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Critical Solace

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Can style compensate for plot? Cormac McCarthy certainly thinks so. It probably seems counterintuitive, if not downright wrong-headed, to seek consolation in The Road (2006). Undeterred, I want to make this bleakest of post-apocalyptic novels my first brief port of call. As readers will remember, a man and his son are on the move; they have been for months. Now, though, they are fast running out of food. Having observed but so far managed to escape the horrors of cannibalism, they know it's going to be harder to stave off starvation. Across a devastated North American terrain they trudge south toward the promise of warmer weather – also toward the sea. In heading for the coast, the man knows that "he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to," wishing only the ocean "would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily."[1] Progress to the shore is slow, and they endure "[l]ong days" through "[o]pen country with the ash blowing over the road" (R 181). But something in the air suddenly changes and the man notices "open country to the east":

> Then they came upon it from a turn in the road and they stopped and stood with the salt wind blowing in their hair where they'd lowered the hoods of their coats to listen. Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of

> some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. Out on the tidal flats lay a tanker half careened. Beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash. He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I'm sorry it's not blue, he said. That's okay, said the boy. (R 181)

What could be more dismaying? The longed-for prospect of the sea as a vestige of ecological endurance, as a zone that's "brighter" than the land's monochrome charcoal, as proof that those "aching blue" "siren worlds" the man has been "learning how to wake himself from" do still exist (R 15), proving too that their slog has been worth it – all this is dashed over the course of one onomatopoeic description of despair. The dental diction simulates in its listless rhythm the predictability of what they see, as "dull and leaden" waves lumber onto a beach that's coupled with the novel's most frequent yet muted epithet: *gray*. Both grammar and lexis reinforce the "disappointment" the boy can't help himself from showing.

Such is the iconic bleakness with which The Road depicts a "world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (R 75), leading us about as far from solace as one could imagine. In whatever shape or form, consolation is hardly what we expect to find in this realm of catastrophe, not only at the level of harrowing content but in expressional terms as well. In fact The Road, at first glance, "seems exhausted at the level of style itself," as Andrew Hoberek has observed.[2] Arranged piecemeal, the novel's fractured typography visually compounds this effect of debilitation, with paragraphs set off from one another in spacious isolation. Moving in closer still, we notice that syntactically too McCarthy's declarative phrases, shorn of commas and

subordination, simulate in their very texture the enervated environment they detail. This equivalence between syntax and scenery, between articulation and exhaustion, is part of what makes the book so memorably chilling. But it doesn't necessarily mean that equation is consistent; to venture that indeed it isn't means considering how McCarthy has other things in mind for style – for description, to be more precise – aside from communicating doom.

Evidence showing how description squares up to action in this way features in the sentence above on "desolation." In a striking simile, we're invited to imagine an "alien sea" from some undiscovered realm. With this image the narrative perspective departs from the impress of the man's misery: far from defeated, the language gathers metaphoric vitality and metric momentum, building through a crescendo of two successive anapests ("on the shores of a world") toward the accentual amphibrach with which McCarthy's portrait of this "unheard of" domain closes. Likewise, acoustically, the sibilance is not simply deployed in the service of the scene's literal description but instead facilitates its figurative transcription. Sure, this diction provides an apt aural correlative to the melancholy plash of waves. Yet McCarthy's alliterative cascade (some, sea, shores) propels us at the same time toward the picture of another world, a world whose "alien" appearance isn't straightforwardly comforting, to say the least, but whose sonorous depiction counterpoints the very "desolation" that inspires it. Undeniably, this simile emphasizes the novel's dismal setting by way of otherworldly comparison; phonetically, though, its surrounding sentence carries an amplified assonance that attempts to suture ecological wounds with acoustic grace.

It would be reckless, of course, to make a single sentence like this representative of the novel at large. And furthermore, euphony is a rather selective

unit of analysis, making my already narrow attention to syntax here seem narrower still. But The Road justifies this manner of close reading a verbal soundscape that resonates athwart the visual landscape it accompanies. Description counteracts the annihilation it conjures yet never pretends to heal, an anomaly that shapes McCarthy's approach to the genre of brutal demise he so arrestingly inhabits. Against the weight of biospheric and physiological decline, description phonically and rhythmically asserts itself – redressing the diminishment it evokes. However futile this appears, description nonetheless provides a "stylistic concomitant of the sense of potential" that inheres throughout the novel and in spite of the horrors that ostensibly structure it.[3]

