliverance could be detected; what all the others had found in the machine [according to the officer!] the officer did not find… [h]is eyes were open, had an expression of life, their look was full of calm and conviction” (58). The officer alive is little different dead. He is, and was, a product and component of the machine all along; only here he literally identifies with the machine and its parts.

**Speaking for Others**

Despite the grotesque activity of this scene, the seizure of the officer’s narrative in exchange for this demonstration of justice, there is a significant pause, a significant blockage of understanding that I think is partly indicated in the traveler’s hang-up about what appears to be murder, not torture. In this contrast of action – the demonstration of justice – on the one hand, against the traveler’s question on the other, and in, a third component, *the identification* of the

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11 It is the traveler, not the officer, who calls the machine’s process *torture*. The officer doesn’t describe the process by this term; though he does use the word “torture” [*folter*] in imagining what the traveler might say to the New Commandant. “In our country,” the officer imagines the traveler saying in his testimony, “we used torture only in the Middle Ages” (50). So the officer is aware of how the mechanism might be *perceived* as a device of torture, but he doesn’t see it this way.
officer with the apparatus, Kafka reminds us of the underlying structural problem of the entire story: that tension between sovereign and rhetorical statements, between *Macht* and *Überzeugungskraft*. This moment of confusion, of the traveler’s bewilderment at the sacrifice of the officer, and the destruction – which is also, significantly, a momentary suspension – of the apparatus of justice, underscores this central narrative tension.

To act like a sovereign, Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler have argued, is to act in the conditions of suspended law. The sovereign’s performative “deeming” relates to a suspension of the law insofar as the act of deeming establishes (in fact or in figure) new law. One “deems” in the absence of a given order, a category of names, though the sovereign can deem at any time, at his prerogative. A suspension of law is not the necessary condition for a sovereign *deeming*: his utterance simply marks a pause, lapse, or a gap in the law. Recall the pregnant silence the officer imagines of the commandant in the moment before his – all of this in the imagination of the officer – final pronouncement. Deeming seems to necessitate this kind of performative, temporal, and conceptual rupture.

“The decision to detain, to continue to detain someone indefinitely,” Judith Butler has recently written,

is a unilateral judgment made by government officials who simply deem that a given individual or, indeed, a group poses a danger to the state. The act of “deeming” takes place in the context of a declared state of emergency in which the state exercises prerogatory power that involves the suspension of law, including due process for these individuals. The act is warranted by someone who acts, and the “deeming” of someone as dangerous is sufficient to make that person dangerous and to justify his indefinite detention.12

The performances of policy, our ritualistic debates about the constitutionality of indefinite detention and torture, the very bureaucracy of power, arise where law’s actuality and practicability, the law’s relation to actual conditions, has been severed. Recall, in recent years,
the Jay Bybee memo to President Bush, “Standards of Conduct for Interrogation Under 18 U.S.C.,” in which Bybee argues that the “severe pain” constitutive of torture “would ordinarily be associated with a sufficiently serious physical condition or injury such as death, organ failure, or serious impairment of body functions.”

13 Impressed by such logic, one can’t help but think of our traveler, who, witnessing the dismemberment of the officer, thinks “That’s murder, not torture.” Similarly, in this space wherein acts of performative deeming reign,

The future becomes a lawless future, not anarchical, but given over to the discretionary decisions of a set of designated sovereigns – a perfect paradox that shows how sovereigns emerge within governmentality – who are beholden to nothing and to no one except the performative power of their own decisions. They are instrumentalized, deployed by tactics of power they do not control, but this does not stop them from using power, and using it to reanimate a sovereignty that the governmentalized constellation of power appeared to have foreclosed.

14 One is reminded in this description of the inexplicable creation of the condemned man in Kafka’s story, the dog-like prisoner; and of the various kinds of *entitlements* functioning in the story. What name – of the human, of the non-human – evokes the law; or, even more simply, whose human name is it that evokes the law? This strange question, I think, is what the traveler’s quibbling about murder and torture is all about.

To kill or murder? Of the prisoners, for example, at Guantánamo Bay, there is something greater than their propensity to kill that keeps them under, and that justifies, detainment. According to Donald Rumsfeld, the detainees at Guantánamo “are not like other humans who enter into war… they are, in this respect, not ‘punishable’ by law, but deserving of immediate and sustained forcible incarceration… [Rumsfeld] implied that the restraint is the only thing that keeps them from killing, that they are beings whose very propensity it is to kill: that is what they

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would do as a matter of course” (*Precarious Life* 73). The “equivocation of the human” is to be studied, interrogated. There remains a sense for the detainer that his detainees secret away questions for humanity, conceal something of the human; and this concealment is what makes their *propensity for killing* so meaningful and interesting. Animals kill. We might detain, or destroy, such creatures; but there’s little debate regarding such detainment or destruction. Human laws do not apply to animals that kill. To kill or murder? Misnomers abound here.

The force of the misnomer, of acts of speech that *deem*, “become the means by which sovereign power extends itself; the more it can produce equivocation, the more effectively it can augment its power in the apparent service of justice” (ibid. 80). Speech acts always already “make use” of laws without *applying* those laws. The speech act equivocates between use and reference of the law; this is how it operates in our debates – about torture, about indefinite detention – without responsibly accounting for the law. “We can see that the speech acts sound official at the same time as they defy the law; the speech acts make use of the law only to twist and suspend the law in the end, even make use of the law arbitrarily to elaborate the exercise of sovereignty” (ibid. 82). In a certain way, “the exercise of sovereignty” is *performed* by speech acts, utterances which only, always deem.

And it is not that sovereignty exists as a possession that the US is said to “have” or a domain that the US is said “to occupy.” Grammar defeats us here. Sovereignty is what is tactically produced through the very mechanism of its self-justification. And that mechanism, in this circumstance, turns again and again on either relegating law to an instrumentality of the state or of suspending law in the interests of the executive function of the state. (ibid. 82-83)

Performative language is the framework around a media spectacle, and it makes possible the proliferation of name-calling, entitling, deeming, what has become for a 24/7 news cycle an actual media circus. Its language takes or assumes as *natural* the strength and necessity of performatives for conveying information, for building understanding. But that’s a lie.
Performatives are not interested in the truth per se. They are interested in the perpetuation of the performance, the iteration of generative statements which, through rituals of speech, extend a hegemony of convention. *Listen and repeat*, such statements imply as they create a collective perception of reality. Kafka’s officer *guides* the traveler’s reading of the design with his finger: *Can’t you see?* the gesture signifies. *Now you understand.*

One consequence of such indoctrination is that violence in this language-game becomes murder, not torture, or, as a related example, “terrorism,” not violence, becomes “conceived as an action with no political goal,” an act that “cannot be read politically. It emerges, as they say, from fanatics, extremists, who do not espouse a point of view, but rather exist outside of ‘reason,’ and do not have a part in the human community” (*Precarious Life* 88). This exclusion makes possible the necessity to *kill* (or “detain”) the terrorist with impunity. As Jacobo Timerman observes, the political extreme of performative speech infringes upon the rights of life and death: under certain conditions, to *write* anyone’s name in the public space of the newspaper can be tantamount to a death sentence.15

What we have then are sites of discourse – congress, the news program, the journalists’ office, the penal colony – from which officials oversee the daily activities of a community. Such characters, caretakers, manage particular populations by the stories they tell, the notes and files they keep, the conversations they have with others. As Butler remarks, this discursive overview of the lives and bodies of others “[is] not only a process through which regulatory power produces a set of subjects. It is also the process of their de-subjectification, one with enormous political and legal consequences” (*Precarious Life* 98). Such figures, minor sovereigns,

15 Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, trans. Toby Talbot (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002): “More than once I had to explain that an article in *La Opinión* could mean a death sentence; nonetheless, their loneliness and the dearth of news made them believe that printing an article on a disappearance was advantageous. At least it fortified them in their solitude and for the upcoming struggle. On balance, I am unable to weigh the results” (28).
bureaucratic spawn and iterations of sovereign power, raise for Butler, and for us, questions about the limit of sovereign speech, a question about when performative language oversteps its boundary and risks the actual lives of others. Indeed, we might consider – contra Butler’s optimism about how performative language can always be reiterated, resignifying and defusing its harm – when and how the performative speech act says too much, exceeds itself (as it always will) to such an extent that the violence it makes possible should somehow foreclose its utterance, its possibility.

Still, *forbidden words* acquire a power all their own. Their transgression, this simple recalcitrance in the face of the law, is impossible to put down. Indeed, the illicit statement is a necessary component in, as Butler concludes, “an account of power that will produce effective sites in the dehumanizing effects of the new war prison” (ibid. 99). Such an account of power would imagine law as something more descriptive, and less prescriptive, of the conditions suitable for human life. But such an account, at the same time, cannot avoid the continued possibility of dehumanization that seems inherent to any performance of the law.

In this regard we might discern the cohesive force of the performative for a community. Performativity attempts to bring differences together through a process of – in an echo of dehumanization – de-individuation, that is, a process of social management. The performative possesses complicated social power. The question, now, concerns *that element* in the social paradigm that *cannot* be performed. Is there a ban on the linguistic re-creation, the ritualization, of some elements of the community? Is there an internalization of the law-ritual such that an

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16 See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 10, on the important differences between *figural* and *causal* analyses of living conditions.
actual performance is unnecessary, the idea of which is offensive? Yes, absolutely. These sacred performatives are God’s: *commandments* which are obeyed, not tested.

*The Catachresis of Resistance*

The uncertainty about what Kafka’s traveler finally witnesses is underscored by a final performative statement in the story: the inscription on the Old Commandant’s hidden grave.

Here lies the old commandant. His followers, who must now be nameless, dug this grave for him and laid this stone. A prophecy exists that after a certain number of years the commandant will rise again and lead his followers from this house to reconquer the colony. Have faith and wait! (59)

There are many nameless characters in this story, as I mentioned earlier. But here they are described as secret subscribers to a subterranean ideology; a resistance, embodied by the officer, to the new order. This force, I think Kafka asks us to imagine by this epitaph, is a resistance against the *inscribing* force of the law, against that aspect of the apparatus which makes itself known to the individual bodies of the colony. The apparatus names; it performs insofar as it creates, like a sovereign, what it says. Against this kind of language is a secret language, a code, a manner of persuasion that employs figure and irony. This language is spoken by the nameless. But their statements, too, can be performative, creating the objects of their utterance: prophecy and parable are performatives not for or of objects in the world but for and of language, and they *inscribe* subjects into the dimensions of performative speech. Prophecy and parable are forms of linguistic uprising, resistance to sovereign commands. Recall the difference between God’s *fiat lux* and human performatives. The human states and *strives for* the power of divine speech; and in this aspiration, and through its subsequent failure, discovers a domain of language that has potential and strength all its own. The power of the performative, then, is not entirely due to its sovereign potential; the performative is not simply a command or threat. What Kafka shows us is
the figurative and rhetorical dimension of performative speech, shows us how the command of narrative itself has the performative power to resist sovereign speech, to resist particular commands and threats.

The command of narrative alone, however, is not enough in standing up against the sovereign. The traveler, for example, does not precisely take up the narrative where the officer leaves it, doesn’t follow through with his intention of reporting to the new commandant. Instead, he leaves the colony, and rather hastily. Where we expect the traveler’s report, Kafka gives us the epitaph, a prophecy. But the epitaph – and Kafka’s displacement of the expected constative statement with a performative – takes up the narrative, with its forms of resistance, of the officer. The epitaph speaks with the force of iterability: “... after a certain number of years the commandant will rise again… Have faith and wait!” (59). The epitaph speaks, as well, for the officer (through and beyond his death), interrupting, again, with a certain precocity and intensity, the moment when the traveler might speak out and deliver his verdict.

This displacement and interruption – both of which could be said to force the traveler away – exemplify what Butler refers to as a display of sovereign power that “performs a catachresis” through which the speaker, the subordinate subject, in acting like a sovereign, breaks the law, but is nonetheless recognized as one with the power of the sovereign by the law (Excitable Speech 81). Though what happens in this kind of statement is more than an offense against “appropriate speech,” a breach of what is censored. Rather, the sovereign in this instance recognizes the precariousness of its own capacity to deem, to make the law in speech. Speaking like a sovereign, then, is unsettling not for what is precisely said – not for the particularities of the statement – but for its manner, its ease, its applicability in the mouth of any subject. Talking
back in this way reveals the lie of the “accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force” (51) in the sovereign himself.

The catachresis inherent in this manner of performative resistance to sovereignty only further demonstrates the force of performative speech that always emerges from its necessary repetition. This is the force of iteration inherent in the epitaph: “... the commandant will rise again...” (Kafka 59). This force, I think it is clear by now, is not merely about the social importance of ritualized acts; this force is not simply an extension of indoctrination, the repetition of the word in a proper manner, in a proper context. Rather, it is the very “equivocity of the utterance,” the “disjuncture between utterance and meaning,” as Butler writes, that necessitates the utterance’s repetition in various contexts, over time, that necessitates this reformulation of the words. By this phenomenon of repetition – which is, first, essential for testimony, and, second, a performance of language’s iterability – comes the possibility for renewed agency (Excitable 87).

Specifically, it is the epitaph’s inscription on the old commandant’s hidden grave that resists sovereignty. This inscription, in the logic of narrative expectations, is the inscription that should have occurred on the body of the condemned man, and that should have appeared on the body of the officer. But through a kind of anacoluthon, the object of inscription is continually displaced and put off. And even here, in the epitaph, this object – the old commandant – could be said to be postponed. But he doesn’t matter as much as the epitaph itself matters, as much as this inscription iterates a secret, and iterates the force of a prophecy, which is a kind of promise and a kind of threat. In this way, in the success of the epitaph to, so to speak, frighten off the traveler, Kafka demonstrates the power of inscription that was indirectly promised in the beginning of the tale. “Yes, the harrow... The name fits. The needles are arranged in a harrow fashion” (38). The
illicit writing of the epitaph, venerable inscription, signifies to the traveler the particular reach of language over and around the speaking subject’s body. The name, that is to say – of the commandant, the sovereign, the visitor, of the condemned – ultimately will fit.
5.

The Disappeared: An Interlude

Does the performative need a body to function? Or can words do things – to passive bodies, specifically – on their own?

Before turning to the particular case of Abu Ghraib, and to a scene through which we can test multiple responses to these questions, I would like to first connect speech acts in Kafka’s allegory to speech acts in practice, to propose ways from the *Fiat lux* of literary mystery to the politics of the performative. By pressing the question of naming, of the awful responsibilities inherent in our summons of the witness and in the witness’s statement, of making names *fit*, as Kafka’s officer would say, I think we can make these connections. The desaparecido, particularly, in key passages in Luisa Valenzuela’s novel *Black Novel with Argentines* and in Jacobo Timerman’s memoir *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, in the work this term performs between what we might call a particular, constative body, and the application of rhetorical force, is an exemplary figure to consider in making these connections and in anticipating what we find at Abu Ghraib.¹

The body appears in what it says, Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech*, in ways different from how it appears in what it writes.

Although both are bodily acts, it is the mark of the body, as it were, that is read in the written text. Whose body it is can remain permanently unclear. The speech act, however, is performed bodily, and though it does not instate the absolute or immediate presence of the body, the simultaneity of the production and delivery of the expression communicates

not merely what is said, but the breaking of the body as the rhetorical instrument of expression. This makes plain the incongruous interrelatedness of body and speech to which Feldman refers, *the excess in speech* that must be read along with, and often against, the propositional content of what is said. (152, my emphasis)²

Performatives *do things* because of their iterability, but it is difficult to think about this *action* in the abstract alone, apart from the presence of *actionable* or *receptive* speaking subjects. Words do things in language, *and simultaneously* words do things to and for others, these reading subjects. Graffiti, for instance, breaks the boundary of conventional semantic space and threatens all other potential semantic fields, including the potential expressivity of the body. Graffiti offers another insight to this question as well: it is created, published or publicized, in a sudden covert, physical act. A machine does not tag this surface, a human does. The message then also conveys the determined, quick, transgressive movement and trace of this movement of the graffiti artist. Likewise, the *excess in speech*, a grain to the voice that reads the performative statement, reveals the body of the speaker’s commitment to what he says. It is more than a string of words that we hear in the speech act: it is the grain of the human voice, the proximity of one speaking subject to another. He demands some kind of response and this demand comes across not solely by the interrogatory linguistic structure. The present body of this speaking subject, by the address alone, makes this demand.

This demand, of course, is another consequence of violence. The transformation of the absence from an actuality to a figure is a form of falling for the threat of further violence. It is a consequence, but it is also one of the “ideas,” performative responses, generated by torture. The victim, and the S&M slave in Valenzuela’s novel, must respond to torture, must open up and speak, even if this utterance is a cry of pain. “[Ideas] sometimes need a good thrashing” says the receptionist at Ava’s, “ideas sometimes blossom with the whip or even better with the willow

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rod, Ava will gladly loosen up your ideas, with blood as well” (*Black Novel* 137). What discourse is produced in the acts of inflicting harm on the body? Why “ideas” in response to pain? What possible “idea” lies at the end of this extremity? The idea discovered through pain is not so much an idea, let’s consider, as it is a breakthrough, an insight beyond reason. The entire scenario calls to mind J. M. Coetzee’s character, Colonel Joll, early in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, when he describes the interrogatory path to truth:

“No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now, I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First, I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.”

Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. (6)³

We must pressure this idea, how torture *generates* discourse. To say language emerges as an eruption from violence is too general a claim. Torture is a specific form of violence. It is methodical and purposeful. Its structure, however, does not make thinking about truth, as it pertains to a specific *utterance or manner of speech*, and this practice of inflicting harm on another’s body, any easier. Indeed, much of our analysis of performative speech and solitude has addressed the *gap between* our interpretations of a statement that is partly, if not entirely, motivated by the infliction of harm on the speaking body, and what we might call the witness’s, the subject’s, intended meaning. And in every instance when this gap is filled by an explanatory statement – it’s murder, not torture; or, it’s revenge, not for the ax blow but for “the platitude of the plot” (*Black Novel* 134) – we must consider how the performative, this act of naming, engages with the act of violence to which it is a response. Moreover, we must consider how the performative’s intractability gives to the witness who testifies to torture an ethical imperative

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that extends beyond the speech act, the saying, an imperative that implicates the interlocutor, the audience, the community who receive the testimonial statement.

There are two hypotheses we might begin with in making these considerations.

The first is that the constative discourse can always be reframed and appropriated as a performative one. Thus genuine efforts at reporting criminal acts can be erased in a readership or audience that has been performatively structured. As Jacobo Timerman remarks in *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*,

Every day *La Opinión* [the newspaper Timerman published] committed what in Argentina was constructed as a capital sin: it used precise language to describe actual situations so that its articles were comprehensible and direct. Might one claim that *La Opinión* was attacked for semantic reasons? Not so, though semantics is the method employed in Argentina to avoid seeing problems in their total dimensions. Newspapers were virtually in code, resorting to euphemisms and circumlocutions. (23)

Performative speech acts occlude aspects of context. Performative speech reveals one thing as it conceals something else. We might consider this exchange – of presentations; of bringing one thing forth to *substitute* for something else; of semantic versatility – as a revelation of power, the revelation of the force of an utterance. In this way, it is difficult to separate an event of performative speech from a performance of political language.

Timerman’s account is chock-full of such empowered redescriptions. *Euphemism*, he shows, is performative, and dangerously so.

Another statement epitomizing an important political clue to the last ten years in Argentina was taken by Perón from Pericles: “Everything according to measure, and yet in harmony.” … A serene saying, tranquil-sounding, not hard to understand and appreciate, it justifies a political process meticulously carried out so as to produce the smallest possible number of critical situations. But Perónists, and all Argentines, understood immediately what it signified: anyone opposed to the tactical methods established by Perón would be executed by the boys, pushed from below by the violence from above. … “Measure” referred to Perón’s orders, and “in harmony” to the machine gun.

Another of Perón’s statements in his infinite semantic creativity was “Reality is the only truth.” This might be construed as an incitement to careful, meticulous scrutiny
of data culled from reality in order to discover peaceful, moderate paths toward a political solution. In practice, however, it formed the basis for Perónist intolerance of any solution outside the ken of its own followers, schemes, or totalitarian rigidity... (25)

Euphemism in these cases confuses *reference* and *use*. The recipient – and this might be said for the use of euphemism in any case – cannot identify the statement, the citation, as either one of genuine enunciation – even if it is an obvious quotation – or if it *signifies* double-speak, irony, code. In this uncertainty, an expression of performative power, the referent begins to disappear; more urgently – since it could be said the referent is always already disappearing – performative statements such as those recorded by Timerman instrumentalize this consequence of euphemistic speech. The euphemism becomes another device for threatening force and maintaining power.