What McCarthy's wretched tale suggests is that prosodic ingredients of description can reroute the negative affects we expect them to affirm. Refusing entirely to reinforce the turbulence it portrays, description jostles against the discomfiture a text like The Road seems bent on imparting. From this competition between content and form several larger, metacritical issues arise that I want to pursue in the following pages. Working at cross-purposes with a work's generic gist in this way, might consolation be a facet of novelistic description that recasts – sometimes intentionally, at other times inadvertently and defiantly – the very diegetic material it serves to record? And if description counterpoints instead of simply classifying and conveying what it describes, do we need to rethink the very immanence of its mimetic function? Which is to say, description might not be so passive as we might assume, fostering disunities instead between style and scene. Far from being a rudimentary, taxonomical device that frames and names, I argue that description is more vivacious in contemporary writing than traditional theorizations of it lead us to assume. And it's this vivacity that lies at the crux of how literary description consoles: rarely neutral,

description in recent fiction draws attention to its own aliveness, its own insurgent tendency to kick against plot. Fathoming the stakes of this dissidence for understanding the poetics of solace means not merely salvaging description as a neglected kingpin of writerly charisma or flair. It also invites us to ponder how description misbehaves, how it hatches rogue aesthetic plans, how indeed it becomes – through the sumptuous pressure it exerts on what it describes – a type of narration in its own right.

What might fiction's affects look like, then, once we view them as part of the agency of description? That is, how might a literary work console by doing something of its own accord, by insinuating through its compositional texture that language counterpoints as much as it coheres with what it conveys? To pose such questions is to entertain, moreover, the possibility that fiction maybe at its most consoling precisely when it doesn't depend upon the reader's consolation. The solace of depiction, we'll discover, isn't synonymous with the comforts of reading. And later on, this distinction will lead me to navigate between ways of reading for description and the varied ambitions of so-called "descriptive reading" as such. Gauging the consequences of that difference for thinking consolation in particular and for augmenting our interpretive spectrum for narrative affect in general synchronizes my overarching motivations. Oxymoronic though it may sound, critical solace names one of literary description's most animating possibilities; yet the term also denotes a species of consolation forever aware of its own intimacy with loss, illuminating the descriptive tactics with which novels piercingly catalogue the catastrophes they both register and reform. [4] A good deal of fiction's poignancy, as readers well know, often stems from its moving apprehension of what ultimately cannot be repaired. But I argue that the more this pathos depends on the facility of its own depiction, the more

likely style is to metabolize sorrow with militant grace.[5] Description in contemporary writing not only resets consolation's aesthetic conditions of possibility but also alerts us to its critical potential – even though solace has usually served as the dodgy opponent of criticism wedded to the perceived virtues of disenchantment.

Description as Defection

If consolation has often been brought into disrepute – unfairly cast as a distractive, substitutive affect, one that supposedly blocks our recognition of systemic inequalities and deters us from dissident readings – then it's not alone.[6] For nothing seems more susceptible to ingrained assumptions than literary description. Surely the most durable is that terminological division of narration and description propounded by Georg Lukàcs. Despite "all its virtuosity," he claims, "description is mere filler in the novel."[7] Zola happens to be the primary target here. But Lukàcs broadens his indictment beyond nineteenth-century naturalism to issue a warning about novelistic production at large, because in his view description had become "the writer's substitute for the epic significance that has been lost" ("ND" 127). Clearly there was something "compensatory" about description for Lukàcs too, though here its substitutions carry a rather despondent ring. Above all, what worried him was "the danger of details becoming important in themselves": with the consequent dilution of narration, these "details cease to be transmitters of concrete aspects of the action and attain significance independent of the action and of the lives of the characters" ("ND" 132). If this sounds rather inflexible in theory, it's even less viable in fictional practice, where we discover focalization turning characters into active participants of description, perpetually chronicling their own sensory perceptions. Far from

"transform[ing] people into conditions, into components of still lives," as Lukàcs insists ("ND" 139), characters' shifting inclinations carry depictive inflections, their mental states pilot the text between picturing and narrating, and their felt experiences precipitate the reader's empathy or animus. All of which seems a far cry from fictional persons being objectified victims of static portraiture, complying with "a schematic narrowness in characterization" ("ND" 139).

But however unhelpful Lukàcs's distinction turns out to be, it stands at the head of a steady stream of mild antipathy toward description running across twentieth-century criticism, a stance that has persisted even when description's connection to or detraction from narration isn't really at stake. As Mieke Bal observes, description has become something of "a bone of contention" in its own right. One explanation for this, she suggests, lies in the "gap" dividing "a criticism that applauds description" from "a narrative theory that marginalizes it," when analytical priorities split between paying attention to "the 'experience' of reading" and accounting more systematically for fiction's "logic of structure."[8] There's no reason, of course, why an emotional understanding of narrative procedures should be inimical to a pragmatic, taxonomical study of structural patterns, implying as it does a contradiction between affect and analysis that is just as misleading as the disconnection of "description" from "narration." In a vigorous exposé of these needless binaries, Ruth Ronen points out that the description-narration polarity has "endured" largely because it has been tacitly reinstated by critics themselves, even though there is "considerable confusion caused by the difficulty in sustaining the opposition in practice." Indeed, to uphold the dichotomy, one has to take for granted – just as Lukàcs took for granted the way description reduced characters to the equivalent of objects in still-life painting – that "the referentiality of description

counteracts" a novel's "narrative syntax," insofar as description "follows the logic of the object described rather than the narrative demands to which the object is subjected." This premise has spurred "post-semiotic theorists," as Ronen calls them, to "claim that description is everything which is negative of narrative (viewing narrative as a structure of signification while considering description as a mode of pure reference)," thus imposing "a theoretical opposition incompatible with textual experience."[9] And it's this experiential element that concerns me here, as I account for fiction's consoling affordances in description's unexpected countercurrents of lexical, grammatical, and metrical energy. When style refuses to be subsumed in story it breeds dissent, causing friction between expression and the very actions we expect language not only to convey but also to complement – a friction that marks the point at which description defects, shirking its mimetic duties so as to reckon with what it shows.

That description can perform these ameliorations, however, raises ethically loaded questions about the responsibilities it has toward the affective or material damage writers detail. This is not an especially contemporary dilemma, of course.[10] To the extent that description really can mitigate upsetting or even traumatic scenes through the way its micro-components – even down to the smallest pulsations and cadences, as we've seen in The Road – not only modify but mismatch what's evoked, it points to an age-old quandary of whether writers should embrace or resist the compensations of form. My aim here, however, is not to historicize that dilemma but to entertain the methodological assets of shifting attention from reception (where we usually go to speak about the consoling effects of literature) to expression (where solace may be reconceptualized in compositional terms). In particular, I submit that prominent writers from recent decades have themselves been taking on the work of

theorizing what solace means, often in the most unlikely genres and forbidding scenarios. Doing so their work reveals that consolation's comportments frequently duck the noose of our expectations of what it might critically perform. Description makes a key contribution to this recalibration of solace even in works that, thematically speaking, contest the very premises of comfort or recovery. Conventionally seen as something rudimentary, functional, even dispensable, description's limber moves could actually turn out to be among the most controversial aspects of what contemporary writing does. Setting description in tension with drama, the next part of this essay considers just how discrepant consolation becomes when depictions of dreadful loss put literature's capacity for redress to the ultimate ethical test.

Depicting and Overcoming

That the provision of solace in fiction can be coterminous with sorrow sounds like the epitome of a performative contradiction. Yet the paradox is itself enabling, urging us to find ways of doing better justice to consolation's formal variety without the presuming that we should also as readers feel somehow consoled. Narratives exercise consoling faculties most palpably, I argue, when they are most disquieting. And no late twentieth-century writer has chronicled the historical spectrum of that disquiet more disturbingly than the late W. G. Sebald. Looking to his work for solace might seem distinctly odd, renowned as Sebald is for charting the traumatizing consequences of imperial and military violence. His vertiginous reanimation of personal testimonies in solidarity with the victims of Nazi genocide carefully guards against the prospect of seeing consolation in webs of reconnection. For some

commentators, Sebald cannot quite "escape the seductions and consolations of systems" by substituting a "scholar's preoccupations" for the "historical amnesia" he aims to rectify.[11] But as Timothy Bewes has compellingly shown, Sebald deliberately exposes "the implied logic or explanatory thread" behind the very "principle" of patterning, ensuring the intellectual comforts of "connection" represent less an opportunity for "resolution" than the further "posing of a question."[12]

What's more, Sebald's own register complements this questioning of consolation, forestalling form's easy recuperations. Restrained, sometimes aloof, the very timbre of his prose might appear too inhospitable for solace, especially when "moments of emotion tend to be rendered purely visually" in his texts, insofar as "emotion itself is never identified or characterized" but instead described.[13] In sum, because Sebald "never offers" an "affirmative vision," as Matthew Hart and Tania Lown-Hecht point out, it's hard to know where in the "consistently melancholic tenor of his Weltanschauung" consolation's countermelody might be heard.[14] In what follows, though, I want to take up the gauntlet by considering how Sebald's style – "characteristically cryptic and unemotional" though it often feels in translation – counterpoints episodes that are far from consoling.[15] Bringing the resources of description to bear on the frequently unspeakable experiences he traces, Sebald complicates the notion that trauma is always indescribable, while nonetheless refusing – by way of his antique vocabulary and unruffled poise – to countenance the idea that style should ever alleviate readers of the traumatizing burden of what he describes.[16]

Throughout his career, of course, Sebald engaged the consequences of persecution whose victims can never be compensated. However unimaginable those atrocities are, description is all that remains. Reflecting on Jean Améry, Sebald maintains that for "those whose business is language, it is only in language that the

unhappiness of exile can be overcome,"[17] a conviction ratified by his earlier discussion of Austrian literature as well. There Sebald insists that the process of "rethinking of one's relation to misfortune" can in fact be "a form of resistance." And furthermore, "on the level of art as a whole," he suggests that the emotive and stylistic "function" of representing this "relation" is "something other than simply to be reactive or reactionary." In a situation where "melancholy, gazing rigidly, once again realizes that things could have only turned out the way they have, it shows that the origins of desolation [Trostlosigkeit, the opposite of Trost, consolation] and that of insight are governed by the same power. The description of misfortune includes within it the possibility of misfortune's overcoming."[18] To evoke desolate events – whose terrible logic of inevitability seems only to be confirmed in hindsight – is the starting point, suggests Sebald, for accessing melancholy's epistemology, for reclaiming "insight" from despair, so that describing adversity furnishes its own "form of resistance." This modality of "overcoming" is not equal to forgetting or willful denial. Quite the opposite. By making the distresses of misfortune legible, description makes them vigorously immediate, tangible, unavoidable. And that, implies Sebald, is the critically consoling point of writing about what fundamentally cannot be redressed. Description dramatizes its own capacity, however insufficient, to bring damaged experience into close-up, in ways that intercept not only misfortune's dissolution through retrospection but also the very foreclosure of its possible consolation.