To disappear, now, in the contexts of Luisa Valenzuela’s *Black Novel with Argentines* and Timerman’s memoir, has not just an analogue in language but a complicit partner. Performative speech creates and predicts a reality of and for disappearance.4

Every individual whose freedom was solicited in the years 1976-78 by the central power, the Catholic Church, or some international organization immediately “disappeared.” It was usually necessary to track down the individual in question in a clandestine prison and then submit a petition indicating the hour, day, and place that he’d been seen alive. Whenever the government was forced to admit repressive excesses, the wording of its self-criticism tended to suggest merely that a certain ward of prisoners had gone one night without food. Whenever a military officer referred to those who’d “gone away forever,” it sounded rather like a melancholy remark intended to recall those who’d emigrated to distant lands and continents to rebuild their lives. (Timerman 27)

Timerman himself, in the days prior to his arrest, becomes aware of this power of the spoken and written word: soliciting a response to an inquiry about a missing person, submitting a petition that details the event of someone’s disappearance, these performatives are tantamount to murder, to assuring the disappearance of an individual. So Timerman is compelled to be silent.

But in my position as editor-in-chief of *La Opinión*, every day I had to confront that distinction between extremists and moderates when relatives of those who had disappeared would show up and assume that *La Opinión* could assist in finding them. More than once I had to explain that an article in *La Opinión* could mean a death sentence; nonetheless, their loneliness and the dearth of news made them believe that printing an article on a disappearance was advantageous. At least it fortified them in their solitude and for the upcoming struggle. On balance, I am unable to weigh the results. (28)

The relation between the article and the life of the person it describes and addresses is a complicated one. Serving its purpose of making its readership aware of what’s happening, the article has the double-purpose (perlocutionary effects) of creating targets – writing death sentences for both those who have been taken, and for those who remain to search – for people complicit, or not, in these events.

There is, then, as Judith Butler argues, a way in which we lose control of our words. And it has been a thesis of the last chapters that this domain of usage – where words would seem to have agency all their own – is where performative statements acquire force. The public notice compels obedience; it always threatens, as I think Timerman describes in negative terms, the force of the law, the consequences of challenging the domain of public speech. This is where Pierre Bourdieu’s account of performative speech goes wrong. Bourdieu’s description, in its emphatic focus on the social and ritualistic aspects of such speech, overlooks the problem of iterability and the force, as we’ve seen, generated by iterability. Performatives always already break contexts: they *enjoy*, depend upon, evoke context, but always in their operation demonstrate an illimitability of context.

“The real source of the magic of performative utterances,” Bourdieu writes in *Language and Symbolic Power*,

lies in the mystery of ministry, i.e. the delegation by virtue of which an individual – king, priest or spokesperson – is mandated to speak and act on behalf of a group, thus constituted in him and by him. More precisely, it lies in the social conditions of the *institution* of the ministry which constitutes the legitimate representative as an agent
capable of acting on the social world through words, by instituting him as a medium between the group and the social world; and it does that, among other things, by equipping him with the signs and the insignia aimed at the fact that he is not acting in his own name and under his own authority. (75)

This description raises several questions in its tackling of the “magic” and “mystery” of the performative, descriptives he returns to several times. The account suggests a dilemma for the solitaire – for the witness, for testimony – who speaks only, always in his own name, but who is still removed from himself – with a new language, on his return – and who nonetheless speaks outside of the institution of his community. Can he thus participate in performative speech? He can be spoken to, and spoken of, and insofar as he “recognizes” the authority of his interlocutor might speak performatively – but this recognition cannot be taken as granted. The solitaire wants to preserve his solitude. Indeed, the spokesperson of the community wants to preserve his solitude as well. In short, of course the witness’s speech is performative. But how will we reconcile the “institution” of testimony with this? The power invested in and entrusted to this witness comes from the violence he’s endured. He chooses to speak not to instate this power but to somehow disarm it, as if speaking a counter-performative. The performative cannot entirely close off free-speech, so to speak. It does not entirely frame the terms of the conversation, expression, or exchange: the performative leaves an opening for an iteration of speech that appropriates the strength of the insult or hate speech, for instance, and thus counteracts the force of such speech. Censorship, Butler argues, would foreclose this possibility.

Bourdieu’s account is difficult to reconcile with the problem of the exile, solitaire, that outside figure or subject. The power of the performative, for Bourdieu, is generated entirely within a community; but this dismisses, as I said, the mystery of the performative’s forceful breaking of contexts, a breaking, in a sense, of the community. Or, as we considered much
earlier, the account overlooks the performative’s liminal qualities, the space of subjective uncertainty it opens for its participants. “The mystery of performative magic,” he writes, is thus resolved in the mystery of ministry… i.e., in the alchemy of representation [The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a perci pi, a being-known, which allows a perci per e to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone]… through which the representative creates the group which creates him: the spokesperson endowed with the full power to speak and act on behalf of the group, and first of all to act on the group through the magic of the slogan, is the substitute for the group, which exists solely through his procuration. (106)

In this magic, however, there remains an element that exceeds the social, exceeds or transgresses the rules of the community. The performative creates and gives a statement-object to the community and minister that they previously lacked: this is the carry-over of the performative’s history.

So the performative is not entirely recognizable. From enactment to enactment, it always presents minor differences. For this reason, Bourdieu’s expectation of the community and its hierarchy – “For ritual to function and operate it must first of all present itself and be perceived as legitimate, with stereotyped symbols serving precisely to show that the agent does not act in his own name ad on his own authority, but in his capacity as a delegate” (115) – is unrealistic. Insofar as the performative does not describe or record an experience, insofar as it does something with words, it avoids the requirement of recognition. It occurs regardless of the interlocutor’s recognition of the imminent speech act; any response on his part might actualize the act. As with the iterable forces of interpellation – which, again, goes against Bourdieu’s requirement of recognition – the subject is formed by the other’s address, and not vice versa.
The second hypothesis to put forward, addressing the extent of the performative’s demand on the audience to testimony, is that torture produces a kind of narrative skill, narrative dexterity. The performative that speaks against the law begins to return the force of the interrogator’s language without repeating the violence of the epithet. If torture is chimeric, its offspring is equally synthetic and multifaceted. Following Roberta’s tale (performative warnings), “Don’t go near that woman, don’t go into abandoned houses in the woods,” Agustín resumes writing, appropriating the other’s materials:

He remembered the house offered him in the Adirondacks, surrounded by woods, where the woman with the encephalic matter might be waiting for him, against whom no weapon at all could defend him. He’d bought a revolver and had defended himself against another woman who had no intention at all of assault... (Black Novel 143)

This rewriting of Roberta’s story, the recycling of its elements, has an analogue in Ava’s work. Torture in S&M appropriates aspects of everyday life and sexuality, and turns them – troping quotidian acts – into new modes of significance.⁵ Agustín’s reconsideration of what he has done, of what Roberta has told him, returns him – working through this trauma – to his past, to what he fled in Argentina. The return to Roberta’s story of the ghost woman compels Agustín, here, into his most explicit enunciation of his fear:

How can you expect me to enjoy voluntary sexual torture when I come from a country where people were tortured for alleged political reasons, for the sheer horror of it, with desperate, not at all compliant victims? … What I need is to know why someone becomes a torturer, a murderer, to know why an upright citizen can one day unawares be transformed into a monster. (143)

⁵ The performative depends on the use of tropes from quotidian life. Still, the performative, and this is unavoidable, calls attention to itself when the trope is revealed, when the ordinary figure is used in an extraordinary fashion. On such ostentatious performance, and chimeric space, note Valenzuela’s description of Lara’s apartment: “My décor, as you know, is constantly transformed in the course of time and of my wanderings. This new sculpted piece, for example: … I attached a Brazilian figa amulet to it as a Brazilian pull, a penis to entice certain young fellows who frequent this retreat. Don’t you love the chorus girl legs of those cardboard dolls peeping out the tank?” (163). “Every inch of the vast expanse of the loft… conveyed a setting both childlike and somewhat perverse, a magical circle of clowns and monsters in which little wooden horses and omnivorous beasts consorted in a transformist rite, in which a leopard’s head with bloody jaws, for example, provided a cushion to rest one’s own tame head” (165).
How does a performative speech act turn a normal citizen into a monster? How does performance permit the possibility of torture? What logic inherent in performance opens this possibility?

Torture as a form of performance seeks to distance itself from the specific act of torture. The performative act of torture does something outside of the domain of verification. Torture makes something happen, but this event is meaningful only in its instance, at its emergence. Afterward, the performance (and performative) loses its force. Like a broken promise, the victim might argue, “But you said that you would do so and so!” “Yes but that was then,” the promise-breaker might reply, “under certain circumstances. Now things are different.” Torture, as we’ve seen, operates in unfaithful performatives: its discourse, in Austin’s terms, is hollow and void, although nonetheless powerful for its delinquency. Indeed, it is something about the fact that torture uses performative language and breaks the rules of such utterances that seems to lend torture’s discourse power. Torture might promise, but it will never follow the chronological rule that this performative requires for fulfillment. Torture doesn’t need a future, doesn’t need temporality. Its performative, like God’s, like the sovereign’s, brings forth what it names. “Pain is truth…” Or, rather, it attempts forcefully to do this. And in its corruption, in its mere mortality, where it fails at sovereign force, torture commits human violence.

To Write a Word

A small thesis of this discussion has been that the torturer imagines and practices his act in figurative terms. Torture does things with words in order to bring forth to the imagination an object or figure that exists only in the torturer’s discourse and in the imagination of the victim. We saw this process in Kafka’s story. In the testimony of torture, then, such figuration becomes
evident in the differences between performative and constative statements, the subtleties between what can be stated or described as fact, and what can only be described as the experience of being there, as the process, in short, as a performative. But performatives, it should be clear, have a complicated relation to truth: they don’t report as much as they adumbrate and metaphorize a scene.

In Agustín’s approach to confession, which is equally the approach of an interrogation, Valenzuela emphasizes these differences between testimony as report and testimony as performance. Accordingly, the approach to confession, Agustín’s act of naming the disappeared, figuratively becomes an entry into his psyche. His way out “he instructed himself, was not to be found in others but in groping through one’s own penumbra and finding a new opening. It lay in one’s own imagination, in the page that was blank only a moment ago” (180). The “answer” to his question, and the way out of the situation, lie in and through a speech act. The entrance/exit to this space appears through language, through an invocation. The space is metaphorical, a “pampas” (179); the freight elevator, down to the street, is likened to a toilet (179). That is, insofar as Agustín remains a cognizant narrator, the material presentation of Lara’s place is nothing more than a matter of language. The paratactic instability of names leads to a corresponding instability of spaces. And Agustín “exits” through this instability.

Behind a drape he discovered what he was looking for without knowing it: a passage to other latitudes. … [Since] he was following a trail of sound, he simply had to separate the drapes, cross an opening without a door, and go down a few steps to find himself in a well-lit, white-walled living room with plants, pale furniture, and other elements of normal living. (180)

What is this space without space, this extra room that is neither upstairs nor downstairs, but “down a few steps,” and that represents, in sharp contrast to what Agustín has left behind, a scene of “normal” life? This metaspace is the space of and for a kind of audience and authority.
Agustín leaves the frame, so to speak, of one performance, of one world, and enters another— but one with much broader margins, “normal living.” And here, behind the wall, the screen, across the threshold dividing one performative space from another, Agustín discovers something familiar: his own language, a sense of home. “I may be a doctor,” Hector Bravo says, “but I don’t discount home remedies, quite the opposite. I’m a Uruguayan, lived for many years in Buenos Aires, when it was our turn to seek refuge on the other side of the puddle, and you have such a porteño look to you it kills me. To answer your unspoken question” (181). The doctor is a political exile too; he too has lived, and lives, in alternative spaces and places. And perhaps due to this displacement, he has learned to utilize, practicing guerilla medicine, quotidian resources for “remedies.” To some degree, Agustín identifies with the doctor: “He felt a strange sense of brotherliness, a gradual return to the world of humans, of men perhaps, to a place where violence has a well-designated, orderly function” (183). Agustín’s recognition of an alignment of violence and masculinity suggests the kind of violence that acts, or at least presents itself, as a necessary and sanctioned process, as an ugly but just act; an act done among brothers—encoded and secretive—that public life might not understand or tolerate. This is the structured violence of torture:

He dreamed of white, white walls, a glaring light striking his eyes. It wasn’t an operating room, no. He woke up, startled, perspiring. A nightmare, he explained to Hector, then added: “Like an interrogation.” (183)

Most of this novela negra, let’s now consider, this blind sort of novel, a concealed or hidden away novel, a novel of disappearance, has been about the interrogation of Agustín Palant. As in the testimonials from Abu Ghraib, this novel testifies to a phenomenology of what is seen in a moment of violence but always already recalled as a traumatized erasure, and recognizable as only a trace.
In this regard, the instabilities of Agustín’s previous world are truer to form than his present environment. “Normal living” is precisely what covers, absolutely, the absence Valenzuela (Agustín) wants revealed. So when Agustín searches for his exit, he discovers that the passage has disappeared. There is no exit, no entrance. “The passage is a nocturnal one. There’s a library where the curtains were” (183-84). And when Agustín asks to “leave word” with his former company – Roberta – Bravo says “What for? They know you’re with me. … You won’t have vanished [haber esfumado], right?” The doctor’s use of “vanish” is curious in that it reveals that the doctor would assume vanishing would be Agustín’s concern.

Of course, Agustín has vanished. Without telling Roberta, or anyone, where he was off to the night before – this despite the fact that the doctor states “They know you’re with me. Everyone knows about the passageway, it’s no secret” (184); a disingenuous statement given that the passage is now covered by a book shelf – Agustín vanished from the party. The doctor implies here that “vanishing” doesn’t happen where knowledge is common, accessible, transparent: that the passageway is no secret, insofar as it is common knowledge to Lara and her guests, Agustín has not disappeared. That is to say, where the structure of movement from one space to a different space, where this conduit appears obvious, disappearance will not occur. This fact throws Roberta’s earlier statement, “They must have done something to deserve it,” or “Nothing happened here” (!), into a complicated light, since Bravo’s logic suggests that where or when “everyone knows,” disappearance will not occur.

The burden of knowledge, then, is once more placed on Agustín, the solitaire. His speech, his narrative, is the only means at recovering his place and his name in the community. That is to say, he must confess: “Caught up in words that have a place and time of their own, Agustín Palant releases his story” (189).
Agustín’s confession is complicated (once again) by a missing or misapplied name. In Bravo’s account of Edouard’s death, the dying man asks for a song, which Bravo sings, and then, at the words “prête moi ta plume/ pour écrire un mot” [Give me your pen/ to write a word], Edouard interrupts with, according to Bravo, “after a very long silence did he add, or sigh … to write?” (200). This gesture, this structure – one man asking another for a pen to write a word – is then transferred to the relationship between Bravo and Agustín, with the latter in the position of the passive man, the patient. Reading Bravo’s “tale” as a parable, what is Bravo actually telling Agustín? Give me your pen to write a word. The interrogatory resonance is not subtle. The Bravo/Ed scene, as told by Bravo, mirrors a scene in Agustín’s memory. The desaparecido, that trace of violence, can be recovered by the unknown word. But what is the word – the motto, nickname, alias, mot d’esprit – that Pierrot or Edouard or Agustín will write? What name will save these men? It is a code word, a pass word that will release them from the haunting of their pasts, and open a “possibility of healing, of forgetting” (202). “Think of what there was in your past,” Bravo asks. “Nothing,” Agustín replies:

“Nothing, and that’s what’s so terrifying, nothing while tenants in my own apartment building in Buenos Aires were being hauled away, with hoods over their heads... Nothing, when people came asking for my help and I could do nothing... when I didn’t even believe them, not even when María Inés...”

“María Inés?” (208)

Thus, through his narration of the “nothing” of his past, Agustín begins to remember. Who is María Inés? It does not exactly matter: the name alone (like the epitaph in Kafka’s story) signifies the emergence of a lost figure, the desaparecido. Where there is one name, there will be others: that is the formula by which naming names in interrogation works. Bravo then provides Agustín with a typewriter and paper, as if “cathartic writing” (208) will release Agustín from his
torments, as if writing as a purge of passion (a performance, as well, of writing) will exorcise the anxiety of wanting to remember.

On the other hand, writing for Bravo, performing this final act of inscription – in the light of the possibility of Bravo’s past character as an interrogator, as a torturer – is precisely what Agustín should not do. As in Kafka’s story, we are at a juncture, at a moment of decision just prior to the conclusion: in one scene, Agustín will write the name for Bravo (and the traveler will deliver his report to the commandant), María Inés, a name which is only the beginning of a litany of such names, the desaparecidos. But in another possibility, Agustín would resist this compulsion, since under tyranny writing the name of the disappeared, as Timerman reminds us, is tantamount to a death sentence.

[Nonetheless], their loneliness and the dearth of news made them believe that printing an article on a disappearance was advantageous. At least it fortified them in their solitude and for the upcoming struggle. On balance, I am unable to weigh the results. (Prisoner Without a Name 28)

Agustín’s recollection, then, reveals a kind of power, an impact in and of the utterance, the name. Inés, here, does not simply signify the solution to a mystery: Agustín is not simply naming another Edwina or Vic. Inés, like all names, indicates a history of addresses, of the application and calling of a subject by this phoneme. However, unlike all names, for Agustín Inés indicates a hidden memory, a mark of trauma that can appear only in language. “The force of the name,” Butler writes, “depends not only on its iterability, but on a form of repetition that is linked to trauma, one that is, strictly speaking, not remembered, but relived, and relived in and through the linguistic substitution for the traumatic event” (Excitable 36). The name holds in place the power of the event and its repetition. This arresting movement makes the name like an image, and shifts the discourse from that of speech to that of vision, iconography, where the origin of the name – the subject in her vulnerability of being called and responding – vanishes
behind the material image. We’ve seen this before: much earlier in *Black Novel*, with “Curtis, Curtis, Curtis, on every writable surface” (28); or, “Here lies the old commandant” (Kafka 59). Power’s operation, here, its application on Agustín, or on the traveler in Kafka’s story, requires this externalization and manifestation in an image or figure. Kafka’s officer’s *reading* of the old commandant’s orders, “Be Just!”; and the apparatus itself, the destruction of which coincides with the silence of the officer: these signify how the *power of the apparatus*, which had expressed itself through the officer’s narration, then, in his silence, can only reveal itself in a scene of violent destruction. That is to say, the violence of oppressive power could be said to be omnipresent in these narratives, but it is couched and mitigated in the complexities of particular narratives views. Precocity of speech, we saw in Sebald, limits the extent of such power. Only when the narrative ends, only at the end of speech, does this power require the ossification of an image. *María Inés* works in this way. The name signifies, *in part*, an account of violence that substitutes, as Butler observes, for the traumatic event. But *Inés* is not only a desaparecido in this conclusion; she is also an image and trace of iterable force. “Inés” is for Valenzuela – as the epitaph is for Kafka – the beginning of a meta-narrative, a performative (like prophecy) that interprets present injustices and offers the possibility of recovered agency, the possibility of resistance to the mechanisms of violence operating and inherent in the present narrative or testimony.

*Question Without Question: The Name of the Other*

The response to the interrogator, the act of naming names, becomes a device and tactic for the perpetration of physical harm. Where Agustín and Timerman must speak in constative terms, their captors flip such phrases into performatives. Thus the harm perpetrated by the
performative is essentially that caused by the spoken word’s engagement with performing bodies. This engagement, I’ve attempted to argue, often results in an expression of iterable force in forms of illicit writing, in hidden sites of, in Valenzuela’s words, graphomanic zeal.