What does writing look like that achieves this double-act, this simultaneous defiance of memory's extinction and consolation's exclusion? At least one model emerges in Sebald's eloquent commentary on Améry, where he turns to the ethics of (self-)expression as alleviation. Admiring his "scrupulous restraint," Sebald

acknowledges that for Améry language becomes the very "means whereby he counters the disturbance to his existential equilibrium" ("AI" 153, 162). This solace of self-articulation, however, "ultimately proves inadequate as a cure for the precarious condition of a man losing faith in the world again daily when, on getting up, he sees his Auschwitz number tattooed on his forearm." Distinctions between the solace we might project upon writing as a potentially therapeutic activity and the disconsolation that the writing subject himself endures contain great pathos for Sebald: "The words that Améry set down on paper, and which seem to *us* full of the comfort of lucidity, to him merely outlined his own incurable malady" ("AI" 162). While this is an incisive warning against the overhasty celebration of literature's consoling efficacy, the "comfort of lucidity" nonetheless weaves its way into Sebald's own work, particularly in Austerlitz, his 2001 narrative that occupies my focus here. As we'll shortly see, language's provision for "existential equilibrium" in this text permeates Austerlitz's unfurling self-descriptions, the exceptionally propulsive nature of which counters the disorientation and incapacity he recalls. If Austerlitz's thematic preoccupations lodge in what Hart and Lown-Hecht call the "ineffability of individual experience" – focalized by a character who is "waiting to remember, waiting to belong, waiting to return to a place that is gone" – the book's formal preoccupations are with redescribing such experience with a dexterity that consoles the physical and mental displacements Sebald narrates.[19]

An episodic, fractured biography of sorts, Austerlitz frames a series of conversations between its eponymous architectural historian and a distinctly self-effacing narrator, beginning in Antwerp in the 1960s and resuming again decades later after the two men are reunited by chance. We learn that Austerlitz arrived in Britain as a refugee with the Kindertransport from Czechoslovakia, and that only after

the death of his Welsh foster parents did he start to learn about his family's fate in Nazi-controlled Europe, including his mother's eventual deportation to Theresienstadt concentration camp. If Austerlitz refracts histories of unimaginable atrocity through the familial losses of this singularly haunted, perpetually searching individual, it's also a record of Sebald's search for a prism capable of that refraction. This "prose book of an indeterminate kind," as he preferred to call it,[20] is at the same time a quest for the "requisite gravity of language" – in a phrase from Sebald's Améry essay – a quest to "make the literary treatment of genocide more than a dutiful exercise marked by involuntary infelicities" ("AI" 146). Skirting this duty, Sebald's writing confronts memory's formidable returns and unforgiving absences, compensating for the voice Austerlitz himself struggles to give to the "bleak prospect" of history's fluidity, with its "ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish."[21]

"From the first," reflects our narrator, "I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life" (A 14). Austerlitz's aptitude for "perfectly balanced sentences" in making surprising connections and "bringing remembered events back to life" sounds so commensurate with what Sebald called his "attempt at restitution" – something imaginative literature can do that other "forms of writing" cannot – that it's hard not to see that description shades into ventriloquism here.[22] Derailing though the process of partial remembrance and reconstruction often is for Austerlitz, his knack for historical resuscitation corresponds with his creator's project in ways that seem more reciprocal than merely coincidental. And however much his odyssey appears to take over the narrative's perspectival or tonal reins,

Austerlitz is closely trailed by a distinctly Sebaldian narrator-figure who adopts the ethical injunction “to maintain neutrality,” as Carol Jacobs puts it, suggesting that “oblique indirection” is as “necessary” as any “purposeful refusal of interpretation.”[23] Meticulously unimposing, this narrator cultivates fluency – a more explicit feature of the English translation, perhaps, than of the original German – something he manages to encourage in Austerlitz, too, as his attentive confidante. So while, in content, Austerlitz’s trains of association bear the stresses of traumatic reconstruction, then, in form, they also retain a compensating fluidity, capturing a sense of impetus amid Austerlitz’s periodic bewilderments.[24] Determination underlies self-description in “bringing remembered events back to life;” but the velocity of these resuscitations coexists with our suspicion that Austerlitz’s sentences are “perfectly balanced” owing to the fact that they’re not merely recorded but also recast by his shadowing amanuensis. Consequently, a first-hand yet finessed portrait emerges of an individual who describes journeys and encounters with a decisiveness that overcomes the elusiveness of the past he’s trying to assimilate, a portrait that withstands – through its liquid manner of disclosure – the extent to which “the thread of chronological time,” in Sebald’s words, as for all “victims of persecution,” becomes increasingly “broken” (“AI” 150).

Descriptions therefore accumulate in Austerlitz not only to provide and manage information for the reader. Nor do they simply enact the epistemic instabilities and emotional insecurities that accompany Austerlitz’s confrontation with the chimera of total recall. Description does much more than that; something more counteractive than the text’s voyages into overwhelming, indecipherable pasts would suggest. Austerlitz, to be sure, struggles toward self-expression, knowing that “the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility” came to seem like

"nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise" (A 175). Yet therein lies the source of the text's most vivid ruminations: descriptions *of* the difficulties that "exposition" presents defy Austerlitz's incoherence in facing a history he has suppressed and whose recognition later threatens to spell a "silence of unfathomable profundity" (A 232). Sebald counters that silence by turning description, in effect, into narration. Fraught sequences of self-exposition not so much interrupt narrative as initiate it. In this fashion, the book becomes a scarcely interrupted testimony, even as we can also see how aptly the shimmering, indefinite edges of many episodes capture the way "certain moments," for Austerlitz, "had no beginning or end," such that "his whole life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration" (A 165). If the narrative's movement from one winding excursus to the next resembles such amorphous "moments," this does nothing to alter its strangely resilient articulacy. Austerlitz's expressivity survives the emotional vortex it conveys to mitigate that "deluded enterprise" of self-elucidation at its heart.

Oblivion stalks and threatens this fluency throughout, however, especially so in the narrator's visit to Breendonk fort, near Mechelen, commandeered by the Nazis while occupying Belgium and turned into a notorious torture centre:

> Even now, when I try to remember them, when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk and read the words of the captions – Former Office, Printing Works, Huts, Jacques Ochs Hall, Solitary Confinement Cell, Mortuary, Relics Store and Museum – the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how every thing is constantly collapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless

> places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. (A 30–31)

The run-on sentence (in Anthea Bell's translation) captures in its overflow the illimitability of "countless" sufferings, with their futile appeal to be "described or passed on." Aided by the expanding, gathering force of this parataxis, Sebald's narrator extends the ambit of "oblivion" beyond his first-hand experience of Breendonk as a monument to atrocity, taking in "countless places and objects" in a wide embrace that reminds us – at this early moment in Austerlitz, as though priming us for the narrative to come – that Sebald's overriding "concern," as Ruth Franklin notes, is not always with "the actual events" of the Holocaust "so much as their aftereffects, which cascade down out of history into the lives of anyone touched even obliquely by war."[25] Records of this cascade are "constantly collapsing"; and yet, this menacing void, this seemingly inexorable dissolution of description, is Sebald's incentive. Granted, the phrasing here – at once accretive yet volatile, a catalogue that succumbs to its own terrifyingly "countless" focus – simulates the insurmountable, forever redoubling task of writing micro-histories of those imprisoned, unconsoled, and forgotten, a task that would never be ethically sufficient for what it strives to render. But if there's relatively "little we can hold in mind," then there's more we can potentially express in the written word: a promise that Sebald realizes with great virtuosity in Austerlitz, even as he draws attention to the inadequacies of his chosen form.

Sebald is of course acutely aware of the moral implications of how literature transcribes damaged pasts, so much so that his register in translation maintains a kind of pristine reserve, an unwavering remoteness. Thus if Austerlitz's narrator – attentive

listener and elegant scribe that he is – appears to compensate Austerlitz for the "total paralysis" of "linguistic faculties," the prose that activates this compensation remains methodical, unostentatious, despite its occasionally antique flourishes. This promotion of modesty obeys Sebald's stipulations about the limits of literary consolation: limits, in other words, that mark a definite ethical position on redress; limits beyond which he would risk aestheticizing the "sense of rejection and annihilation" that Austerlitz had "always suppressed" and that now breaches "the walls of its confinement" (A 322). Yet even for a world-historical abomination as unrepresentable as the Holocaust, whose postwar legacies make the very principle of consolation seem unconscionable if not obscene; even where description is never suitably qualified to recover the experiences it embroiders; even here, suggests Sebald, there might be a role for literature to play as an agent of restitution, however incomplete or conflicted that role remains. Though Sebald seems well aware that "art alone is no substitute for memory," there is still, as Franklin observes, "something deeply consoling about his vision of art as capable of offering some sort of recompense."[26]

Austerlitz eloquently maps the uncertainties that compel suffering individuals to ask whether "we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we find in the end" (A 287). In drawing that map, Sebald notates emotional and epistemic consternation rather than simulating trauma through formal flamboyance. And yet this restraint contains a further paradox. While Austerlitz pretends neither to embody nor to appease the distress it shows, Sebald's prose still lends exquisite design to ruptured recollection – a prose whose poise goes to prove how "trauma's stalling," as Roger Luckhurst remarks, often "actively provokes the production of narrative."[27] Composed, tenacious, sometimes pedestrian: Sebald's descriptions sail closer than he perhaps intended to that "traditional idea of creative writer," in his words, "bringing

order to the discrepancies in the wide field of reality by arranging them in his own version."[28] At the same time, such ordering and shaping are ultimately of a provisional, purposefully unnerving kind, comprising a style that seems forever watchful of what Sebald called the "comfort of language evoking pity."[29]