Timerman’s memoir makes this force all too explicit:

And the application of electric shocks begins. The amount of electricity transmitted by the electrodes – or whatever they’re called – is regulated so that it merely hurts, or burns, or destroys. It’s impossible to shout – you howl. At the onset of this long human howl, someone with soft hands supervises your heart, someone sticks his hand into your mouth and pulls your tongue out of it in order to prevent his man from choking. Someone places a piece of rubber in the man’s mouth to prevent him from biting his tongue or destroying his lips. A brief pause. And then questions. A brief pause. And then words of hope. A brief pause. And then insults. A brief pause. And then questions. (33)

The howl of the victim, the controlled tongue, the insertion of the rubber, it is finally, grotesquely ironic that the torturer wants a statement from his victim. We have seen how torture corrupts performative language, using it but disregarding rules of felicity. The statements made in such scenes force themselves upon the participants, force themselves against what is clearly and empirically evident. This exploitation of language abuses not only the subjects who must endure actual conditions of dehumanization, but abuses the very language which we use to construct and reconstruct such conditions. Another of the interrogator’s victims, that is to say, is the language he shares with his source:

The torturers, nevertheless, try to create a more sophisticated image of the torture sites, as if thereby endowing their activity with a more elevated status. Their military leaders encourage this fantasy; and the notion of important sites, exclusive methods, original techniques, novel equipment, allows them to present a touch of distinction and legitimacy to the world.

This conversion of dirty, dark, gloomy places into a universe of spontaneous innovation and institutional “beauty” is one of the most arousing pleasures for torturers. It is as if they felt themselves to be masters of the force required to alter reality. And it places them again in the world of omnipotence. (39-40)
But in this exploitation of the performative, what does interrogation actually ask, demand or require? It is as if the torturer asks a question without questioning, asks, states, declares a statements that falls out of the bounds of statements in this language game.

Skardon [chief examiner of Britain’s internal security service, MI5] once reminisced on how an instructor had taught him the best method of interrogation: to repeat the same question many times, at different moments in the examination, as if it had never been asked before. The object is to verify how many changes the interrogated party introduces in his replies, then to point out to him the apparent contradictions, and keep insisting until the sought-after reply, or the one that is suspected to exist, is obtained. (55, my italics)

Does the interrogator ask questions for which he already has answers? Other than “answers,” as information, what does the interrogator expect or want to hear? “Let me give an explanation,” one of Timerman’s exasperated interrogators says, “so that we can get to the bottom of things” (74). The interrogator wants his interrogatee to respond in a particular way: his performative question requires an appropriate response in order to succeed. Of course, the interrogatee is not always (not usually) aware of the rules of this performance. Indeed, under the threat of pain, or in actual pain, the victim cannot be expected to participate in such a language game; furthermore, part of his victimization, part of the infliction of harm on his body, involves this impossibility of compliance. To the victim, all that matters is an escape from the threat, from the pain, which requires a particular, constative utterance about reality: it could be a name, or a confession, but regardless of the facts of the matter, the interrogator is not listening. He performs his duty, which is to ask questions that are not actually questions.

The questions were impossible to answer. In my fatigue and exhaustion, I tried not to engage in ideological discussions so as to avoid the trauma of direct questions and impossible replies. (74)

This problem of the torturer’s performative question carries over into the act of testimony. We must ask, again, as we’ve considered before, who understands the testimony of torture? What logical response can one give the witness who speaks of torture – the witness who,
under a new manner of questioning, must negotiate this re-engagement/disengagement with the question without questioning? Timerman’s response is enigmatic but instructive:

In this world of tribunals and of the accused, I search fervently for the relief that should be forthcoming from the Other if truly we belong to that vast little group of victims. But once again I find only consolation, not identity. I find the consolation of solidarity, but not that of inevitability, for though we share the same aspirations, his guilt is not inevitable, and he will always be lacking the guilt needed to reach me [That is, as Other, this figure will not identify with the subject in his guilt, which is inevitable]. And if he is unable to reach me, it means that I am united with him, but not he with me. Not in the fullness of my guilt, which I possess in its totality, but which he possesses only in part. (112).

Timerman understands his imprisonment in and through this term, the Other, in the existence of the other who has created him. The non-existence of such a figure would be “intolerable” because the subject’s imprisonment would be due, in part, to that which is the same, to oneself. Imprisoned by his own kind, the prisoner’s condition would be unrecognizable. Only the other gives the possibility of meaning to and for this imprisonment. The existence of the other means, in this passage of Timerman’s, that the future “is open still to appeal.”

Still, the other only offers “consolation, not identity.” The subject can’t have both: identification in the inevitability of guilt would make the subject indistinguishable from the other; for one, guilt is not inevitable, it is contingent and consequential. Timerman’s dilemma, then, is essentially that of and about alterity. Though the subject finds unification with the other, that other, autrui, does not, will not, unify with the subject. Autrui is absolutely removed, regardless of its constitutive participation in the subject’s being. Alterity is structured by this irresolvable difference and inequality.⁶

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⁶ See Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (New York: Verso, 2004): “[We] are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is” (44).
It is the face of the other, let’s consider, paraphrasing Butler’s reading of Levinas, that manifests for us this burden of the performative. At its heart, performative language puts the speaking subject into an imaginary discursive space where he strives, and fails, at speaking like God. More precisely, in light of our consideration of the proliferation of dehumanizing statements, the pain in our failure at speaking like God is not of a disappointment of our creative abilities, it is the realization of just how destructive we can be. At its heart, the performative echoes that commandment that binds us to our enemies: “You shall not murder.” “The face that at once makes me murderous and prohibits me from the murder,” Butler writes, “is the one that speaks in a voice that is not its own, speaks in a voice that is no human voice” (*Precarious Life* 135). What is inhuman about the performative, then, is not its creative potential – *that* we could utter *Fiat lux* – but its capacity, as we have seen, to destroy through its reiteration of a misnomer the lives of others. Furthermore, the historicity that every performative entails, in this light is not merely the resonance of a word or statement over time: it sounds now like an echo of an original word, sounds now as if performative language is a kind of primary language – the repetition, utterance, and recognition, indeed, of one’s parent – an occasion of speech that is inseparable from a sense of responsibility. The performative speech act echoes deep in its structure an ethical moment of response to something like God, to the voice of the other that at once introduces, temptingly, and forbids the possibility of killing others. And one has no choice but to respond.⁷

It is the case, however, in recent events, in images from the war on terror, that this response has been displaced or renamed, as if we readers, writers, citizens were nothing more than a passive audience to an ongoing drama. Part of this displacement occurs, as Butler argues, in the redescription and metaphoric shift of the face of the other as the far less complicated face

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⁷ See Butler, *Precarious Life*: “It is in this sense that the Other is the condition of discourse. If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address” (138-39).
of evil. So, as with our “detainees” that are more animal than human, the image of Osama bin Laden or Suddam Hussein has been framed such that the viewer is not asked to respond with anything more substantive than recognition of the enemy. There is no responsibility required in this moment of visualization. This production of a way of seeing the world, the production of an epistemological frame, has the consequence of making its viewers like minor sovereigns: without responsibility for how we see the world, we deem in our collective imagination how the world should be. “And if we are to understand ourselves as interpellated anywhere in these images,” Butler writes, “it is precisely as the unrepresented viewer, the one who looks on, the one who is captured by no image at all, but whose charge it is to capture and subdue, if not eviscerate, the image at hand” (143).

The performative language of the news is not so different from the performative language of interrogation, or that practiced by the torturer: both use impure, infelicitous expressions. They act with sovereign distance and indifference. The failure of torture’s performance is that it interrogates without imagining itself as interrogated. Torture imagines itself as the unrepresented viewer – invisible, but with the power of the visible, the power to actually deface.

Within every identification lives an irreducible difference. When this difference is overcome, hidden or otherwise resolved, then identification comes to an end; for one has become the other. The invisibility of torture, the particularities of its abuses, are concealed by tactics of visual aestheticization, part and parcel of recent military campaigns that have returned torture and its discourse to a place in public debate. The invisibility of torture is, in a sense, another

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8 In fact, much of what plays out in the visual field of the 24/7 news-cycle appears to be a competitive project, across the news spectrum, to dissolve altogether any burden the image might create for the viewer.
consequence of the “shock and awe” strategy, only we, the inventors and practitioners of the technique, are its very victims. Torture counts on this strategy, of bedazzlement, as if to ask, “Have you not seen enough?” Torture demonstrates an arrogance – another kind of violence, this treatment of others – that suggests its violence is necessarily beyond representation, beyond spectacle. Spectacles satisfy masses. Torture thinks of itself as more important than that, as if, simultaneous with its work on a particular body, it performs a moral calculus on the visual field of its citizenry. And yet, as Timerman reminds us, it is the public, and not the victim of torture, that wants a description of torture, that wants the story of what happens in the prison. While it is essential that this story be told, it is not at all certain that victims of torture, like Timerman or the prisoners at Abu Ghraib, should be the ones bearing the responsibility for this telling.

The way we compel the witness to speak might have the consequence of forcing her narrative, an imposition of “discursive form,” of a political structure, that will determine “(a) under what discursive form a claim becomes legible as political” and “(b) consolidates politics as a production of discourse, and establishes ‘silence’ as a site of potential resistance to such discursive regimes and their normalizing effects.” The witness’s silence, let’s now consider, is “heard” or read, instrumentalized, as a form of resistance, and possibly as a form of complicity with the perpetrators of the crime. The burden of the witness is now complicated and increased: She must speak, or risk a misperception that would question her status as victim and introduce the possibility of her as perpetrator. Silence, in such a context, signifies complicity and guilt. Inversely, the testimonial statement, then, is not necessarily the singular expression of truth: it too is determined and enframed by the demand of those who want her testimony, those who were not present at the event. Whatever results from the testimonial, the end will have this internal quality: the statement is always already politicized, and the body of the witness, too, the grain of

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10 Butler, Excitable Speech, 137.
her voice (which must be heard) is politicized, inscribed, as it were, into the language game of the court.

Writing with the body, then, is a form of testimony to the unspeakable in any performative moment; it is the address of the solitaire to his community that risks his incarceration. Views of the performative that prioritize its social conventionality miss (or dismiss) this problem, the burden of expectations put on the witness and on the solitaire. Pierre Bourdieu’s account of the performative in *Language and Symbolic Power*, for instance, as Butler summarizes,

> presuming that the conventions that will authorize the performative are already in place, thus failing to account for the Derridean ‘break’ with context that utterances perform. His view fails to consider the crisis in convention that speaking the unspeakable produces, the insurrectionary ‘force’ of censored speech as it emerges into ‘official discourse’ and opens the performative to an unpredictable future. (*Excitable Speech* 142)

Butler’s observation touches a nerve near the heart of this dissertation’s argument: to speak what is unspeakable, to imagine the solitaire’s engagement in “the insurrectionary force” of speech-without-speech as he speaks to and in “official discourse” – as testimony, for instance – exposes how performative speech temporarily destabilizes the convention, our expectation, our certainty in a “proper” response. Performative speech acts hover, resonating with uncertainty, over the domain of normativity. It is impossible, contra Austin, to undo this uncertainty. The performative exposes its participants, and its thirds – the audience – to language on the threshold of immediacy, to the emergence of subjects in language.

Kasim Mehaddi Hilas: “Not one night for all the time I was there passed without me seeing, hearing or feeling what was happening to me.”
Mohanded Juma: “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing.”

On the threshold of speech between the solitaire and his community, in the risk the solitaire must take here in talking back to his community, we might identify a “misappropriation or expropriation” of the performative that reveals how the community’s language-game always already excludes such figures as the solitaire.12 Exposing this fiction of power, the misfiring of the performative that is nevertheless taken up, reveals the performative’s determination to reiterate itself but also the artifice of power that it presents. Its force is in how it resists contextualization, how it breaks context, intransigently breaks from the control of its participants. Its power, then, lies not in the ritualistic form but precisely in how it turns its attention to the artifice of power in this form. The performative, that is, teaches us how to persistently, and paratactically, talk back, to call out, so to speak, oppressive authority or sovereignty. In this light, the performative exposes something of the bureaucracy of power and the fictional motives or justifications for torture.

The torture scene, as we have very roughly described it, but also as it is discussed in Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, and in Timerman’s memoir, and as it is imagined through various popular visual outlets, is portrayed as an extension of a certain order of business. Torture participates in a truth regime, however questionable this truth. Torture acts like a kind of classification scheme; torture wants to assure authority, as is evident in Kafka’s officer’s precociousness of speech, that everything is in its proper place, that everything has its proper name.

Because of torture’s proclivity for bureaucracy, it is all the more difficult to identify how precisely it inflicts harm into and onto particular bodies: there’s so much interfering paper work

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involved, for example. Or the illusion, at least, of paper work. Recall the officer’s frustration with how the new commandant wants to implement certain changes in policy; envisioning the work involved in such changes is enough to motivate the officer’s recalcitrance, his enmity against the new order. As if to say: Why not keep things the way they are – because they work!?

But this illusion gets to the difference I introduced much earlier between the performativ (Butler’s version) and Lyotard’s performativity. Indeed, performatives integrate differences, and offer us various discursive functions. But they also always expose the construction of these functions. And where these constructions dehumanize, torture, murder, “disappear,” we have a responsibility to realize the performative dimensions of our acts.

If iterability, the force of the performative, gives us on the one hand a semblance of continuity with the history of a term or engagement, it also gives us the possibility, and perhaps obligation, to transgress such continuity. The context, the conditions, for performative speech are never right, never quite proper; there is always something amiss. So performatives succeed insofar as they imagine, and then construct for the participants, proper conditions. I think this point is indisputable. The ritual adorns the mundane with the imaginative, the traditional, the fiction of properness. But this idea brings us back to a comment Butler makes about an imperative to think about the emergence of terrorism, for example, in figurative ways, that is, in a way that is primarily discursive, of performative language and not of constative, empirical facts.13 (It is this very capacity of thought that lets us understand what it means for God to say to Moses “You shall not murder.”) Conditions, this is to say – conditions for speech acts, conditions for human and nonhuman life – are always already infiltrated by an idea of the unconditional.14

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13 See Butler, Precarious Life 10-11, on the important differences between thinking about humanity’s “conditions” in figural and not causal ways.
The law that is implied by every performative – and the conditions that allow for performatives, and in some cases, then, the dehumanization of others – is never free of unconditionality, statements and phrases which always apply without question. In performative speech, we find ourselves on the border, facing a frontier, a lawless space which will necessitate the unconditional. And yet the language-game of performatives always already functions in some unconditionality: its magic, ritualization, delivers this aura, this element of the unconditional. It is only when the performers forget this fact and act in and with words with the force of the real, act like they imagine God would, that the ethics that the unconditional carries into performative language is ignored or renounced.
6.

The Hooded Man

Take my blood.
Take my death shroud and
The remnants of my body.
Take photographs of my corpse at the grave, lonely.

– Jumah al Dossari, from “Death Poem”

In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself... It was from that apprehension of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizens came to develop an important and vital consensus against the war.

– Judith Butler, Precarious Life

... [Since] the crime is exposure, the excuse consists in recapitulating the exposure in the guise of concealment.

– Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading

Part I

Introduction

Without stating it explicitly so far, much of the hypothetical foundation and dialectical space of this dissertation has been about a particular site of encounter, and about an exchange in this encounter between one figure, the precarious solitaire, and another, an equally precarious community. Another word, however, for this site might be the border between societal space and, as Thomas Keenan describes it in the first chapter of his Fables of Responsibility, the frontier.

While most of my discussion has focused on subjects, characters, individuals, the indescribable other, and the relationships between these figures, we would be remiss to overlook the significance of the context – this field of linguistic and symbolic exchanges – in which the actions these figures perform occur. The topos of the frontier, and the border zone between the exiled subject and the collective subjectivity of the community, for a discussion of the prisons at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba – sites extending, figuratively and actually, from President Bush’s nostalgic statement, “There’s an old poster out West, I recall, that said ‘Wanted, Dead or Alive’” – offers a compelling framework. This zone, facing the frontier, between society and wilderness, the uncivil, the unseen and unimaginable, exists in part because of transgression, because of the variable ways we test the forces of normativity, of being inside or outside, testing the reach of the law.

We see things at a distance in this zone. Nothing is quite clear, nothing quite familiar. We press forward, approaching alterity, sometimes bringing objects into focus, sometimes exacerbating our blindness. But what’s important to remember is that, however far into the frontier we venture, and however solitary the space might feel, we carry with us a particular way of seeing, a law of visualization that is not ours alone but of the community we’ve left behind. Solitude is always seen from the point of view of community. One thesis of this entire project is that the solitaire’s narrative is always already interpellated by the social, by discourse in general. In this way, the concept of solitude is inseparable from a way of seeing and imagining the other. Solitude is the name of a frame, of a manner of envisioning. But if to see things alone, to see things from the perspective of the outside, without the frameworks and interpellation of social life is the hope of solitude, it is also a desire and fantasy, a fiction and impossibility. One cannot

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see, properly speaking, from the singularity of the other. Thus the repetition of a mistake: seeing what we take to be solitude, as if “being alone,” is in fact a stroke of rationalizing appropriation of (once more) the other. Our pictures of solitude, our language of solitude, commit this mistake of overcoming appropriation.

In this light, being alone can be thought of as one of two conditions. Either it is a future state of being, a possibility (like desire) that is never an actuality; or, as actuality, a condition that is never of this self, never from this position or point of view. Rather, being alone is an instance of seeing the other as incarcerated, enframed, or in other ways contained.\(^3\) Being alone is the structuring, the sorting and ordering, the detainment of the solitaire who resists re-entry into, and the assimilation of, the community. In fact, in normative terms, the solitaire – regardless of its effort to communicate, regardless of its summons, or its cry which anyone may or may not respond to – is always already only seen; only an object for our gaze and scrutiny. We appropriate the solitaire into the truth regime of vision and call what we see “solitude.”

The following analysis attempts, among other things, to break through the limits of this vision, to give, if not a kind of voice to the solitaire, at least pressure against the advantage of sight we claim over the object of our scrutiny.

Remember the Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib? Have we forgotten this iconic figure already? Is it possible, anymore, to forget such things as Abu Ghraib, as computers, more and more, do our remembering for us? Conversely, is it the case that we forget, more and more, \textit{because} of our computerized memories?

\(^3\) See, for example, William Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” a poem about an old woman abandoned by her Somersetshire community: “I looked around, I thought I saw/ A jutting crag, – and off I ran,/ Head-foremost, through the driving rain,/ The shelter of the crag to gain:/ And, as I am a man,/ Instead of a jutting crag, I found/ A woman seated on the ground.” William Wordsworth, “The Thorn,” \textit{Norton Anthology of English Literature}, 8\textsuperscript{th} ed., Vol. D, ed. Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lynch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 257.
The Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib is one of the strange, tragic, belated outcomes of the event that occurred on September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001. Recovering order in the aftermath, the US organized coalitions, collectives of countries all sharing a common ideology and purpose. One consequence of these coalitions and the so-called War on Terror was the overzealous and overcompensatory capturing and isolation of countless individuals who the US identified as causes, or as elements of the cause, of the terrorist attack. These prisoners, then, not POWs in the conventional sense, arrested and isolated in various prisons and quasi-prisons, ostensibly offered the US means of access to the inner world, the other world, the non-state enemy. The US, using its detainees for information and as information, replaced its inner sites of vulnerability, its inner breakings and traumas, with these other, symbolic fragments, these bodies for interrogation and torture; and it incorporated these bodies, its prisoners – detainees, the disappeared – into the enormous project of imperial expansion, militarization, regime change and democratization, subordinating the solitude of its unconscious to a solitude in practice. Isolation became an instrument of the system, of policing. For the US, isolation has become a way to understand its hegemonic relation to that which it will oppress.

Isolation symbolizes US power in relation to those elements in the world that would resist this power. The US seeks, in various ways, to cut these elements off; to sever them from the world – from their homes, families, jobs – to corral and to control them.\textsuperscript{4} This approach to intractable others redefines our understanding of solitude: the solitaire’s connection to us is now not the possibility of connection in the precarious context of risky and responsible approach, in

\textsuperscript{4} See the report by Jennifer Daskal and Joanne Marinier, \textit{Locked Up Alone: Detention Conditions and Mental Health at Guantánamo} (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), 35, 48, and note how frequently the prisoners speak of the pain of being unable to contact their families. Indeed, in the list of recommendations the report concludes with, the authors request that the prisoners be granted time to communicate, electronically or by letter, with their families.
the border between our community and the frontier, but as the unincorporatable fragment that is utilized in and by isolation in ghost sites, in and for indefinite interrogation.

The Hooded Man, recall, is wired. In actuality, these wires are dead, but symbolically the wires connect the figure to an imaginary mainframe, network, indeed, to the virtual universe in its entirety. But this connection – the Hooded Man’s paratactic insertion or absorption into the larger picture, the story of Abu Ghraib, the story of the disastrous Iraq invasion, the story of our wired and wireless lives, etc. – is anything but straightforward.