Styling Counterlives

Pursuing further this sense that language confronts even as it amplifies pitiable events, I want to move now toward the end – with the help of an ending. The one I have in mind ranks among the most simultaneously moving and troubling scenes in contemporary fiction. More than a crucible of poignancy, though, it's an episode that speaks to some metacritical concerns that have hovered in the wings of this essay and ought finally to take the spotlight. Specifically, the scene in question allows us to tarry with the mutual implication of narrative register and divided response, demonstrating how descriptions that stage consolation as a problematic also solicit a reading experience that leaves us conscious of the vocabulary we use to engage solace – caught as our experience is, I want to suggest, between compassion and critique. The finale comes from Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro's celebrated 2005 novel, whose counterfactual portrait of postwar England imagines a society from which that most fundamental focus of institutional care and consolation – personhood – has been reduced to a purely instrumental value. All but erased from public conscience, cloned humans provide harvestable organs, delaying the onset of most common fatal diseases by exponentially increasing life expectancy for the general (that is, non-cloned) population. Palliative nursing research has long emphasized the importance of patients' "experience of an empathic relationship with their nurses," an experience

best “captured in the category of ‘affirmation as a person’.” In grim opposition to nursing’s basic ethical codes, Ishiguro’s clones face the impossibility of ever being acknowledged as individuals at all – of ever being “affirmed” as persons with whom nurses can empathize.[30] That the state has legislated this heinous voiding of care is of course the novel’s central abomination and core thematic preoccupation. Yet the perversion of care itself – including the costs borne by clones who take pride and comfort in caring for fellow donors destined to be killed by the societal profit they sustain – plays a crucial part in how the novel parleys with the plausibility of solace. Denied the very principle of positive carer-patient interaction foregrounded by recent scholarship on nursing practices, Ishiguro’s clones are denied too what Astrid Norberg, Monica Bergsten, and Berit Lundman call the assurance of “consolation as a spontaneous unselfish manifestation of life in an exclusive atmosphere of giving and receiving in mutual trust.”[31]

Unless, that is, they get a carer like our heroine, Kathy H. Having decided to commit her remaining years to nursing clones – including her difficult, jealous friend, Ruth, along with the love of her life, Tommy – Kathy accompanies them on successive donations, affording them post-operative solace until the day comes when they “complete.” She’s adamant about maintaining care standards, regardless of the pointlessness that stalks the whole enterprise and that Tommy insinuates in a brief quarrel late in the novel, where he asks “‘is it really that important? Okay, it’s really nice to have a good carer. But in the end, is it really so important? The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they’ll complete.’” Buffering herself from the dread underscoring Tommy’s observation, Kathy insists: “‘Of course it’s important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor’s life’s actually like.’”[32] Never losing sight of that possibility, Kathy has excelled at what she does. Having “developed a

kind of instinct around donors," she intuitively seems to "know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it" (N 3). Knowing how to enable her patients to describe their feelings to themselves – while knowing too when to take up that description herself – is evidently part of the comfort she provides.

Yet Kathy has her own reasons for description on a larger, self-excavating scale too. For the novel itself might be viewed one extended re-description, as she leads us back to childhood and the friendships forged there with Ruth and Tommy, who subsequently succumb to a life-determining system none of them can change. Moreover, Kathy's retrospective story – what Mark Currie calls a narrative of "unwanted freedom and remembered anticipation" – pitiably gathers and groups shards of solace.[33] Resembling a personal memoir both in mood and in its spatially confined purview, the novel compositionally enacts (perhaps desperately so, from our perspective) an extended consolation through self-descriptive reminiscence. A painstaking process of memorialization thus outweighs, by virtue of its sheer exhaustiveness, the more dreadfully finite prospect of Kathy's time as a carer drawing to a close. Meticulous retrospection compensates in part for fateful apprehension.

Memories will endure "safely in my head," predicts Kathy; they constitute "something no one can take away," now that she faces the prospect of an imminently (and, for the reader, ominously) "quieter life" she expects to lead after years of nursing a donor-community she will soon join (N 262). Through this "confessional" orientation toward the past as well as to what's lies ahead, Kathy "positions her reader," in Anne Whitehead's terms, "as fellow victim and passive observer (preoccupied with the same minor compensations and injustices as herself)," so that

consequently "by the end of the novel we too have become 'carers' through our involvement in and affective engagement with her story."[34] Picturing readers confronted with the predicament of looking "beyond the immediate needs of those who are closest to us," Whitehead persuasively suggests that Never Let Me Go allegorizes the way "literature and care work" alike can "uphold social inequalities, by producing consoling (but false) fictions of legitimacy and meaning." Such fictions operate as a "diversion from activist agendas," typically "by enabling us to feel good about our actions without interrogating too closely the power structures and relations that underpin them."[35] In a moment I hope to offer a rather different account of where the reader might emotionally end up by the novel's close. Avoiding the proclivity to yoke consolation together with collusion, I'll suggest that Ishiguro invites us to contemplate the predicaments of our own complicity and, further, to contemplate the penetrative goals of interpretation as such. For now, though, it's worth noting that feeling good with respect to one's actions without entirely reflecting on our own self-justifications is exactly what critique can sometimes be about. When criticism consecrates its own interrogative agendas, it may recycle exactly the sort of response that Ishiguro, I argue, wants us to scrutinize. He does so by compelling us to look again at how our will-to-expose "minor compensations" throughout the novel – whether in terms of the fictions clone-children seek refuge in, or the lonely routines of care Kathy now savours "later" in life – betrays the interpretive comforts afforded by demystification, including the comforts of proving the success of one's own self-assured apparatus.[36] To the extent that a production of "consoling fictions" across the novel might actually be a mark of the clones' imaginative autonomy – "the students' true creativity," after all, "lies in the narratives of possibility" which "they relate to themselves and each other"[37] – Ishiguro calls to account, I suggest, the reader's own

sceptical dismissal of such narratives of solace, speculative and arguably ineffectual (at least in this novel's world) though they remain.

Never Let Me Go's provocation is therefore not only diegetic, centering on the milieu of bio-ethical atrocity and violent inequity that Ishiguro hypothesizes. It's directed outward, too, aimed at a suspicious reader bent on associating solace with sentimentalism or self-delusion. A temporary patch in times of sorrow; an expedient sedative that blunts incentives to rebel; a mollifying gesture that invites us to acquiesce, to be content with what we've got: solace can be charged with all these misdemeanours. But Ishiguro mobilizes a different story about this most mercurial of affects, a story that's also about exegetic method. Looming in his novel's crosshairs is the critical appetite for verifying complicity, for indicting the reader who refuses automatically to condemn as a destructive fallacy what vulnerable characters utilize to console. That nothing could be more alluring for the critic than a self-satisfying critique of consolation's supposed reinforcement of political passivity is the conundrum Ishiguro prompts us to deliberate. And it's one that disposes me to look once more at what solace, beyond superficial compensation, might mean in the final scene of a novel that so potently mixes abiding dread with momentary comfort, a scene of transitory reprieve where consolation's complexities are mediated by the work of description.

In an interview from the mid 1990s, Ishiguro argued that "consolation" applies to "something you can't fix or heal; all you can do is caress it."[38] For her part, Kathy leaves that caress till the close, regarding the temptation to spy a counterlife for Tommy and herself as an "indulgent thing" (N 263). Successive, often laborious phases of retrospection have until now waylaid her expression of the grief she has been trained to pre-empt. But in these last lines she yields:

> That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood has washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be. (N 263)

"It's a kind of consolation that the world isn't quite the way you want it," reflected Ishiguro in 1990, so that as a writer "you can somehow reorder it or try to come to terms with it by actually creating your own world and own version of it."[39] Echoing Sebald's implication that, for the creative writers, it can be consoling to lend "order" to the "discrepancies" of reality by "arranging them" in one's "own version," Ishiguro is patently talking about the solace of imaginative liberty. Vestiges of this sentiment, though, can be spotted in the novel he published fifteen years later. It's not that Kathy can or should simply "come to terms" with her world of premature loss. What's moving instead is the self-consciousness with which she tests her own capacity to be

consoled, envisioning alternative outcomes in a private thought-experiment framed by her portentous expectation of having "to drive off to wherever it was [she] was supposed to be." The reader is steered into a partial lee, tucked away from the squall of inevitability – knowing as we do that what awaits Kathy has only been deferred temporarily. And the elegance with which description escorts us into this gossamer refuge shows how style takes on a counterlife of its own. Looser syntax and sibilant-rich diction transport Kathy's language as she allows herself to be transported into this "little fantasy thing." Tentatively submitting to a longing "only a couple of weeks" old, she breaks with hitherto laboured depictions of recalled events. Previously these have ensured small-scale reparations subdue her expectations of how lives might otherwise be, as her analysis of past experience funds a "therapeutic encounter," in Bruce Robbins's phrase, which "steals a good deal of the show."[40] Here, by comparison, description relaxes: up to this point, it has been predominantly spare, declarative in construction; now it modulates into swelling parataxis, while Ishiguro liberates Kathy's diction from the clichés of her foregoing recollections. Though she sets foot rather gingerly into this realm of gratifying speculation, accumulating conjunctions (in the passage's second sentence) enable the paragraph to pick up lyrical momentum, just as we see the figure of Tommy in her mind's eye "gradually getting larger." If this precarious, perhaps recklessly soothing fantasy seems out of character for Kathy – someone who's habituated to accept the fate she foresees – then that fantasy is all the more eerily affecting for the reader due to the stylistic and behavioural departure it represents.