In fact, the Hooded Man, in its excess of oddities, suggests an opening, a way to imagine solitude and collectivity, a way to imagine the solitaire’s relationship with the community. The Hooded Man, more than a metapicture of our time, symbolizes, very simply, a transformation in how we imagine subjectivity: being alone, being connected. What is troubling, then, about the image of the Hooded Man is the conjunction of his uncanny proximity to us with his elusiveness, with the way he conceals and is concealed, with the way he reveals something so familiar as to be obvious to us.

Looking back, in memory and history, the figure is iconic; looking forward, into the digital and virtual frontiers, the figure is iconic as well, but in a very different way. Without the aura, we might say, of the historical icon, the Hooded Man’s new iconicity captures something of our paratactic engagement with and understanding of the digitized world, our twenty-first century Enlightenment, where the mysteries of information and the dream of instant access to this limitless font have supplanted the mysteries of the sacred. The Hooded Man signifies this usurpation, this transformation, and he haunts us in doing so. The Hooded Man haunts because of a creative reminder (or remainder) about his image, a kind of anomie, energy that gets away

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from us. It is like an image with legs, as they say; an image that goes before us. This digital photograph, this image called the Hooded Man, is not exactly art – in any case, it’s not the purpose of this analysis to make such a claim – but it does motivate an impulse in us to respond as if it were artistic, as if it were somehow extraneous, beautiful or grotesque, sublime. And this energy of the image cannot be captured, fully contained, sorted and ordered, framed in the way other sources, other bodies, at Abu Ghraib are fully contained.

This is another reason why we won’t forget the Hooded Man. Within the Abu Ghraib archive, we’ve captured this figure but also its lacuna, this absence included. We have inadvertently archived what I’ll call the Hooded Man’s concealment, a covering that creates an inaccessible void. The testimony, then, of this image captures a foreboding secret: we did not capture everything. Something got away. A witness to the crime…

The Hooded Man is not art, but it does remind us of how some of the things we build – whether as art, machinery, community, language – have a way of getting away from us, out of our control. Like good novels, those books we teach year after year, and have taught for centuries, the Hooded Man, like a literary figure, Janus, demonstrates in various ways an intractable power. Physis, let’s call it: the energy of nature, the productive world without us.

Looking Back

Have we forgotten the Hooded Man? Even in its ubiquity and infinite reproduction in our virtual visual consciousness, are we still somewhat blinded by its presence? Or, with eyes wide open, what more is there to see in this image, of this image? Rather than offer another interpretation of the figure, I would like to begin prior to that phase of reading with this objective

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observation: in defiance of all conclusions, the Hooded Man remains concealed, and being concealed this figure withholds from us its inaccessible solitude. What are the qualities of this persistent concealment, this solitude we can only imagine?

Firsthand accounts of the scene draw attention to the limits of language in visual descriptions of violence and horror. As Mr. Juma, one of the victims of abuse by the 372nd Military Police Company, testifies, “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing.”

Complicating this assertion, Mr. Hilas, another prisoner says,

Now I am talking about what I saw… I saw American soldiers hitting them… and they were taking pictures… The female soldier was taking pictures… Not one night for all the time I was there passed without me seeing, hearing or feeling what was happening to me… I swear on Allah almighty on the truth of what I said. Allah is my witness. (242)

An anonymous viewer recounts: “One of them was wearing glasses. I couldn’t read his name because he put tape over his name… [T]hey would hold the string from the bag and they made me bark like a dog… I saw inside the facility a lot of punishment just like what they did to me… And they were taking pictures of me during all these instances” (245). The challenge to vision implied in these statements is sometimes mitigated by reference to familiar scenarios. There’s a sense, occasionally, that the perpetrators attempt to reach out or reach back toward norms, conventional life. As with Mr. Alsharoni, who describes the removed position of his viewers as if they were “watching a live movie of three young guys being put up … And everyone was taking pictures of this whole thing with cameras” (234). Mr. al-Yasseri goes farther: “They started to take photographs as if it was a porn movie. And they treated us like animals not humans… They started to take pictures from the front and from the back” (236). One complexity about these accounts, a complexity delineating limitations on language and on ways of seeing, lies in the fact that the violence was recorded from multiple positions, and then disseminated along countless

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digitized lines. The concealment, then, if we’re to critically open up this idea, is paradoxical in its redundant efforts at transparency. There is no question, on the one hand, about what happened inside Abu Ghraib. And yet, as Mr. Juma says, there are things here “no one would see, they are amazing.” Is he talking about ghosts? Angels? Demons?

In the eyes of authority, the concealment takes a different, although no less complicated, form. On exiting a private screening of the images, U.S. Senator Richard J. Durbin says, “It felt like you were descending into one of the rings of hell.”8 Mark Danner, as well, refers to a common underworld in his query of the events: “What is one to make of this Dantesque nightmare journey?” (Torture and Truth 14). If previously, on the inside, the challenge to vision lived in the immediate strangeness of atrocity, in the absurd conjunction of torture and photography, on the outside the challenge falls to competing tropes of horror. Still, these challenges to sight and language do not entirely respond to the concealment of the Hooded Man. The lacuna between point of view and object of horror – “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing” – suggests an irresolvable point of resistance for representative language. This force is evident in the reinscription of the horrible object into the security of metaphor: Hell, Dante’s Nightmare. Such descriptions repeat – refining, conserving, professionalizing – an action taken by the amateur photographer. The metaphoric naming of the image does little in terms of explication, but a lot in terms of further dissemination. Moreover, calling the work “Dante’s Nightmare” we command, in concealing our awkwardness in the face of the image, the photo to take a certain pose.

Images such as those that emerged from Abu Ghraib stir in viewers various reactions. Often these are angry, somewhat violent. There is even violence, and irresponsibility, in re-

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8 Quoted in Alfred W. McCoy, A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 146.
naming the photos “Dante’s nightmare.” But this challenge of visualization – seeing abject bodies, for instance – is nothing new. We have a history of such problems. And the anger, let’s say, that such images motivate is less about the content of the image itself than it is about our frustrated capacity to look, to understand. Plato might have been the first writer to address this conflict.

Outside of the city walls, or in the closed room of a private screening, we see such things, a heap of bodies, corpses.

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!”

No one wants to see such things. We, like Leontius, are disgusted by the sight, and turn away.

Still, the unsightly is, in its strange way, attractive, sightly in its transgression. We have, as Plato writes, an appetite for such things. Something in our eyes or in our mind craves such sights.

We’re torn, divided inside, one voice (of conscience) making the argument for disgust, for the force that makes us human and not animal, and the other voice making the argument for curiosity, for wonder, for the excitement of being outside of the city, of taking this dangerous trip into the outskirts, abroad. You won’t see these things back home, so have your fill while you can. And so we look, again and again, at things we recognize as objects beyond recognition, beyond sight, unsightly, horrifying, horrible and awful. We look again, as if, this time, we might learn a lesson, we might, in fact, recognize these bodies for what they are, and return them, in our mind or soul, to their proper and reasonable place. But this idea, too, is an apotropaic fiction we reassure ourselves with; because we never learn from looking at what we know we should not

look at, what we know should not even make an appearance. This heap of bodies: the dissonance of the sight lies in its abnormality, the unnaturalness of the scene – that people ought not act in this way, pile themselves or let themselves be piled like wood, like earth – that is, as well, an excess of the natural, all of this flesh pressed together, indiscriminately, like meat, not bodies, like a resource, something to be measured, carved into proportions and distributed.

We see in the heap of bodies an act of dehumanization functioning in several ways. The first, rather obvious way, is in the treatment of these bodies that once were individual men. Who could *strip* these men in this way? Disintegrate what was whole and now tossed together in a pile? The second manner of dehumanization that we sense in this heap occurs closer to us, closer to the eye or mind, as with Leontius; we find ourselves split between a voice of conscience, that asks us to look away, and a stronger or more persuasive voice that asks for access, for the sight. *He pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses...* This split in the subject’s self-scrutiny is a form of dehumanization. The integrity of Leontius’s body and mind is under threat. That is, the split is testament to a certain construct within the subject’s point of view; and the sight shocks him, so to speak, into an awareness of the construct of normal life, of a normal point of view. *Look, don’t look!* The sight of the bodies alienates us, from the scene and from each other. It is impossible to recognize a scene like this, these bodies piled in a heap. As with the hypothesis of excessive naturalness about the sight – *meat, not flesh* – the horrifying proximity of these naked, supine bodies, stacked like dead fish, makes the viewer feel rather alone. He’s haunted by the thought that if what these heaped bodies signify is a kind of community, a new way of thinking of human relationships, then what do we, individual and independent viewers (voyeurs) have? Or, what have we lost? What does a sight like this steal from us?
Susan Sontag notes in her essay “In Plato’s Cave” that one reason why people take cameras on safari, and not guns, as they once did, is because going on safari is no longer dangerous. When nature was out of our control, we took guns for protection. Now that nature is tamed, we take cameras, and the pictures that result from these excursions, Sontag remarks, capture, along with tamed nature, scenes of our nostalgia for the past, for what we’ve lost. We want the danger, perhaps, but only at a safe distance – only as an image, not as an actuality. How did Christ put it, as Thomas pushed a finger into his wound? *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*

We go to sporting events (or watch sports on TV) for a similar reason, a similar drive. Without the danger of real conflict in our lives, we have our teams play-act conflict for our viewing pleasures. The performance and the image bring what is distant – in actuality or in memory – up close, but with the safety of the enervated copy, the image or performance. And here various disjunctions fluently persist: between knowing that what we see is not real, knowing that we have lost the real thing (that we’ve mastered nature), and knowing that we watch the present game because of nostalgia for what we’ve lost, but also knowing that we don’t actually want again what we’ve lost because it would mean giving up our present comfort, our viewing pleasures. Recalling a discussion from Chapter One, Augustine, in *Confessions* (Book 6, Chapter 8), comments on similar disjunctions, breaks in the viewing consciousness.

One day Alypius, a student in Rome, is asked by his friends to come attend a gladiatorial show. Alypius has no interest in such things. He wants to study. But his friends cajole him and he finally agrees. “You may drag me there bodily,” Alypius says,

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but do you imagine that you can make me watch the show and give my mind to it? I shall be there, but it will be just as if I were not present, and I shall prove myself stronger than you or the games.\textsuperscript{11}

At first, Alypius closes his eyes. The arena, Augustine writes, was “seething with the lust for cruelty” (122). But Alypius will persevere, he’ll lock his mind behind his shielded senses and save himself. Unfortunately, the young man fails to cover his ears. Something happens between the gladiators – something we can only imagine; Augustine doesn’t describe this crucial event – and the crowd is uproarious, and Alypius, his curiosity overwhelming his determination to remain blind and invisible, opens his eyes to look. “[H]is soul,” Augustine writes, “was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator, whom he was so anxious to see, had received in his body” (ibid.). So the conflict spreads: not only are the gladiators fighting among each other, within the ring, Alypius now participates, vicariously but nonetheless actively, in the fight. With this stroke, the young man is disembodied; he has become part of, one of, the mass, the collective in its role-playing fantasy of living dangerously, of living not precisely in the city of Rome but in the other world offered by this theater. Alypius, then, fell, “and fell more pitifully than the man whose fall had drawn that roar of excitement from the crowd” (ibid.). The young man watches passionately, in a rapture:

He reveled in the wickedness of the fighting and was drunk with the fascination of bloodshed. He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined, a fit companion for the friends who had brought him. (Ibid.)

Alypius is transformed. Removed from himself, in ecstasy, but at once “one of the crowd,” fitting in. Here Augustine gives us a kind of portrait, let’s imagine, of an entropic state: the disintegration of the autonomous and individual subject into a generalized energy, esprit de corps, the animalistic roar of the crowd at any sporting event. Auerbach, in his analysis of this passage in \textit{Mimesis}, provides a fascinating study of Augustine’s uses of parataxis to reflect

“immediate emotion” (69), the immediacy of “human life,” as the tone “has something urgently impulsive, something human and dramatic” (70). We’ve considered this dimension of parataxis before. What I would like to draw attention to, here, is the parataxis about Alypius’s desire and determination to “be there,” with his friends, at the games, but “as if I were not present” (Augustine 122).

On the one hand, Alypius expresses a common ideal, a determination to be among others, friends, while also being, as it were, in one’s own world, chaste, removed, cerebral. This behavior is a kind of solitary confinement or withdrawal, a kind of solitude we usually find publicly acceptable. Alypius is a unit in this party without connection or dependency on others; he, like all diligent students and ascetics, strictly obeys his conscience. What’s brilliant, then, about the scene, is Alypius’s sudden turn: from being so securely interior, in a few sentences the young man, fallen, is one of the crowd – and in an entirely different kind of solitude. In fitting in, Alypius gives up his voice. The independence of saying “I shall be there, but it will be just as if I were not present” is gone, forgotten in the moment he becomes one of the crowd. Indeed, the solitude he might have chosen – It will be just as if I’m not present – finds its corollary, its evil twin, in the solitude of this crowd, where, again, he’s present but not present.

Scenes of violence have this power over the subject. The middle ground of the image, where interpretation and vacillation between semes might occur, is here reduced to almost nothing: one must take a position. Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight! The subject is either within or without. This is the visual logic the Bush administration exploited following the global response to 9/11. And this is the logic at work in many of the responses to the images of Abu Ghraib. The confrontational tone of the images

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compels us to take a position, to stand, as it were, on this side of the line. As a result, we don’t respond to the alterity of the image as much as we reframe, and contain, this alterity further.

Previously, the Hooded Man and Staff Sergeant Ivan (Chip) Frederick had no idea what they were up to: Frederick was playing around, and the Hooded Man was exhausted, frightened and manipulated, following orders like a dog. Frederick had something uncertain in mind. “Stand like this,” he might have said, remembering something from a movie or TV show.

Our reinscription, then, describing the imagery in canonical terms, performs a similar act of posture-direction with the photo. Only now the command comes from distanced, studied authority, and it is not for fun, but motivated instead by the work of truth, the reach for final understanding. In this way the repetition and reordering of the performance – “Stand like this, photo” – is particularly sharp, with an unfortunate irony, because it is done in full awareness of the consequences of such commands. As Jean Baudrillard observes in “The Violence Done to the Image,” “There is a great affectation in giving meaning to the photographic image. It is making objects strike a pose. And things themselves begin to strike a pose in the light of meaning as soon as they feel the gaze of a subject upon them” (101). But our treatment of such images cannot avoid these various risks, pitfalls: not only will we misinterpret what needs to be properly explained, we risk applying the force of interpretation in general onto an object that ought to speak for itself, in its own words.

13 The Hooded Man: “And he took the hood off and he was describing some poses he wanted me to do, and I was tired and I fell down… I was so tired and I dropped it…” (Danner 230).
14 The prison at Abu Ghraib is compared by Sergeant Javal Davis to a set from one of the Mad Max movies (Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, “Exposure: Behind the Camera at Abu Ghraib,” New Yorker 84.6 (2008), 45).
Here is a strange instance where the anonymity of the Hooded Man becomes a significant factor in our reading of the figure. Our interpretation, our temptation to speak for this figure, applies a name to that which is essentially nameless; but this anonymity is precisely what motivates the work of our responsibility. The other is anonymous; and its summons or cry treats us, as well, as anonymous figures. Responsibility is difficult because of this rule of anonymity, that a cry for help does not ask you or me for help; it asks you and me as anyone for help, and if we choose to act we act in this condition of anonymity, one’s name replaced by being anyone.16

Speaking of Levinas, and of the difference and distance between recognizability and apprehension, Judith Butler remarks that the “face” “works on us precisely through or as its shroud, in and through the means by which it is subsequently obscured.”17 And yet, in the face of the Hooded Man, it is difficult to rationalize or reconcile another act of concealment, the other hooding that the proposal of anonymity suggests. Perhaps because of this difficulty – of seeing the Hooded Man as a person, as a man, a human abused and humiliated by US soldiers, but also seeing something modest and proper in the figure’s concealment – we respond not by addressing the singularity of the person depicted here, not by returning to him his proper name, but by disseminating the image for all to see, in a way breaking the burden of naming and anonymity. The dissemination of the image – a dissemination that was not precisely the conscious decision of its creator; the Hooded Man, in its way, was designed for dissemination – then distributes and exchanges the strange anonymity of the figure with the anonymities of its viewers.

Because of this exchange – treating the figure as merely an image – the reproduction of the Hooded Man in images and in metaphor perpetuates and, in some cases, intensifies the concealment we would like to open and expose. For this reason, technologies of reproduction

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and distribution cannot be removed from the mystery of this figure. The ubiquity of camera work by the Military Police at Abu Ghraib raises questions for the visualization of tortured bodies, but not for the obvious reason that this technology suggests an uncontainable permissibility to the representation of violence. The problem is not precisely that the technology (the digital camera and its productions, more precisely) anaesthetizes us to violence; we’re not concerned with these particular digital photographs per se, the photographs as exemplars of the older problem of visualizing abject bodies. Rather, as a demonstration of technology more broadly, Abu Ghraib invites, in the gap between what is seen and unseen, a challenge for creative and speculative perception. To my initial query, then – what more is there to see in the Abu Ghraib Hooded Man? – I offer these corollaries: What design, what plan, what frame of visualization lies beyond – before and outside – the representation? What technology produces something like the Hooded Man? Insofar as a photograph poses questions of identity – who is depicted, who is the depicter or author of the sight? – how does this image, in its enframement, challenge certain ontological assumptions, assumptions pertaining to how we perceive or apprehend what lives? In this view, the problem I propose investigating lies not so much in the action or event of physical abuse, not in a specific tortured body or body of empirical evidence. Rather, the concealment of the Hooded Man is primarily a question of exposure, of seeing the solitary figure

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19 Mark Danner interprets the explicit and demonstrative use of cameras as an act that does more than merely record evidence: “The camera had the potential of exposing his humiliation to family and friends, and thus served as a ‘shame multiplier’… his shame would be unending” (“The Logic of Torture,” Torture and Truth, 19).
20 What is visualization’s agenda? How is visualization more concerned with identifying and organizing objects in the world than with actually en-visioning or revealing?
21 My use of enframing has a history. First, in an earlier version of this essay, my analysis incorporated a reading of Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Question Concerning Technology.” Here I have removed most of my work on that essay, keeping only some elements of the earlier version where I think they’re pertinent. Second, while enframing, from Heidegger’s “Gestell,” and what I sometimes use as “Gestelling,” does not exactly align with our idea of “framing” a scene or photograph – Heidegger’s “Gestell” has nothing to do with a field of sight – in the following discussion of Judith Butler’s use of “framing” we do cross over, although not entirely, into fields of vision, ways of seeing. For now, let’s think of the frame as designating both the structure determining what is perceptible in a visual field but also what is, in Butler’s language, recognizable, of what can be known. See Butler, Frames of War, 1.
at a distance, of the imminent revelation of a word. In Abu Ghraib’s theater of sadistic porn, why is the Hooded Man covered? What does he conceal – or, what, of the dramaturge behind the seen, is this figure asked to conceal? Where so much at Abu Ghraib is exposed, why is the Hooded Man covered?

There is a dangerous energy beneath the Hooded Man’s veil, an energy that is at once figural and magical – drawing the viewer in with the slight, uncanny tilt of its head, with the archaically torn hem of its sackcloth, with the hopelessness in its limp hands – and actual, wired to the world through its fingers and genitals, through the instantiation (which is, again, somewhat magical) of the image itself. The Hooded Man is covered, in this sense, to contain a signifier, a face, on the verge of explosion. Here is a marvelous example of Benjamin’s dialectical image: the Hooded man is the image “that is read... in the now of its recognizability,” which “bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded”; in the Hooded Man as dialectical image, “thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions.”

In this figural sense, the Hooded Man’s now of recognizability occurs in the strange conjunction of his position in Abu Ghraib – in the context of torture, of the disastrous US-Iraq war – of this instant with an evocation of Christian iconography. It is as if the Hooded Man is not entirely present, but ephemeral, evanescent: it asks to be looked at closer. Or, as W.J.T. Mitchell writes, the Hooded Man has two bodies, one actual and one virtual (Cloning 143). Unlike the other images from Abu Ghraib, there is something unusually calm, portraitive, symmetrical and organized about the Hooded Man. It is not, as is said, confrontational, but this image does, undeniably, confront us. It is one of many images that, in confrontational ways,

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23 Mitchell, Cloning Terror, 111-114, 143.
upset public opinion about the US invasion of Iraq. And yet, the image possesses this tranquility: it resembles – as Mitchell has argued and analyzed in several places, and as one of my own students quickly observed – an impression of Christ we have in our iconographic memory, an impression I’ll explore in detail below. But the Hooded Man also faces us in a curious way. It is inactive, immobile, poised, as it were, to speak, to address.\(^\text{24}\) What would the Hooded Man say, if it could speak? What do we expect, in this confrontation, to hear? What’s more, in this image, in our way of seeing it, and in this strange confrontation, there is the establishment of certain lines, boundaries, *fronts*: that of the Hooded Man – his face, his position before us – and that behind which we stand. This meeting, then, an image of imminent exchange, delineates a boundary and also what I would like to think of as a frontier – the space from which the Hooded Man comes to us. This background, then, a way of framing our view of the image, offers us, as Thomas Keenan writes, the possibility of responsible, political thought and language.\(^\text{25}\) The frontier, that is, even with its ideological luggage – *our* dreams of expansion, of open space, of freedom and eden and solitude, etc. – is the foundation for the language of the solitaire, of the other who summons and comes to us.

*The Man of Sorrows*

The Hooded Man bears an uncanny resemblance to the Christian iconographic themes of the Man of Sorrows and the Lamentation.\(^\text{26}\) Like the Hooded Man, the figure of the crucified Christ represents a body caught and tortured by imperial forces, a body put on display for public humiliation, and also a body caught in a liminal space, between cultures and, in a theological

\(^{24}\) See Mitchell, *Cloning Terror* 144, 147, on a fascinating discussion of Meyer Schapiro’s distinction between “themes of state” and “themes of action” in painting. The static presence of the Hooded Man, what I and Mitchell see as a scene of address, would fall into Schapiro’s theme of state.


\(^{26}\) Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, 149.
sense, between worlds. Of two bodies, of two states; present and not-present. (Or, as Roland Barthes remarks about the paradox of photographs, the image of Christ always demonstrates “an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then.”27) Moreover – to extend Mitchell’s analysis – the Hooded Man’s resemblances to this icon and to a history of portrayals goes farther than formal concordances: as I’ve already suggested, we recognize the resemblance to the Man of Sorrows in the fact that the Hooded Man, like Christ, is a victim of imperial oppression. The Hooded Man is also arrested, interrogated, tortured, and publicly humiliated. The resemblance in this case is inseparable from a memory of narrative; and the image, here, is the spark and entry to this memory, to this narrative.28

There is more than a resemblance of form at work here. There is an echo, through the image, of certain narratives and narrative structures. The photograph evokes for us more than a shadow of Christian iconography; the Hooded Man evokes several stories about solitude, about journeys beyond the boundary of community, about returns to the community and the struggle for understanding that then ensues.29

28 Sontag, in “In Plato’s Cave,” argues that photographs cannot narrate and thus cannot lead to understanding. Understanding comes through studying sequences, causality and consequences; photographs, she writes, present reality as “atomic, manageable, and opaque... a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity” (23). I think she’s right, to some extent. Judith Butler takes issue with the idea that photographs lack narrative potential. She makes the point that photos function in, and use, a different temporality than lived experience; a photographic archive or album can give the viewer a sense of an event’s ongoing continuity (*Frames* 83-86). I would add to this argument for photographic narratability that the interpretation and framing of the original scene carries with it an implicit narrative – “Here I am at the Grand Canyon...” “These are my lovely cats...” “He looked like Jesus Christ...” — that our interpretation of the image must engage with, respond to, or repeat.
29 On such solitary figures, excursions and returns, see especially the gospel of John, chapters 20 and 21. Additionally, The Man of Sorrows, while a generic title for some portrayals of Christ’s Passion, is not actually Christ himself. This figure, a prefiguration of Christ, according to some interpretations, comes from Isaiah 53. He is a prophet who leaves and returns to this community: “Who has given credence to what we have heard?” asks Isaiah. The prophet has “no form or charm to attract us/ no beauty to win our hearts;

he was despised, the lowest of men,
a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering,
one from whom, as it were,
we averted our gaze,
In our desire to bring the solitaire back to this threshold of community, we might ask of the Hooded Man, as Peter asks Christ at the end of the gospel of John, about the nameless apostle who follows the others at a distance, What about him? Like the various distances traveled in John’s account – between the tomb on the outskirts of the city and the room in the city proper, or between the boat and shore – our gaze on the Hooded Man makes various movements and hypotheses, traveling, so to speak, from this side of normativity, into the zone of engagement, and perhaps into the frontier of the other. The testimonies offered by Mary and the nameless disciple, furthermore, are indebted to this distance; they compel some of the other disciples to make a similar journey out to the tomb. As with Keenan’s reading of the frontier and its significance for political language – the frontier “reopens the question of politics as that of responsibility itself, the space and time of differences and thus of guards and rights, the right to question and to pass” (Fables 11) – we find, in the end of the gospel of John, various ways in which distances traveled or ways of seeing across space complicate testimony, truth and understanding, and belief. The distant, exterior place, the empty tomb, is an essential factor in the narratives that unwind in the safety and security of a room in the city.30

In this way, we find once more how testimony must always account for disintegration, the fracturing of a unity – an event, the law, the continuity of experience. Testimony’s parataxis, then, necessarily covers ground, speaking of the various distances between the witness and despised, for whom we had no regard. (Isaiah 53.2-3, The New Jerusalem Bible (1990) 927)

While I do not have the time or space to incorporate a fuller analysis of Isaiah into this essay, I will note here that, as we read the Hooded Man as an evocation of Christian iconography, the Renaissance painters who thought of Christ as the Man of Sorrows also envisioned their figure as exceeding its imagery, as an intertextual icon.

Furthermore, an extended study of this scene and its importance to our understanding of testimony would need to address the distances, as well, between accounts. The story/stories of the tomb is paratactic in its repeated, multifarious presentation in the gospels. The gaps, the lack of detail, that occur in one account are filled in another account – an account which introduces new gaps, and new absences of detail. No account is exactly like another. Taken together, like all testimony, they indicate an ideal story, an account of the event that can never be recovered, never told. This sense of an impossible recovery also plays into the impossibilities and magic that occur in the stories themselves.
others, between the witness and the event, but never providing the material or details or logic that
could connect these various parts and reveal continuity in the scene. Rather, testimony, like that
found in the gospels, as a discourse of seeing, never closes these spaces, these spatial and
temporal distances between objects, never recovers the unity the event in question has ostensibly
destroyed.

In another aspect of his uncanniness, then, the Hooded Man stands for a kind of witness.
Present, but covered, concealed; seeing us, perhaps, but only partially, through his hood. The
hood, as well, is a paratactic device – it separates and isolates a part without dismantling the
whole. The whole is seen, is evident, but with a part marked off: and the opacity of this marking
expresses the absent conjunction of parataxis. The hood fragments the subject, his voice; it
captures and subordinates the subject (his head, the site of the face, expression, rationality) to the
captor and to the surroundings. At the same time, the hood also connotes an equal and opposing
force: that of the captor himself, the perpetrator of the crime, or the executioner of the law.
(Blind, faceless justice, often acting, as Plato describes – and as we saw in Kafka’s “In the Penal
Colony” – in the gray zone between society and the frontier, outside the city walls, where
Leontius “saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet.”) This iconographic irony – that the
hood’s connotations are opposed in our imagination – adds to the opacity of this figure, the
trouble of undoing this concealment.

Furthermore, in the context of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the hood echoes in
the viewer’s imagination contemporaneous public displays of violence: beheadings, the
mutilations of corpses.31 The Hooded Man not only refers, then, to older, more removed
narratives, but to the present, emerging narrative, the US-Iraq invasion of which he is a product.
This double attachment – to a present depot of images and to the imagination of a limitless past –

secure and highlight, emphasize, the figure in our gaze. At once here and elsewhere, paradoxical, like a photograph we cannot part with, for its sentimental value, for its mysterious hold on our memories. And if such a unique and odd space-time category can be attributed to any photograph – the here-now/there-then paradox Barthes describes – the image of the Hooded Man, whose digitality I’ll discuss below, seems to redouble the photographic paradox: not only the here-now/there-then, as a photograph, but a here-now/there-then as image, as evocation of an iconographic history and also a present historical and ethical event.

So the Hooded Man, as we approach its frightening uncanniness, its evocation of images we’ve already seen and stories we’re already familiar with, appears to move away from us, to get away from us, out of control. The figure is a kind of witness, and simultaneously a victim, the object of our witnessing; the figure, as the Man of Sorrows, evokes a sign of pity, grief and mourning, while at the same time evoking a sign of terror, as Klansman or executioner. The Hooded Man simply doesn’t fit: its difference goes beyond the fact that it shares very little with the other images from Abu Ghraib. The images revealing grotesque abuses of prisoners are awful for many reasons but perhaps one of the less obvious of these is that the images don’t surprise us. Some soldiers, and some frat boys, do these sorts of things; the acts depicted here are somehow familiar, somehow, if taboo, already present in our visual consciousness. Which is to say, if there’s a quality of sameness or familiarity to the other Abu Ghraib images, then this normativity makes the alterity of the Hooded Man all the more unreadable.

Indeed, the Hooded Man’s image is fascinating because of, first, how it both indicates sameness (its uncanny likeness to too many things in our visual consciousness) and difference (it

32 In fact, the acts depicted in these images are not uncommon in the purlieu of Bush’s War on Terror. See Andy Worthington, The Guantánamo Files, 176. See Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches, eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 136-137, on the normalization of violence in American culture.
is unlike anything else at Abu Ghraib), and also, second, that it – the Hooded Man and the image – are not singular objects or artifacts. The Hooded Man is an instance of singular-plurality: at once this image, this figure, but at the same time the infinitude of the Hooded Man’s digital dissemination. Because of this singular-plurality, what is perhaps most terrifying about the image is its ephemeral presence, being here and elsewhere, everywhere at once. As mentioned earlier, we have archived the Hooded Man and Abu Ghraib, but with the lacuna between its presence and absence, and dissemination, included. Inadvertently, we archived the Hooded Man’s concealment, its testimony of this foreboding secret: we did not capture everything. The witness to our crime got away. In this light, we might locate the other meaning of Derrida’s comment in an endnote in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*:

> The only testimonies that escape archivization are those of the victims, not of the dead or of the cadavers (there were so few) but of the missing. By definition, the missing resist the work of mourning, like the future, just like the most recalcitrant of ghosts. The missing of the archive, the ghost, the phantom – that’s the future…

The problem is not that our archive is incomplete. The solution is not to find the missing testimony of the Hooded Man. The ominous note, here, is that the missing figure, the missing testimony, returns to us in the future; this is the dimension of terror that the future holds over us. Furthermore, that we know the Hooded Man is out there, disseminated along uncountable digital lines, and that we see the figure while realizing that we don’t entirely see the Hooded Man (the Hooded Men, more precisely), indicates to us, whether we acknowledge the fact or not, veiling ourselves from the gaze of the other, the capacity for terror possessed by this image. Like some kind of clone, the Hooded Man, this metapicture – or picture of picture production – terrorizes because of is ubiquity, but also, through this automated duplication and dissemination, a sense of self-regeneration and homeostasis, marvelous symmetry, a sense of its indifference to our gaze,

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sympathy, drive for understanding, and indifference, as well, to itself, to all of the acephalic Hooded Men out there.  

Looking Forward

There is a dangerous energy beneath the Hooded Man’s veil, a connectivity with the world, with us, via its wired fingers and genitals, via the instantiation of the image itself. The Hooded Man’s tenuous connection to us is mechanical, not simply interpellative, like the modifications which make a human a cyborg. Captured and secured, solitary, the Hooded Man is full of potential, waiting to be activated and deployed.

In this contact zone between the Hooded Man and the world, this edge of the frontier, the nature of his concealment begins to reveal itself. On the one hand, our apprehension of the Hooded Man and his brothers tingles in a growing awareness, in shock and awe, of the potential extent of new technologies. These are not exclusively electronic technologies. The digital-imaging of the world, in which everyone participates as a site of reproduction, confronts us in this image with the power and totality of hegemony, of an e- (electronic) or i- (information, informatics, or id) hegemony. What is dazzling about this confrontation is how it suggests, with redoubled force in the revelation of abuses at Abu Ghraib, the termination of humanity. Technological hegemony, like Frankenstein’s creature, is humanity’s other. Unlike the creature, however, this technology is self-regenerating, ostensibly public and democratic (insofar as technological supremacy parallels the expansion of the first, western, or free-market worlds),

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34 Mitchell, Cloning Terror, 137.
35 Sabrina Harman, MP, photographer: “I knew he wouldn’t be electrocuted… So it really didn’t bother me. I mean, it was just words. There was really no action in it” (qtd. in Gourevitch, “Exposure,” 55). Harman also claimed that her motivation for taking photographs in Abu Ghraib was twofold: in one case, a prisoner (not the Hooded Man) “looked like Jesus Christ”; but more generally she wanted photographs “to prove that the US is not what they think” (qtd. in Errol Morris’s documentary Standard Operating Procedure (2008)). I leave the question about whom Harman refers to, in presenting her proof, open; it is an interesting ambiguity that I don’t have the time or space to explore here.
working automatically and endlessly in the processing, duplication, and dissemination of biopolitical statistics. Consequently, in this view, from our perspective, there is nothing ultimately mysterious about the Hooded Man, no longer an absence behind a signifier, since technological hegemony describes not the conquest or colonialism of things and places in the world, but a global metastasis of information that is indifferent to the world, the resource of energy. That is, in this view, the Hooded Man is merely an image, one of billions, with little more significance than the encoded information it conveys.

A couple of things occur in this transformation, in our reading of the Hooded Man in its contemporaneity and futurity. Both concern the differences between digital and analogue records or images.

First, looking back (once again) – this tethering to the past that the Hooded Man imposes is more secure than we at first realized; one begins to think there’s more to the Hooded Man’s uncanniness than the Hooded Man alone provides, more to its concealment than it alone signifies – looking back, digital technology asks us to reconsider the frontier in light of new forms of solitude. Our new technologies make us solitary in new and interesting ways. In fact, solitude might simply be an epiphenomenon of an evolving technological culture. Solitude is not out there, but here, as a manner of living – an aspect of a particular habitus – that is a consequence of how we have uncritically taken up and incorporated into daily life certain technologies. Being alone will never be the same.

Thus the stories that we now, still, generate of being alone – cliché tales of, usually, men in the wilderness, enduring and suffering the hardships of a natural life – cannot be separated from the dynamic and transforming techno-life that most subjects in the post-industrial society participate in. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that many of the “terrorists” the US
government pursues _also happen_ to live a kind of “natural” life, in the wilds of south central Asia, for instance. The substratum of our veneration of men who go into the wild are the men (“terrorists”) who congregate in _that other wild_, the places on the earth that our industries and democracies are still unable to access and colonize. As solitude has often evoked a relation between one excluded figure and a past/present community, it also connotes – in light of this analysis – exploration, technological innovations that, first, make a journey away from the community possible, but also, second, compel an individual to _abandon_ his community. “I went to the woods,” Thoreau writes, “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life...” Citing this passage, Sherry Turkle asks, “of our life with technology,” “Do we live deliberately? Do we turn away from life that is not life?” But where Turkle takes Thoreau at his word, and alludes to the ideal solitude _apart_ from society, I think the Hooded Man is one indication of how solitude, now, has become an extension of the technologies constitutive of community: the technology opens curiosity, possibilities for research, for knowledge; _and simultaneously_ motivates the purist or nostalgic, the cautious and critical, element in the community to leave and seek a different, less “contemporary” world.

Which is to say, as we develop and deploy our technologies, we push the boundary and idea of an ideal frontier and of an ideal solitude further off, but this pushing also at once opens a new zone of engagement, a new conception, and new appropriation, of the frontier and of solitude inside of which we test the limits of the law. It is here where we find figures like the

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Hooded Man. Here we practice a kind of solitude and solitary confinement – the instrumentalization of isolation – in the deployment of such things as robots and drones.

But before taking this step forward, to enter the realm of the posthuman, one final glance back.

Of the technical distinctions between these two images, the digital and the analogue, I will simply point out that an analogue record refers back to an initial word-like thing: according to the word is a simple definition of analogue. With this dependence on the word, or speech, whether this is the word of God or not, analogic presentation entails the physical imprinting (whether for sound or image) of infinitely reducible gradations of meaning. A digital record, on the other hand, refers back to an initial touching and measuring: digitality concerns the sorting of discrete parts. In this kind of record, meaning is arbitrarily divided into discrete, measurable and countable, units, and then, in reproduction, re-sorted to the original structure. For this reason, the digital reproduction is, first, an approximation of the original, and, second, determined by a degree of technical complexity (the number of “bits,” the number of pixels). Digitality operates in measuring and sorting discrete parts; analogicality operates by recovering an initial word.37

While both operations entail degrees of loss – lost information, lost qualitative mimicry – the loss concealed in an analogue photograph is not the same kind of loss concealed by a digital image. In the former case, loss refers to the temporal decay of material; in the latter case, loss refers to the technical decision of the quantifiable accuracy of the reproduction.

The sudden shift from the analogue to digital episteme has further ramifications. My allusion to the word of God is not as fantastic a comparison as it sounds. There is something of

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37 See Baudrillard: “Digital, numerical production erases the image as analogon. It erases the real as something that can be imagined” (“The Violence Done to the Image” 96); and Douglas Davis: “Analog signals may be compared to a wave breaking on a beach, breaking over and over but never precisely in the same form. This is why copying an audio signal or video signal in the past always involved a loss in clarity” (“The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995),” Leonardo 28:5 (1995), 382).
the sacred/secular divide in this technological shift. In fact, the Hooded Man’s appearance before us is a consequence of the forces at work in the resistances in and about this shift. Giovanna Borradori, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, offers this marvelous thesis: the rules and practices that constitute a religious life are fundamentally opposed to the rules and practices that constitute a digital life. “All the constitutive components of religion,” she writes, “the respect for the sacredness of the harvest, a sense of obligation to God, and the promise of absolute truthfulness – speak to religion’s profound wariness of displacement, fragmentation, and disembodiment, which are instead the conditions of existence of digital technology” (157). So, while one community envisions itself and its relation to other communities in the world in terms of new technologies, technologies which are built upon principles of informatics, there will also be a community that envisions itself and its relation to the world, etc., in religious terms, through practices of “inscription and embodiment.”

Religion, writes Derrida, which is inextricably linked to the body and to linguistic inscription, feels dominated, suffocated, expropriated by the global information system. This feeling of expropriation and self-estrangement explain the primitive modality of the new wars fought in its name. (Borradori 157)

As a symbolic character of and for the “War on Terror,” the Hooded Man signifies this “primitive modality” of the new. As Mitchell writes, “The contemporaneity of this image and its circulation in new media as a digital file is combined with something deeply archaic and uncannily familiar” (*Cloning* 111). Another facet, then, of its uncanniness is the Hooded Man’s evocation, as previously mentioned, of Christ’s capture and torture by an imperial force: but in this historical event there is a similar tension between religious practices of inscription and embodiment and what we might call state (secular) practices of sorting and ordering its citizens,

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38 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999): “I take *informatics* to mean the technologies of information as well as the biological, social, linguistic, and cultural changes that initiate, accompany, and complicate their development” (29).
of the systematic application of the force of the law. What is ghostly, frightening, “deeply archaic” about the Hooded Man is how it reminds us, in the inter-face of our digital technologies, not exactly of the religion we’ve given up in the name of technology, in the name of globalism, but of how our technologies can appropriate “religion” and offer a simulacrum of practices of inscription and embodiment, a simulacrum of community.

If TV, to take a nearly obsolete example, provided a semblance of proximity for the viewer to events in the world, recent technologies – teletechnology, Derrida calls it – take this visual presence a step further: now the teletechnological subject participates in local events (revolution, recently) from distant, disparate places in the world.39 At the same time, however, seeing the world is such super-mediated ways, we no longer see as a community but as isolated, discrete subjects. So while we might see in events in the world community, groups of people in action, as long as we perform this seeing via technology we no longer see, and no longer address, the other community as a community. The community, then, is visualized as a kind of other and – echoing Sontag’s observation in “In Plato’s Cave” – through a nostalgic lens. That community, those people in action in other, distant places in the world, is something like what we subject-viewers once had. And yet, that community is not exactly what we have lost, since ours was not, and currently is not, virtual. (Nor is theirs, but technology interdicts and prevents an understanding of, or engagement with, the actual thing, the community in its noisy, fractious, heterogeneous presence.) The framing, then, of that community, through its viewing with the device, is also a framing of our memory, of our nostalgia for community. That is, the technological access to communities in the world reminds us of two things: first, the time when one community might engage with another community directly; and, second, the forceful

39 On TV and “distance,” see Mitchell, Cloning Terror, 98. On teletechnologies and the illusion of globalism, see Borradori, Philosophy in a Time of Terror, 121-122.
interruption of this communication by new technologies, and the emerging sense of the impossibility of recovering such face-to-face communication – since this would require, in fact, a community effort at dismantling the very medium it has come to rely on for communication. Such a bind, disconnection, is the product of enframing.

We might think of our confrontation with the solitaire, then, as a test, as the inception of a new boundary for our community. There is a correlation between new technologies and new political conflicts – between state and non-state communities, between technologically advanced states and areas in the world that in comparison appear pre-modern, or by a different measurement, appear exploited and exhausted, depleted and crippled, transformed into a substratum of industrialized societies, a world that has been, in its exploitative use for the industrialized world, prevented from modernization, or modernized only to extent of necessary development, that is, development to and for the economic advancement of the superstructure, the post-industrial society. But there’s also a transformation of the political within the very community that deploys the new technology, and this occurs in a changing understanding of solitude: technologies condition various forms of solitude, but more recently, in the information age, we find a solitude that serves everyday life, a manner of solitude that is an extension of one’s working condition, one’s working life, into other realms of the social. In this light, solitude is an acceptable and necessary quality of middle class life in the post-industrial world.

Such a norm is a paradox, the idea of solitary communion. It rings as hollow as the idea of connectivity, an ugly contemporary word – not a neologism, the word has been with us for a little more than one hundred years, and was used primarily in scientific writing until recently – connectivity let’s use to designate the social connections made through computers and similar technology. But the word also describes the myriad distances and disconnections one subject
experiences between and with others. Connectivity, like digitality, has quantitative concerns, not qualitative; it wants potential and access, but not complex, entangled and embedded, relationships; it wants information, but not, in fact, meaning.  

If the secularization of everything – in the form of our Enlightenment, for example – leaves the subject disenchanted and lonely in the world, then we might consider technologies, such as the Internet, that ostensibly bring “us” together in new, interesting, multiple and virtual ways, as a response to the zeitgeist that resulted from the sense of loneliness, of distance between one subject and another. The technology thus attempts to close these distances. But the closure provided by the Internet is only a substitute; the Internet is an instrument we use to navigate the distance, which in actuality remains. Indeed, if the Internet is an instrument that for the time being lets us communicate across distance, it does not do anything to address the cause of the distancing that it is a response to and nominally a remedy for. In the meantime, then, the original problem of communication, and of a feeling of isolation, persists, manifesting itself in new ways, in ways we, in our enframement, dazzled by our technologies, have not yet come to realize.

The Hooded Man signifies the metastasizing reach of our technologically driven hegemony, the virtual universe. He comes to us and exists for us not only, ironically, because of

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40 See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, on the meaning-information binary. “Remember that information in the technical sense has nothing to do with meaning; the fact that such a message [a string of random letters] would be meaningless is thus paradoxically irrelevant to calculating the amount of information it contains… For an individual message, the information increases as the probability that the event will occur diminishes; the more unlikely the event, the more information it conveys… Most of the time, however, electrical engineers are not interested in individual messages but in all the messages that can be produced from a given source” (32). Additionally, access, Hayles argues, is not the same as possession: “Presence precedes and makes possible the idea of possession, for one can possess something only if it already exists. By contrast, access implies pattern recognition, whether the access is to a piece of land… confidential information… or a bank vault… In general, access differs from possession because the former tracks patterns rather than presences” (39).

41 See Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 70, on the “instrumental conception of rationality” that comes to ameliorate the pain of disenchantment.
the efforts of conscientious, democratic, justice-loving minds. The Hooded Man exists because of an internal, technological function: digitized, the Hooded Man is designed for automatic and endless dissemination. His image is encoded with its own algorithmic DNA, rules for its regeneration. That he appears before us at all is only because of technological contingencies, an accident suggestive of further terror, deep in the image, an insult to our already troubled reflections: this evidence was never secret, never hidden, and so never laboriously revealed. These photographs were always to be objects for public visual consumption, a terrible revisioning of reality-TV, a desperate simulacrum of power.42

Additionally, the ontological question raised by the Abu Ghraib photos, while accounting for, as many have observed, presuppositions of national identity, must also account for, to recall a metaphor from several decades ago, the ghost in the machine, the reproductive power of the technologies that made Abu Ghraib possible. Sontag’s claim, then, “the photographs are us,” addresses these images as more than mere images, more than simple, mechanical reflections of an event.43 These things, lines of digitized code, are now, in the framework of my argument, more than depictions of beings-like-us. Indeed, the digitized code is an extension of us and of our inventions that, in a moment of crisis, in its virtual legitimacy in visual, discursive, and informational worlds, takes on the autonomy of an other empire, a superstructure whose reach, complexity and power no human will fathom. We try this fathoming in phrases such as “It felt like you were descending into the one of the rings of hell” but, as I want to make clear, the concealment of the Hooded Man makes such responses predictably banal, a mere show of authority, humility, or understanding. As if we had just stepped out of a movie. Reinscription does little for us as a critical approach to this figure. It replaces one frame with another. Rather,

at this impasse, the threat of the Hooded Man finds a parallel in the mysterious operations of *framing*, of the containment and gradual liquidation of being in, and by, technology.

On the other hand, to resist the force of a technology that sacrifices, in our awe and its awfulness, our potentials as creative, questioning, thinking and inventive beings, I cannot grant total alterity to what is autonomous only in appearance. Technology, Heidegger reminds us, was once a kind of poetry; not manufacturing, not means-to-end designs, but a form of craft that, like poetry, concerned revelation, the *physis* of the things we live with. Recognizing the possibility of our enframement, then, draws the essence of this technology back to the question of our own essence, and returns the question of human action, a way to be, to its initial place. This is one of the central questions, which is one of the simplest questions, elicited by these images: *Who could do such things?*

Only by approaching the Hooded Man’s concealment with full awareness of our participation within, and as components to, the technology of his production, might we discover a way out of the prison that does not simply vilify Sabrina Harman and company, in an attempt at innovative moral condemnation, some expression of critical indignation and denunciation. Instead, seeing in the Hooded Man a glimpse of our *enframement* moves all participants in this drama toward a recovery of some kind of revelation, a recovery of the essence, or mystery or singularity, of these men, women, their humanity and our technology.

Can we identify, then, in these challenges for perception and of technology, a question aimed at that zone of creativity our technologies share with ethics? May we, attending to the problem of reinscription – the security and order of metaphors – set aside the evil director behind the technique, set aside our distrust of aesthetics in the proximity of violence, and take up the possibility, for example, of *fiction* for the Hooded Man? What would this entail: the Hooded
Man in the conceptual and experiential frameworks of fiction? Of literature? What engagement with the Hooded Man will not perform the displacement representation always entails? Speculative fiction as a kind of *physis*, as facing what we take to be impossible, as the invention and destruction that occurs only in imagination, as the risk responsibility always requires, is the possibility I would like to pursue.

**Part II**

It should be clear by now that the concealment I began with is not solely about the Hooded Man. I am not writing about, only, another disrobing, a forgotten site of humiliation. Nor is this about imagining the liberation of the man beneath the hood and robe, a setting free through responsible thought and criticism. The concealment also concerns, it should now be clear, the technologies that frame the Hooded Man: the Military Police, a prison, cameras, an electrical outlet, a cold shower, a translator; the complete list would be very long. In fact, it might be impossible to fully describe the *concerns* of this concealment entirely. So we might ask, now, the opposite of the question with which we started: what does the Hooded Man reveal? What if what we take for concealment is – because of our peculiar way of seeing – in fact a form of revelation?

To summarize the ideas I have tried to organize so far, a comment on the polarity of concealment. Do we face in this image a technological *expression of power* which, although we created its framework, we did not foresee, and so confront this power with the urge to overcome it, as if it were not our own? Or do we face a technological expression of power that is merely the startled expression of our self, in our intoxicated and blind triumph? “The photographs are us.” In other words, the challenge is not for us, sent by or emerging from technology – the
framing of our ambitious humanity – but instead is for us by us, a challenge articulated by our technology. What I take as the questionable essence of digital imagery, for example, is in fact a question, as Heidegger argues in “The Question Concerning Technology,” for our own condition of being, our own imperiled understanding of our place in the world.

Part of the challenge the Hooded Man now presents to us is to resist the desire to remove technology from humanity, to resist the tendency to see Harman as a technician whose expression was determined by the success of her mechanical device. The desire to oppose Harman to her camera – an opposition of her intention and vision to a technical means of representation – also expresses a more repressed desire to imagine a world without technology, a world of innocent vision and expression. “Have we not always nurtured a deep fantasy of a world functioning without us?” Baudrillard writes. “The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, free from any human, all-too-human, will? The intense pleasure of poetic language is to see language functioning on its own…” (“Violence” 101). Only in our dreams do words and objects act on their own accord, opening like chrysalises to release their winged secrets.

Against this desire is the fact that the technology is an expression of Harman’s vision, and not only a tool in her hands. The antithesis, then, to the view of technology that would oppose the subject and her tool, is counter-intuitive. This moment in the life of technology, through which we confront the Hooded Man, is the inventive expression of a young woman with a camera; this moment conceals a vestige of visual innocence, that pre-aesthetic mystery and peril of seeking and revealing truth. It is as if there is a second Harman inside the first, a Harman who needs to try seeing before she sees. As with speaking and writing – as we considered in Chapter One, with Auster and Blanchot – expression does not always occur within the safety, logic, and discourse of a community, of likeminded people, of writers, of readers. Writing, with
the technology it employs, is the means of approach to the idea the writer wants to express; but the act of writing does not guarantee expression, and not always the expression of the idea itself. Writing, like taking this photograph, is the necessary risk one takes in solitude, on the frontier, where the secrets, threats, and promises of the other become possible.

Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh

One impulse is to look carefully into the detailed depth of the Hooded Man, as if this figure came before and now cannot be placed in memory. In this view, our concentrated focus imagines past scenes, as if flipping through figures in an album ("The Man of Sorrows," "Dante’s Nightmare"). Before any positive identification of the Hooded Man, we ask a question of comparison, we hold this figure up against a model, his precursor and prototype. There is something of a stage test in this act of rigorous anamnesis: and somewhere in the Hooded Man is an actor, a destitute and manipulated body, and somewhere a performance. But it is the performance that preoccupies us, in placing this figure. In this view we align ourselves with Harman and Frederick, directors of the scene, and whatever feeling we express for the Hooded Man is actually for Harman, for her way of seeing. (How would I have taken this shot?) The technology, as Walter Benjamin describes, reduces the presence of the actor as individual destitute man in proportion to our identification with the director. Placing the Hooded Man, we put him through a series of optical tests.

The second consequence [of presentation by means of a camera] is that the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person… The audience’s empathy with the actor is really an empathy with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.\(^4\)

In this view – “It felt like you were descending into one of the rings of hell” – there is an a priori understanding of the horror genre; we are testing the degree of horror in this scene. At the same time, framing the scene in this way, we risk sounding indifferent to the reality, in the imposition of fantasy on our reading of the image. But is such an imposition unavoidable? Will a cinematic, or generic or literary, framing of the Hooded Man bring us any closer to understanding, or to revelation?

Possibly. If literature has any bearing on our ideas of responsibility and ethics, then considering the Hooded Man as a literary figure, and accepting in this way of seeing elements of the undecidable, the unreadable and aporic, might be the only way of responsible engagement with this image, with this solitary figure. He haunts us as an apparition that exists in a literary imagination, as, at once, the Man of Sorrows and also an executioner. And the differences between these figures – and there are others we might discover – are incommensurable, but this is precisely what makes the Hooded Man a test for vision, for reading and for responsibility.

The Pit

In the conclusion to his fantasy on torture and vision, “The Pit and the Pendulum,” Edgar Allan Poe exposes a paradox inherent in the visualization of horror, a paradox that complicates the facile inscription of the Hooded Man into the genre.

On freeing himself from his bound position, the narrator in Poe’s story observes the ascending withdrawal of the pendulum, and concludes from this that “My every motion was undoubtedly watched,” (315) since his mobility disrupts the aim of pendulum. He then discovers a fissure (later called an “aperture”) in the wall, the partition separating him from the

source of “sulphorous” light in the chamber. Identifying neither the source of light, nor the watchful others, the narrator is then forced away from the wall, as the light behind it increases in intensity, and the “spectral and fiendish portraiture” engraved on the translucent wall are cut out in sharp relief. Within these portraiture, the narrator then spots “Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity” that are transfixed on his position, from “a thousand directions, where none had been visible before,” blazing “with the lurid lustre of a fire I could not force my imagination to regard as unreal” (315).

We have in our narrator the figure of a man in solitary confinement, a man trapped inside a box, the walls of which are either translucent or engraved in such a way that light, when projected from the other side of the wall, fills the engraving, thus illuminating the image it depicts. The chamber is a prototypical, though unusual by its purpose, movie theater.46 The differences between Poe’s theater and the modern kind are these: here the screens are the four walls of the pit; the light does not project an image but instead relieves or reveals an image, as it simultaneously reveals the narrator/viewer; the viewer is surrounded on all sides by the spectacle, and, most importantly, the viewer himself is an object – the projection, or relief by light – for someone else’s view. In this scene, then, there are degrees of visualized horror: there is that horror described by the narrator, but also the performance of horror – a horror show – implicit in “the eyes that glared at my agonies!” (315).

Under such focused light and observation, the chamber heats up and the narrator seeks relief in the coolness suggested by the pit at its center. Once more, directed light casts a surface

46 For contemporary, and real, manifestations of such rooms, see Mark Benjamin’s article, “Inside the CIA’s notorious ‘black sites’” Salon.com (December 15, 2007), web, accessed December 1, 2011. “Video cameras recorded his every move. The lights always stayed on – there was no day or night” (1). “He was forced into a room and stripped naked again. Photos were taken of all sides of his body. He was surrounded by about 15 people. ‘All of them except for the person taking photographs were dressed in the kind of black masks that robbers wear to hide their faces,’ Bashmilah wrote in the declaration.” On similarities with Guantánamo Bay, see the report by Human Rights Watch, Locked Up Alone: Detention Conditions and Mental Health at Guantánamo: “I am starting to hear voices...” (28); “It seems that I am buried in my grave” (29).
in relief: “The glare from the enkindled roof illumined [the pit’s] inmost recesses” (315). But the narrator cannot fathom what he sees; until, after minutes of scrutiny, the object in the pit “burned itself in upon my shuddering reason.” What does he see? It is unnamed, or unnamable. The heart of the pit contains an object of horror that is beyond the reach of language. The narrator’s aphasia resembles the moment of dumbfoundedness I began with, in Juma’s expression, “I saw things no one would see, they are amazing”: invisible and amazing, yet made visible. This making visible of what is amazing is Poe’s, and our, concern: for the Hooded Man and company, let’s hypothesize, what we reveal will not necessarily be the objective essence of Juma’s fear, but instead the framing, the drive to sort and order, of a technical process.

The narrator’s torture, to come back to Poe, is then redoubled. He is forced toward the pit, forced up against the horror that is beyond language. “The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute – two, consequently, obtuse… In an instant the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge” (316). The slow collapse of the chamber forces its captive – still under the “lurid” glare of others – toward the “the yawning gulf” in the center of the lozenge-shaped room. Momentarily the narrator will fall into the pit, figuratively into indescribable horror, and literally into the apocalyptic and consuming gaze of his captors’ technology. The machinery that transforms the chamber from square to lozenge, capturing its content in the vast center, figuratively doubles the action of a closing eye: the narrator is consumed by the torture chamber as he is simultaneously consumed by the gaze of his torturers. The narrator, at the height of his anguish, is forced in this moment to witness or face, as he will imminently fall, the technological reproduction of sadistic objectification. The metonymic eye-machine will close over and terminate his life; his final gesture of resistance, then – “I averted my eyes” – is to look away. But this compelled gesture of resistance – ostensibly to avoid
witnessing his own destruction, to not match and double his gaze with that of his captors’ – suggests a strange complicity in the torture: the object of indescribable horror will not be seen, to the very end, but is at the same time consumed and seen-if-unseen by the averted eye. The horror, or essence of torture in this story, that requires scrutiny for its dismantling, triumphs in this final occlusion: the narrator closes his eyes as his torturers mechanically, and by simulation, close theirs in his destruction.

The production of the abject body requires a degree of blindness, a degree of concealment. The challenge to such technology is then, first, for sight and visualization, and then for the innovative capacity of language. How is horror described but not disseminated and not aestheticized? Moreover, what is the source of this description: do we side with the narrator of horror – Poe’s effusive prisoner, Mr. Juma – or with his author or director? The description of horror always entails these two sides, two sources; and what is concealed, of the horrible object, is this duplicity. Recall Plato’s Leontius: “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!” Directing our sight onto the object, to know it, we risk, like the narrator, doubling the gaze of our captors’. On the other hand, turning away, averting our gaze, precisely doubles the method of our destruction: the body is crushed and consumed by the eyes of the chamber or camera.

This double bind has the additional consequence, in the impossibility of an exit for the singular target – or the reduction of the presence of the actor – of generalizing point of view. Anywhere he turns, the narrator confronts a mechanical, demonic, or human eye. Moreover, the plurality of points of view reduces the specificity of the author or director of the scene; the audience, as Benjamin argues, now watches as a “quasi-expert,” since “competence” for performance “is no longer founded on specialized higher education but on polytechnic training,

47 Plato, Complete Works, 1071.
and thus is common property” (“The Work of Art” 262). Susan Sontag makes a similar observation, on the strange plurality of recording events in Iraq. The images from Abu Ghraib, she writes, are “less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated. A digital camera is a common possession among soldiers... now the soldiers themselves are all photographers” (“Torture” 132-33). But the ubiquity of the camera does not increase the objective reality of the scene; nor, as we might logically conclude, does the ubiquity of perspective metastasize subjectivity. Rather, echoing a central obsession of Baudrillard’s, omnipresent surveillance and recording facilitates the insertion of horror into the data stream of language, transforms the Hooded Man into a digitized war-story. “It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality,” Baudrillard writes in “The Murder of the Real,”

We are no longer dealing with a problematic of lack and alienation, where the referent of the self and the dialectic between subject and object were always to be found... By shifting to a virtual world, we go beyond alienation, into a state of radical deprivation of the Other, or indeed of any otherness... Furthermore, the ubiquity of the digital camera in the prison transforms (repeating the transformation of Poe’s chamber) the relationship between the guards and the prisoners. The technology creates a perception of the prisoner’s body as always already discursive material. The prisoner becomes only the Hooded Man to us. The actual person, Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, might as well be dead.

There are several overlapping illusions at work here. One concerns the authenticity of the experience we perceive in the image. Experience itself, Sontag remarks, is appropriated by the camera-eye: we go to places, like the Grand Canyon, not to see the canyon itself but to see it through our cameras and to see it, in another sense of seeing it through, through photographs of ourselves seeing it. “Here I am at the Grand Canyon...” All point of view, that is to say, and this

point is particularly accentuated by the ubiquity of digital cameras, is always already interpellated. It is nearly impossible to see the frame within the frame. Consequently, and this is Sontag’s concern in “In Plato’s Cave,” one’s active, ethical presence is captured, framed, postponed by the camera: taking the picture takes the place of taking responsible action. But the aura of the photograph *convinces* the photographer that the action he took is as important and ethical as the action he chose not to take. To respond to the event, the site of violence, with the camera – and the photograph, to be sure, offers *evidence* of the event, which has its ethical utility – is to use the device as a mediator, as a means of communication. The camera connects one subject with another; the camera assists in how the subject sees and visualizes the other. But this is not a face-to-face encounter. And the device, like all technology, even as it *produces* a semblance of the face-to-face, interrupts and covers over the potentials in such an encounter. And too often, the device and its product come to substitute for the encounter, and thus the other, in and for this particular event, is missed, foreclosed, ignored.

On the one hand, the discourse *about* the Abu Ghraib images highlights the transparency made possible by our new technologies, that every soldier might digitally record his or her experience. So we – not only soldiers, in the field – come to self-police, since everything in public and private life is potentially, always already on display for the scrutiny of others. Everyone is a quasi-expert of the law. Panopticism, beautifully achieved. On the other hand – as with panopticism – there is a sleight of hand involved in this perception, a sense that what we see in the images of Abu Ghraib, for instance, is not the entire picture. In fact, many of the images are cropped, adjusting our view and our interpretation; in fact, according to testimony of the MPs involved in the scandal, many other crimes, perpetrated by interrogators, occurred behind closed doors, well removed from the camera-eye. But these facts, too, are only part of the picture. The
Hooded Man’s concealment, his actual and figurative covering, is this other aspect of opacity we must consider in addressing the transparency and technology issue.\footnote{See Borradori, \textit{Philosophy in a Time of Terror}, on Derrida’s comments regarding globalism and our delusions of transparency: “Though the discourse in favor of globalization insists on the transparency made possible by teletechnologies, the opening of borders and of markets, the leveling of playing fields and the equality of opportunity, there have never been in the history of humanity, in absolute numbers, so many inequalities, so many cases of malnutrition, ecological disaster, or rampant epidemics (think, for example, of AIDS in Africa and of the millions of people we allow to die and, thus, kill!” (121-122).}

The double bind, these illusions, the paradox of visualizing horror, as Poe demonstrates, is that the visualization itself is horrifying or participates in the very production of the horror it would like to describe. It is from the gaze of his captors, in addition to the pit and the pendulum, that our narrator wants to escape. But his narrative has no existence apart from the dark relief of text. So – and this gets to the heart of Poe’s technique – the reader experiences a kind of suffocation along with the narrator, undergoes a live burial beneath his effusive speech. The alternative, however, is no less problematic: \textit{not} giving words to the Hooded Man, we suffocate in his silence. The perils of solitude, here, are absolute.

The Hooded Man’s concealment, or revelation, as we explore and circumscribe it, only seems to become more and more complex. There is no retreat for this figure, and no escape from our ordering of the world; no space where we can let words or images poetically do their thing. Instead, we write with apprehension. So I would like, finally, to approach the Hooded Man, as perilous as this step will be, by considering a kind of patience, a form of renunciation of self-will, the risks demanded by responsibility. In spatial terms, let’s enter the distance between Harman and her object, and attempt to come face-to-face with the Hooded Man. Let’s enter this frontier, and risk, like Leontius and Alypius, proximity with the abject body, and see what we shall see.
Once more, if this *performative* request of the argument sounds fanciful, it is no less fanciful or performative than the state of exception we find ourselves in, in this image, in Abu Ghraib. Remember, in the state of exception – where anomie, in Giorgio Agamben’s words, appears to be inscribed within the juridical order – we find ourselves thinking and imagining a scenario that is neither inside nor outside normal conditions, that is, conditions of lawful subjects but also of modes of thought, discourse, rhetoric.\(^{50}\) It is a wide threshold, a liminal zone, a “zone of indifference” (ibid.) where the temporary suspension of normal conditions does not mean the *abolition* of such norms, and does not mean that *the anomie* in our midst is absolutely opposed to the rule of law. Indeed, this conditional anomie in some ways is an extension of our law, of the normal conditions we’ve stepped away from. The exceptions, then, our manner of action and politics in this condition, require a kind of very active generation. The atmosphere might be one of indifference but this indifference can be mitigated, resolved or reversed. If in normal conditions we act as passive subjects to the law, in the state of exception there is a particular kind of opportunity for the subject’s action, since anomie is indifferent to *both* the sovereign, or source of political might, and the subject who would be the target of this might. Furthermore, this is the zone well beyond that of pragmatic application. Here is where, through transgression, both anomie and *nomos* imagine possibilities, the *fiction* of and for the law. The lacuna of exceptionality “is not within the law, but concerns its relation to reality, the very possibility of its application” (31). This means, following Agamben, that for every law within normal conditions there is an internal question and ambiguity concerning its application, and in this question and ambiguity our imagination, our picturing of future scenarios, takes off – such that, to such an extreme, we imagine a condition in which *application of the law becomes irrelevant* to the force

of the law itself. The state of exception, this aspect of fictionalizing the future, lies within this dream of law that is enforced without being applied.

Now, such automated law can appear tyrannical, like the judgment of God, and often is, in fact, as Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay demonstrate, of tyranny, but it is equally of rhetorical force. This means for us that, in approaching the Hooded Man, we resist the exhibitions of force, and we face the threat of retribution, not in normative terms – in outrage, with appeals to liberal humanism, etc. – but with, as Socrates remarks near the end of *The Republic*, charms of our own.

*The Hooded Man*\(^5\)

*Scene: Prison shower. Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, following orders, steps onto a cardboard box; he is robed; a hood is placed over his head. Beside him, Frederick untangles the inner works of an apparently defunct circuit breaker; he exposes the copper ends of a few wires and rubs them together; no charge; he attaches these to the Hooded Man’s fingers.*

Reading the concealment of the Hooded Man, we want the image to speak for itself. That would be so much easier, if images could auto-narrate. As it is, all of our approaches, chagrined, attempt to coax testament from the figure, have it physically bring forth the truth, before representation. But the proliferation of the image works against this voice. His transfiguration into the iconic crushes the specificity and mystery of the scene. At the same time, the icon *does* offer testament; but for whom does it speak? In this tension between one testament and the other, the concealment persists. Speech, or image? “Apparently,” Sontag writes,

it took the photographs to get their attention, when it became clear that they could not be suppressed; it was the photographs that made all this ‘real’… Up to then, there had been

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only words, which are easier to cover up in our age of infinite digital self-reproduction and self-dissemination, and so much easier to forget.\footnote{Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” 139.}

Harman has a similar notion of language, when she tells the Hooded Man not to fall off the box, that “he would be electrocuted if he did”: “I knew he wouldn’t be electrocuted… So it really didn’t bother me. I mean, it was just words. There was really no action in it.”\footnote{Gourevitch, “Exposure,” 55, my italics.}

Subscribing to the impotent-word theory, we dismiss not only the energy of Harman’s ironic command; we also risk proscribing the Hooded Man’s voice. While Sontag does not entirely affirm, as Baudrillard would, the image-reality, her opposition of “only words” to the images at some point forecloses the potential voice behind the image – which gets back to her concern, addressed earlier, with the photograph’s inability to narrate. But here, in an essay written much later in her career, Sontag aligns action with static, albeit ubiquitous, representations (which are difficult, we infer, to cover up), and attributes a kind of mimetic power to the Hooded Man, assuming that his representations produce a quasi-reality. “The photographs are us”; they represent “the fundamental corruptions of any foreign occupation” ("Torture" 131), and represent a “culture of shamelessness” as much as “the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality” (137). But what is the nature of this reality? How can I expose the failure of this representation? Challenging Sontag’s censure of the brutality depicted in the images, the dissemination – which is a transparent process, and not veiled or whispered Truth; that is, point-and-click, there is no pretense behind these images of artistic authority, of talent, even of design – the dissemination of the image also disseminates the disclaimer that the digital-image is amateurish, from public space, inauthentic and anonymous to the degree that it could be anyone’s taken from anywhere. The digital image reflects less a specific place in the world than it does a meta-place in technological engagement. While the analogue photograph – which might
authentically, in its physical inscription, depict brutality – maximized the quality of its content, of a specific moment and absorbed environment, the digital image, which can be everywhere at the same time is more concerned with the expedient sharing of information than it is with the quality or content of that information. The Hooded Man, then, does not project substance; there is nothing there, exactly, to support censure. Rather, the image projects both the pattern and randomness of information, and the force of the image – like a speech act, shimmering with iterability, in response to Harman’s “just words” – results from our use of this information. That is, its force reflects something of our own enframingment in the power and structure of our technologies.

By this view, condemnation of the act depicted here rings hollow for several reasons. First, there is no specific substance, no imprinting cause, behind this depiction, which is a depiction among infinite depictions, an anonymous image in a crowd of such images. Second, a cry out with the Hooded Man as a glimpse of enframing refutes, but then empowers, as Heidegger suggests, the actual objective, the determination, of Gestelling. And finally, the condemnation of this image is misguided, insofar as it suggests a nostalgia for a time when the image represented, by a mark or trace, a time and place in the world, and also a nostalgia for a time when technology did more than only secure and order, identify and categorize, and treat everything as a source of energy.

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54 On auto-archivization, and other devices, of the digital image, see Mitchell, Cloning Terror, 124.
55 The ontology about people and objects in photographs is complicated by digital imagery. Such images are never specific, never particular. “Which picture do you object to? This one, or this one? This one, this one…?” The digital image fascinates us, perhaps, in how it circumvents the sacred ban of “carved” images (Exodus 20.4), not only by being un-carved, but by virtue of its structure, its incontainability. The materiality of carved things makes them vulnerable to destruction; a war against “digital” images is as nonsensical as a war against terror.
56 Instead of disassembling what we perceive as problematic in technology, and then re-ordering these parts, Heidegger suggests a kind of patience, a passive attention to technology: “On the other hand, Enframing comes to pass for its part in the granting that lets man endure – as yet unexperienced, but perhaps more experienced in the future – that he may be the one who is needed and used for the safekeeping of the coming to presence of truth” (“The Question Concerning Technology,” The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 33).
Mimesis, whether in word or image, fails in the presence of the Hooded Man. Nothing specific is reflected here. We cannot say, with Sontag, that one thing represents another, because there is no specific, single thing: we deal instead with a network of words and images, speech acts and performances. What is unique about this scenario – since soldiers have always done horrible things to their captives, and then talked about them – is the function of technological reproduction in its execution. The soldier, as raconteur, is cut out of the formula; her image speaks for itself. How does this happen? In the tendency toward generalization, that magnetic force that makes all war-stories eventually sound the same, the images would appear to speak. (“It felt like you were descending into one of the rings of hell.” “The encampment they were in when we saw it at first looked like one of those Hitler things, like a concentration camp, almost.”57 “I swear on Allah almighty on the truth of what I said. Allah is my witness.”58) The voice of the image is produced in its automated circulation, which mitigates the power of atrocity, shame, brutality, or any term that was once reserved for those singular moments when the humanity of a person or action was called into question. The circulation of the images, to rephrase, is a process of generalization that is inseparable from the censorious claims of shame and brutality, which take aim – necessarily, semantically – at singular figures and instances. This complicated binding of the Hooded Man with Harman challenges the singular in a context of war-story generalization. (This is exactly the problem of communication between the solitaire and his community, for the solitaire’s narrative, that much of this dissertation has examined.) Giving power to the Hooded Man, then, compels our investment in the illusion of the mimetic transfer not of his singularity but of his paradoxical singular-plurality. Our understanding of his concealment must take account of this illusory presence.

58 Kasim Mehaddi Hilas, quoted in Danner, Torture and Truth, 242.
Alone, the Hooded Man tells us nothing – or tells us too much. And in the crisis of this concealment, our tendency is to take this ambiguity as a chance for re-education: there must be a way of reading the Hooded Man. On the one hand, we might consider the rhetoric of this image in the way Judith Butler considers the rhetorical dimension of an address, which is not reducible to a narrative function. The rhetorical edge in the moment of address

presumes that someone [the addressee], and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone. Something is being done with language when the account I give begins: it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical. It may well seek to communicate a truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language.

The Hooded Man doesn’t speak. It won’t speak: it remains, forever, an image. But in our imaginations, and in our address of this image, we, in various ways, put words into the invisible mouth of the figure. Our responsibility for this image requires, in part, this ventriloquism, this somewhat messy act of imagined expression, imagined narration. Recall Derrida: “The only testimonies that escape archivization are those of the victims, not of the dead or of the cadavers (there were so few) but of the missing” (Borradori 189). And in this act, I would add to Butler’s observation on the rhetorical dimension of address – how it recruits and acts upon the interlocutor, breaking narrative – we participate in the relational discourse through which we might practice responsibility for the image and for the Hooded Man.

Simultaneously, however, Donald Rumsfeld and his ilk need to persuade the public (by offering a competing hermeneutic) that the images function in a traditional way, in order to, among other things, dissimulate the extent of technology’s domain, the hegemony of empire that

59 Or, we can’t look away. “In our digital hall of mirrors, the pictures aren’t going to go away. Yes, it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos” (Sontag, “Torture” 142).

is both real and virtual. He would ban, as in olden times, graven images. *Do not show the dead.*

The recovery and replacement of materiality in and for the photo also recovers the semblance of an individual sadist, and the semblance of her victim, an appearance which foments outrage and resistance. But this outrage is misdirected and oblivious to the nature of the technology that has brought us to this point. In fact, the outrage energizes what it opposes – “The horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken” (Sontag, “Torture” 132) – in that it attributes power to an image that has been evacuated of qualitative substance. The Hooded Man (Hooded Men, I should say from now on) is quantified to maximal distributive efficiency. And his director has anticipated our particular-oriented censure: “Is it *this* image you object to? Or *this one*?” So, where we want to express – indeed, where we must express – outrage at what the images depict, where we must speak out against this indifference to human suffering, this censure will fall on deaf ears if it does not also address the technological frame that makes such images possible. We fall, once again, between paradigms: one, technological, that is primarily performative (modular, transitive, virtual), and the other, what we might call of the human, of the singularity of lived experience. The argument of this chapter has been that we cannot separate these positions, these operations; that, in short, the Hooded Man conceals (or reveals what we’re reluctant to address) the fact that this image is a manifestation of a new kind of challenge of and for the human, for its ethical engagement with others.

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61 On the complexity of this prohibition, Mitchell writes: “The argument was that the sight of these coffins, aside from being deleterious to morale in the Global War on Terror, would ‘violate the privacy’ of the dead servicemen and their families. It is, of course, difficult to see how the anonymity of a shrouded casket violates anyone’s privacy. The real motive for the ban was transparent: to minimize the number of American casualties, and to prevent the real human cost of the war from becoming visible, even in the most indirect, veiled forms of imagery. Like most bans on or destructions of undesirable images, the prohibition had the effect of spawning more reproductions” (*Cloning Terror* 95).
Another way to consider this dual structure – the split between digital and analogue images, the split between technological operations and the singularity of our moral outcry – is to turn from the Hooded Man’s silence to the image that only speaks for itself:

*Scene: the Dead Man. Harman and Charles Graner leave the Hooded Man’s room and enter the adjacent shower; on the floor, a body; Manadel al-Jamadi is in a black body bag, wrapped in ice; Harman gets down and begins investigating.*

Harman snaps a few shots of al-Jamadi. This is more work than play; she would like to be a forensic photographer someday, and takes this opportunity for practice. Still, there is an important connection between the Hooded Man and the Dead Man: the corpse will exit in a few hours, disguised as a sick man, *unconscious* on a gurney. In the meantime, Harman returns to the Hooded Man. But now the theatricality of the Hooded Man’s torture – being forced to hold this pose, the image of which is later reproduced as a tattoo on Harman (Gourevitch 57) – surrounds the scene of the Dead Man, who cannot be asked, any more, to do anything. The Dead Man now functions only as a cipher, a form of emptiness given over to any interpretation. The complex play of the Hooded Man, then, enfolds and conceals a threatening void, which is the reason for play. Insofar as the case of the Dead Man is violently real for Harman, a primal scene of discovery,

*I was just lied to. This guy did not die of a heart attack. Look at all these other existing injuries that they tried to cover up.* (56)

her retreat is to re-enter the initial room, the initial performance. The Dead Man’s *lie* of death now informs Harman’s direction of the Hooded Man. She and the Dead Man now cooperate in their direction of the Hooded Man with this new knowledge of life and death. Likewise, the Dead Man, rolled away *playing* sick, collaborates in the further abuse of the Hooded Man. In this transfiguration of al-Jamadi, the “canonical” Hooded Man can no longer be saved from this

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“confluence of torture and pornography.” In view of Harman’s brief exit with Graner, into a room where secrets are shared, the concealment of the Hooded Man becomes marked yet again: he is indeed canonical insofar as his gown conceals the pornographic violence of enslavement. That is, its body, paradoxically, still has reserves, can still serve a purpose, while al-Jamadi’s time is up. The Hooded Man’s stasis, as well, “a simple and singular impression as a black, diamond-shaped form against a light background, a form that can be instantly recognized from a distance,” contrasts with the prone, detailed and visceral images of al-Jamadi. Where the latter is unequivocally dead, the former is not seen precisely as living, but as something merely alive. One can apprehend life but not recognize the living as living, Butler argues in the first chapter of *Frames of War*. It is what falls between apprehension and the frames of recognition that we are responsible for; and it is the backdrop, now, of al-Jamadi that pushes the Hooded Man into this liminal zone.

*The Angel of Death exits with the soul of al-Jamadi in its arms.*

In another light, of course, and only through the loss of al-Jamadi, and through the dissembling and disappearance of his body, does the physis of the Hooded Man begin, does he resurrect, so to speak, as a figure invested with the iconographic force of the risen Christ.

The draw of fantasy is not to be taken lightly. Questions of art and literature, as I have suggested, arise in those moments where the visualization of horror intersects with questions of identity, alterity and ethics. Heidegger sees a way through enframing by a return to the primacy of revealing in art, in its mysterious, selfless, and dangerous processes (“Question” 35). Sontag, as well, concludes *Regarding the Pain of Others*, with a shift from documentary photographs –

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64 *Canon* connotes both law and disciplinary violence. *Kanōn*: rule and rod.

> What would they have to say to us? “We” – this “we” is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through – don’t understand… We can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. 

Does literature, do the visual arts, offer a unique way of communicating what would otherwise be impossible, unimaginable? The laborious posturing of our politicians, in confrontation with these images (“It felt like you were descending into one of the rings of hell”) suggests that this, perhaps indirectly, is the case: Abu Ghraib as Dante’s Nightmare communicates the limit of our imagination. Let a canonical figure – Dante, the Hooded Man – have the last word.

This reinscription, however, is unacceptable. Heidegger calls such a closure of imagination “sheer aesthetic mindedness” (“Question” 35). It might be a limit of our imagination, but it could also be pure laziness or indifference to the task. This refusal to risk, to venture forth into the frontier where responsibility is tested, plummets Being back into the business of enframing. The nature of the Hooded Man’s concealment, then, if we are to find its expression by thinking through the frame of art, of literature, must contain something beyond canonicity, beyond what Philip Gourevitch calls a *symbol* for “all that we know was wrong at Abu Ghraib and all that we cannot – or do not want to – understand.”

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67 Gourevitch, “Exposure,” 57. Additionally, the *symbol* lives in an *analogic* universe: it is a referential sign, a reach back to a spoken or written word. I have not spelled out the problem of digitality to the extent it probably deserves; that’s the work of another essay. It seems to me, though, that digitality will force a paradigm shift in the study of language and literature. Sorting, ordering, processing data: the quantitative drive behind digital representation is fundamentally different from the qualitative drive behind analogic representation. The analytic reader, let’s consider, begins and ends his work with questions of ambiguity, interpretation, and meaning; the digital reader, let’s hypothesize, begins and ends her work with questions of connectivity and application.
This imaginative movement toward the literary, in a very particular sense of *physis*, where the Hooded Man might address us – interrupting, in fact, the *nomos* of narration, another framing – is, I think, what Sontag sees in Wall’s Cibachrome transparency. To be sure, the turn to fiction in general does not mean we take up the canon in defense against the unimaginable. *Fiction* here is, rather, the exercise, the responsibility, of imagining the impossible. “Dead soldiers don’t talk. Here they do.” Otherwise, the response to atrocity tends toward a stalemate of dialectical thinking, solipsistic regeneration. As Jean-François Lyotard asks in “The General Line,” “What use is the right to freedom of expression if we have nothing to say but what has already been said? And how can we have any chance of finding a way to say what we don’t know how to say if we don’t pay attention to the silence of the other inside us?”

Otherwise, the horror of Abu Ghraib as simulacrum – and Abu Ghraib was modeled, as Andy Worthington shows us, and this model has certainly reiterated itself in the years since, in cases and sites both brought to public scrutiny and left in the shadows of our imagination – as simulacrum its horror will include not only the witnessing, time and again, of criminal abuse by military police, but also the iterative potentials for humiliation by way of technological power. Moreover, in this collapse of the space between viewer and spectacle – in a closure of the frontier, in fact, with the simulacra as a kind of impenetrable wall between the subject and the threats and pleasures of reality – we become our own spectacles, indulging in narcissism in extremis. We watch ourselves watching, as some of the images from Abu Ghraib reveal. And in the virtual world that the digital camera opens to us, we displace and repress our fear of

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71 “The camera had the potential of exposing his humiliation to family and friends, and thus served as a ‘shame multiplier’… His shame would be unending” (Danner, *Torture and Truth*, 19). Also see Andy Worthington, *The Guantánamo Files*, 134, 176, on abuse in US military prisons in various places prior to Abu Ghraib.
becoming Hooded Men in a narcissistic expression of guilt, merely a simulation of guilt. The possibility of expressing real guilt, and offering some kind of restitution for the acts performed at Abu Ghraib, will only come following the Hooded Man’s address, following the judgment of this silent, inscrutable, solitary figure. His voice alone, any sound at all from this effacement, would short-circuit the propagation of the image and release us from the feedback loop of our narcissism, our watching ourselves watching.\textsuperscript{72}

This claim sounds fantastic, but I think that it is nonetheless applicable and true. Literature, like ethics, is often fantastic, full of unanswerable questions, impossible metamorphoses, all of the challenges that upset our predilection to celebrate, as Thomas Keenan writes, “the pathos of pure resolution, of having to decide once and for all, without reason but with firmness and conviction.

It is just this proud, last man, the subject of the decision, that is in question here – and without its being in question, just as any “external” or objective ground is lacking, there would be no politics and no literature.\textsuperscript{73}

But in the final analysis, the Hooded Man is an image, not a narrative, not a story. Still, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, the Hooded Man, in various ways, breaks the boundaries of its imagery, exceeds itself as an image, and in this transgression transforms into something deeply embedded in our literary imagination. Furthermore, the virtual world, as Baudrillard has always described it, operates and expands insofar as the strength and uniqueness of a person’s voice – not his writing; not a recording; the presence and ephemerality of

\textsuperscript{72} An ingenious critique and exposure of this narcissism is accomplished by an act of graffiti in New York City that Mitchell refers to as “culture jamming.” Vandalizing an Apple iPod advertisement, Forkscrew Graphics covered a few of the dancing silhouettes with silhouettes of the Hooded Man, wired. “Perhaps the best way to understand the iPod/iRaq culture jamming is to analyze the relation between the self-pleasuring dancers, narcissistically absorbed in a music only they can hear, and the self-torturing stasis of the Hooded Man, absorbed in a pain and terror only he can feel, accompanied by the menacing anticipation of electrocution to come if he steps off his box” (Mitchell, \textit{Cloning Terror}, 106-107). I would add that the ideology that makes self-absorption and isolation via our entertainment gadgets publicly permissible also has a hand in how we see the Hooded Man and how we think about our detainees in indefinite detention, in solitary confinement.

\textsuperscript{73} Keenan, \textit{Fables of Responsibility}, 5.
immediate expression – is suppressed and overcome by its representation. The Hooded Man, that is to say, despite its plurality, its infinite duplication in the virtual world, is not fully representable: its silence is irrepressible. There’s always a great pressure, Lyotard remarks in the essay cited above, to compel silence to express itself; we are unsettled by silence. But, like the figures in Wall’s image, the Hooded Man, as much as we would like to hear his cry, his protest, his judgment and condemnation, remains, in fact, uninterested in us. It is such disinterest that forces the viewer to think about and practice responsible action, responsible thought. It is my approach to this figure, without its reciprocation and without certainty about outcomes, that is the first step toward an ethics of seeing, of reading and interpreting, of being in the proximity of solitude and the solitary other.

Many of the approaches to the Hooded Man that I’ve considered here might check enframing technologies momentarily, but then return to the scene other forms of the frame, the sorting and ordering of an Intelligence Gathering point of view and consciousness. The final reading of this problem asks us, now, to drop our guard, to open ourselves to the threat of the Hooded Man. In other words, Harman can do the one thing her technologies will never do: she can grant herself, risk herself, renounce herself before the force of enframing. Only through risking and disclosing ourselves, by entering the frontier that makes responsibility possible, might the technology, as Heidegger says, come to pass, and through this transformation return Being to the site of revelation.74

Responsibility asks for more than a response to the other. Responsibility incessantly demands more than what is merely responding, with or without others, with or without context.

Responsibility, we might imagine, is the imminent occasion when the subject must respond to a question, statement, gesture, sense of presence, knowing that nothing will respond in turn. Giovanna Borradori writes, “To be responsible is to respond to the call of the other: another individual, another culture, another time. Such a response also makes one responsible for the other ‘in oneself’” (Philosophy 168). What this definition misses is a certain encoding, a vulnerability within responsibility; a feeling for the subject, perhaps, of guilt (guilt without guilt, guilt without reason for guilt) for being unable, in a future occasion, to respond to the presence of the other. Responsibility entails in the subject an awareness of his insufficiencies, of what he would like to have and would like to be, in order to act justly, and the knowledge that he will never entirely have such a quality or be such a person for others. There is no reciprocity about responsibility, no other in oneself that is like the other we must respond to.

Harman, unlike all of the technologies that enframe her and that brought her to Abu Ghraib and to us, can renounce herself, can unname herself. In the frontier we can take ourselves as anyone. This is to experience the solitude of substitutability; anonymity is the form of being alone as being without a name. Responsibility participates in this anonymity; it occurs as we act apart from ourselves, risking ourselves in namelessness. Our isolation of the other – our exclusion, our exile, our detainment of the other – or, in the other’s approach from his solitude, and his summoning to us from the threshold between our-selves, our community, and the frontier of solitude, all of this implicates the anonymity of addressing and responding. The solitaire as other makes, if not a cry for help, not precisely a statement discomfiting us from our complacency, but a presentation that reveals an anonymity of ours that we would rather forget; that is, the solitaire reminds the collective of a kind of essential indifference that they embody. This is not the subjective indifference of choice, not the indifference they own and practice
against each other, but their embodiment of an indifference according to others, according to the presence or gaze or demand of the other: the collective is anonymous, it is alone and always replaceable. The Hooded Man is disinterested in us. While the encounter with the solitaire might suggest a singular moment, an essential moment in which responsibilities are tested, in this light the moment is quotidian, as unremarkable as any moment.

The normalization, however, of the moment, this encounter, exposes the event to the possibility of abuse. This would occur as an indifference to our own indifference, for instance. This attitude would say “Since the other speaks to us as anyone, and since the other would treat us as always replaceable, then we have nothing to lose in not responding to the call.” Or we respond but only as far as we want, as far as we deem permissible, not to be put out or beside ourselves. This is to be merely tolerant of the other’s presence and summons. (And consider, once more, that Apple iPod advertisement: silhouetted dancers, together but alone, apparently pleased and entertained by their devices, each in their colorful box, aware but unaware of each others’ presence.) And thus, not only does the pain of solitude, the indifference and indifferentiation of solitude, continue to spread, so to speak, in this exchange, but our empowered indifference (or tolerance) makes it possible for the quotidian exchange to disappear from the community’s perceptual field. In such a case, we instrumentalize to our advantage the anonymity the other has recognized in us, thus postponing, cordonning off, the question of responsibility for the solitary other.

The Hooded Man, however, disrupts this tendency, and it does so, as I have argued, in its appeal to our literary imagination. It seems to elicit, in a somewhat magical way, a statement, a question from us that it may or may not respond to. This disclosure I am ready to offer, in viewing the image, has its prefiguration in Benjamin’s reflection on ritualistic art. The auratic
quality of the early art object consigned the object to concealment, solitude, an invisible position. The object had “the unique apparition of a distance” for the viewer, who experienced his sight in a private space.\textsuperscript{75} The viewer brings to the object his solitude, the modesty of passage between and across worlds. The presence of the object, then, reassures the viewer, in its own removal from visible materiality (ibid. 257). It too makes a kind of passage. Can the Hooded Man be approached in this sense? Is the Hooded Man, for Harman, a performance, not of a dark ritual or “primal scene of martyrdom,” as Gourevitch proposes, but of a ritual that exposes the presence of her solitude; and not only Harman’s, but the presence of all of our movements toward solitude?\textsuperscript{76}

The expanding shadow of the Hooded Man, which has for the duration of my consideration seemed an irrepressible threat of concealment, now indicates the conditional necessity of concealment. Like an avatar from the other side, this figure of the solitaire invites not opposition, not explication, not terror. Instead, we have here a chance to recall ourselves, in our modest and precarious awareness of the danger of enframing technologies and ideologies – which are nowhere more evident than in the tragic military campaigns ongoing in Afghanistan and Pakistan and throughout the Global and Virtual War on Terror – as primarily servants of \textit{physis}, servants of the world not of our making but as it exists in and of our imagination, like a world without us or as the world to come. Servants, that is, to a certain kind of impossible life. Like the aporia of the demos, as Derrida describes it, wherein the mysterious singularity of each individual, this condition prior to “the subject,” meets with the notion of “the universality of rational calculation... the equality of citizens before the law” (Borradori 120), we find in the


\textsuperscript{76} Gourevitch, “Exposure,” 57.
Hooded Man an opportunity to practice the kind of imagination-work, a kind of *anomie*, that brings the force and progress of a particular kind of law, of imperialism, to a halt. This work and servitude, however, must resist the draw of securing and ordering, the draw of framing, which in the digital age persuasively veils itself as a democracy for art and invention, a free-market utopia, as thinkers like Douglas Davis exemplify: “We reach through the electronic field of ease that cushions us, like amniotic fluid, through the field that allows us to order, reform, and transmit any sound, idea, or word, toward what lies beyond, toward the transient and ineffable.”

It is the same attractive force, “to order, reform, and transmit,” that dazzles us when in the presence of such strange figures as the solitaire, Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, the Hooded Man.

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77 Douglas Davis, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” 386. “This educated (yet democratized) elite, mixing all classes, creeds, and colors, is now immense… Without hesitation, artist, audience, and publisher… embraced the individuating mark, not the erasure of presence that accompanies replication (the ‘copy’). It seems to me a reversal of Benjamin and Orwell to find digital technology so accomplished in providing that individuating mark” (385).
Epilogue

Sorting and Ordering: Framing Solitude

When I first began thinking about solitude for this project, I was not thinking about literature. I was thinking about the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. I was thinking about human rights and the obvious violations against these that were taking place at Guantánamo Bay and at similar prisons throughout the world, some present, in plain view, and some secret, “ghost” sites, as they were called. But it was not precisely the criminal violations against human rights that caught my attention; it was the method and the language of these actions (“detainment,” “extraordinary rendition”) that I also found curious, troubling and problematic. The linguistic structure that rose up and appeared suddenly in the popular consciousness, with the appearance and discovery of places like Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, I found intriguing. For the structure provided us with a new way of thinking and talking about not only isolation and solitude, but about “us,” about “community” and “integration.” Solitude, and the various associations we draw from this concept, was becoming a tool of the system, an extension of US military might. This idea, a feeling that would become a hypothesis, was fascinating – in its cadence of Orwellian doublespeak; that solitude could be appropriated and managed in this way – but also repugnant. And my disgust about the notion – that in the approach of the US military nothing is sacred, everything is up for grabs – had to do partly with the fact that I thought of solitude as Wordsworth and Thoreau had thought of it: as an open space in which I can freely examine myself, talk to myself and think about the things I want to and enjoy thinking about; or
even, in a more mystical sense, as a space in which I can let myself go, releasing the thinking ego.

Guantánamo Bay turned this assumption about solitude, this Romantic inheritance, on its head. It did this by proposing a use of solitude that seemed diametrically opposed to how solitude was thought of and practiced in everyday life. What’s more, this opposition, the ludicrous notion that the detainment and solitary confinement of those we deemed enemies was somehow good for us, the right and legal actions to take, went unquestioned. And suddenly, at least as I heard the rhetoric in the news, in everyday conversation, solitude had once more been normalized: what’s good for us, in our retreats to the country, into our creative and salubrious spaces-away from the toxicity of everyday life, must be good for them. Solitaire, Guantánamo Bay said to the world: Reflect on what you’ve done – confess – and I’ll let you go.

The engine of ideology turned what was for a moment plainly unjustified and illegal into a necessary hardship, a form of treatment, an expression of “soft” power.

This thought, on the quick, successful force of ideology, then sent me back to the idea of solitude, questioning what exactly we mean by this concept. Observing my friends and my students plugged into their iPods, absolutely engaged with (and engaged by) their hand-held devices, connected, in a sense, with the world while at the same time disengaged with their actual environment, I thought “What does it mean, anymore, to be alone?”

Literature came into the conversation in several ways. The first is obvious. The Romantic idea of solitude, as developed by Wordsworth, and then Emerson, and then picked up and disseminated by Thoreau, is without question still with us. Sara Maitland’s recent memoir, A Book of Silence, is in many ways a refashioning of Wordsworth in and for the twenty-first
century. And, maybe because this idea of solitude is so entrenched in the word, at first I didn’t think too much about it.

A second way literature came to mind, in my thinking about the ideological structures of solitude, concerned the reading of literature itself. By this I mean not merely an appreciation for the work of writers like Auster, Ozick, Sebald and Blanchot. Rather, my work, on the one hand, what I am paid to do by the university that employs me, requires this process of being alone, this exhausting act of reading, of being alone with my own thoughts but at the same time engaged with the mysterious and disembodied language of the book, of the novel or memoir or poem. Solitude, in this case, is always solitude within the reach of language, always with an incessant murmur over the horizon of thought.

Maurice Blanchot, then, was a third entry into the question of solitude by way of literature. His thesis that the solitude inherent in a work of art is one that excludes “the complacent isolation of individualism,” one that “has nothing to do with the quest for singularity” (Spaces 21) was something of a discovery, a magical beacon for me. Getting away from the complacency of individualism, and working, in my reading, at resisting the powerful draw of self-secure subject, is probably the single most important directive, a work-idea, for this project. Why? Because it asks us to think about the inverse of Romantic solitude – the dark side, the outside of solitude, Blanchot might have said, where autrui summons us – and it opens up a possibility of thinking about other, important kinds of solitude, namely the solitude wherein the individual breaks down or is lost and irrecoverable, namely the solitude of violence. One of the mysteries in Blanchot’s The Instant of my Death is precisely this: Who is the witness who comes back to us, to speak about what he saw, to speak about those who died and who cannot speak themselves? “I saw things no one would see, they were amazing,” Mohamed Juma said of the
crimes committed in Abu Ghraib. Who is this person? And how will he tell us of things no one would see, bringing to light the Other from the dark?

As for the rest, choosing Paul Auster, W.G. Sebald, Franz Kafka, Luisa Valenzuela and Jacobo Timerman, they more or less fell into place. Auster’s strange evocation and citation of Blanchot opened a door for my thinking, and entering that literary space I found a rather straight path from the literary to Abu Ghraib. Of course, I say this in retrospect. Initially for this project, the figure of the witness was not as prominent. But the figure of the witness, I found only as I wrote the last chapter, is the secret, the solitaire that is so hard to grasp in the early chapters. It is the witness who leads us, in her speech and performance, through frontiers linguistic, historical and geographic, from Auster’s curious memoir, through Sebald and Kafka, into the protean testimonies of Timerman and Valenzuela, and up to the inscrutable face of the Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib. Juma’s testimony gives the lie to how we think about solitude. Violence happens there, in the field, in prison and in war, beyond the horizons of imagination. It is violence, a rupture, discovery or epiphany that sends back the self-secure explorer, but only by abandoning the Other. Wordsworth will sing for us the lonesome reaper’s song. Juma, in this scheme of things, is like a ghost before us, a voice that has escaped its death.

An Apology

A future for this project might go any of several directions. I have not done the Romantics justice in my summary remarks on how they conceived of solitude. Surely the solitaire was not one, singular idea, not solely an invention of Wordsworth’s. Coleridge, for instance, briefly mentioned in the introduction, exposes something of the violence of solitude in his Mariner, a complex and frightening character who is without compare in Wordsworth. So we
could turn back to late eighteenth century, and reexamine Romantic solitude in light of the problems, of testimony and responsibility, that I have addressed here.

Likewise, we could look forward, from our present – which is increasingly networked, digitized and compartmentalized – toward the future, toward an emerging ideology of solitude, of being-alone/being-together through notions like *connectivity*.

Such an inquiry, however, would be incomplete without returning to the question of Guantánamo Bay, which remains operational, and which still holds prisoners beyond the reach of communication. There, in those cells, in that solitary confinement that we cannot access, is the nadir of our connectivity; the bodies of these prisoners like sacrificial animals, destroyed for the maintenance of our reality, our illusions and ideology. If I have been inaccurate in my treatment of the Romantics, I am far more concerned about the short shrift I’ve given human rights in this project. There is a good argument to be made against the entire last chapter, which seeks to avoid “inscribing” the Hooded Man back into literary-canonical language but which inscribes the figure nonetheless. The whole notion of “The Hooded Man” as a *character* grinds in my conscience. *Then why did it happen?* Transforming the figure into a character was a rhetorical move that I found necessary to make – once in the midst of reflecting and writing on the Abu Ghraib images – in order to make what I hope is an effective argument, among other things, against over-simplistic approaches to that particular image and to our conception of solitary figures. (The writer, as a solitaire, doesn’t come easily or willingly out of the dark toward his reader: he too must risk himself and his ideas, some of which will inevitably fail.)

So, if I were to do the project over, or expand from what I have here, the question of how solitude relates to human rights – a question that might have its prototype, in fact, in the Romantics – would take a more prominent position. Guantánamo Bay offers us an opportunity to
think in new ways about the social or socialized versus the radically independent; about secular democratization and integration versus theocratic conservatism and isolationism; or about the idea of the state versus non-state political entities. There are many shortcomings of this dissertation, but I am most sorry for how I have subordinated actual cases, immediately pressing matters of human rights – issues that I had in mind and in sight from the very beginning of the project – to abstract tableaux and to the last chapter. Good books are not that important. Sebald is a magnificent writer, and his novels will be with us for a very long time, and I hope to teach his novels in the coming years: but nothing in the mystery, beauty, or literariness of his work gives the reader the obligation to act in the way Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib and the countless secret prisons in the world compel us to act.

Though perhaps I would not have discovered this imperative, would not have come to see the Abu Ghraib Hooded Man in the way I now see him, without first carefully reading and writing on such works as *The Emigrants*, or *The Infinite Conversation*, or *The Writing of the Disaster*, or *Black Novel with Argentines*. I would not have discovered the solitaire in the Man of Sorrows without a view toward, and a consciousness geared for, literature. Our capacity for imaginative thought, for metaphorical language, for making the invisible visible, for reading and rereading literature, gives to us the ability and obligation to think about ethics in the world in new ways. This capacity – literature’s gift to culture – lets us imagine worlds that often do not exist, worlds that we cannot see or touch. But just because that world, domain of the Other, cannot be seen, heard, or made present before us does not mean that we can not be responsible for that world and for what happens there. Often, as the solitaire reminds us, that world remains inhabited by things we have expelled and forgotten about, by things which may or may not come back to us, by things which probably don’t care about us and would not take responsibility for
us. Severing ties. But isn’t this indifference precisely what makes reading long novels, and reading Blanchot, and thinking about the solitaire and responsibility so difficult?

Even though our relationship with the Other is unreciprocated, it remains a relationship nonetheless. It is a relationship that, on the face of it, does not make much sense. We take responsibility for that which does not take responsibility for us.

If anything, finally, I hope this project has at least demonstrated how the work of studying literature – of reading it, writing about it, of teaching it – does make sense, and especially makes sense when it reaches out of its own domain into the strange and mysterious, the speculative and dangerous terrain of solitude that is, in fact, never too far off.
Acknowledgements

I would not have completed this project without the outstanding patience, wisdom, intelligence and guidance of my dissertation director, Michael Bernard-Donals.

I would also like to thank my dear friend Larry Edgerton. For our countless conversations on music, art, writing, teaching and politics, for his humor and generosity, Larry made my graduate school years more than only a test of endurance. His friendship has been a discovery and a blessing. With heart and soul, Larry, you taught me so much – words cannot express my gratitude.

I also want to thank my friend and colleague, Kevin Mullen, for reading the entire manuscript under an impossible deadline, and then giving me wonderful feedback.

Craig Werner, as well, provided thoughtful and encouraging feedback in the final days of this project. I’m sorry, Craig, I didn’t pursue you sooner. Your integrity and intelligence offered warmth and light to me when I was anxious and full of doubt.

Finally, for so much, and for nothing at all, I want to thank Marina Iovene, plant cytogeneticist. Her warmth, kindness, beauty and wit have made the last four years unforgettable, the best of my life. Baci, my dear, sweet Miciagrigia.
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