Inanimate, congregating rubbish might seem odd as a correlative for lives whose meaning this novel wants to regain. Yet the "shore-line" of gathering detritus befits in its everydayness the appalling vision of cloning as a normal component of a

proficient welfare state, one that invests in biological preservation at the expense of a second-tier population whose suffering seems masked from public view. "I wanted the characters in Never Let Me Go," reflected Ishiguro, "to react to this horrible programme they seem to be subject to in much the way in which we accept the human condition, accept aging, and falling to bits, and dying."[41] However, his extended metaphor of the caught debris here flexes beyond this parabolic function, pointing to what this scene rhythmically and melodiously executes rather than what it allegorically signals. For these final lines create a sense of discursive uplift, whose pathos revolves around the prediction of consolation's own brevity. The heightened register momentarily ambushes us before Kathy pliantly turns to go, snagging us alongside her, if only for "a bit" – like the litter indeed, but unlike the melancholic neglect that litter seems to symbolize. Description intervenes for an instant to impede the onset of Kathy's abandonment once again to predetermination.

Solace rarely materializes without a foretaste of its indeterminable cessation, and Ishiguro seems keen on finding the rhetorical means to acknowledge this. Hence the scene's power resides not so much in what it fleetingly redeems as in the way it raises the stakes for the novel's reader. By this late point, Ishiguro has primed us to expect, even to crave, style's last-minute consolations, eager as we might be to detect some luminous counterpart to Kathy's methodical, self-controlled recounting of lives that acquiesce to their own unspeakable biomedical consumption. What we first witnessed in The Road as that friction between style and situation returns; here, though, it also applies to the reader's own sentiments. For this closing sequence dislodges our wishes, our concern, from the resigned self-consciousness that underscores Kathy's description of it – animating though that description is when she permits herself, if only for a beat, to accept the fantasy's solace. Ishiguro not only

exacerbates that friction between our response (whether compassionate or incredulous) and her apparent resignation, through the sudden commotion of language – in the crescendo of syntactic enlargement, euphonic elevation, and clausal flow – though he does do that too, of course, as the confluence of verbal grace and Kathy's compliant self-inhibition attests. More pointedly, he also inflicts it on the very conditions of reading. By this I mean that traces of the self-awareness curbing Kathy's consolatory vision carry over to her audience, cautious as we might feel about gleaning from her climactic lyricism a long-awaited balm for the sombre plot we've just experienced. Moreover, just as our response becomes haunted by the self-control we witness in Kathy, the scene is backlit by the glow of all those affirmative readings one might be tempted to impose on it, however briefly and knowingly. For the temptation is this: when Kathy's apprehension of consolation as an illusion coincides with our apprehensiveness about the gruesome destiny she's now set to fulfil, her fragment of magical thinking entices us to feel temporarily consoled, not because we identify with Kathy's situation at all but because we can sympathize with the hope of finding momentary solace against the odds – of recognizing when it can be more important to care about mental refuge than to critique its supposed fallacy.

Even if we're content to indulge this temptation, Ishiguro provokes us in the end to oscillate between what we might call circumspect and consolatory readings. Yet that oscillation is by no means the novel's takeaway message. For although his readers may be "caught" at the end "between staying and leaving, holding and letting go," facing what Whitehead calls an "unresolved dilemma of care or empathy,"[42] Ishiguro also provokes us to consider the critical comforts such binaries offer – and to consider how they detract in turn from aspects of affective involvement which aren't satisfactorily unravelled by recourse to the readymade glossaries of aporia. One of

those aspects relates to the way Ishiguro not only dramatizes our own desire for solace in the face of the sobriety with which Kathy entertains then dispels the consolation that coruscates through her glimpse of Tommy's impossible return, but also reveals how that desire is enmeshed in, and emblematic of, larger predicaments of interpretation itself. Never Let Me Go, in short, embroils its reader in a way that questions our tendency to regard detachment and compassion, scepticism and complicity, critique and consolation as somehow irresolvable – along with the tendency too for finding interpretive succour in preserving antinomies as explanatory mechanisms. Ishiguro's ambivalent ending reminds us that in "[f]oreswearing suspicion," in Rita Felski's phrase, we're fruitfully "confronted not only with the text but with our implication and entanglement with that text."[43] If the novel teaches us something about what it feels to be an implicated reader it's that it can be rewarding to admit – to probe, even perpetuate – our own complicities, in ways that help us to grasp unpredictable responses to literary affects. This is not to imply that consolation should be reduced to, and measured against, the idiosyncratic feelings of a given reader. Rather, it is to suggest that accounting for the dynamism of one's very own complicity could be more important than the comfort-zone of critical distance for understanding what novelistic solace actually does.

Consolation in Critical Practice

Connoisseur of surface impressions; spokeswoman for what she notices (in patients, in friendships, in herself through hindsight), instead of what she suspects; defender of actions based around what she accepts, rather than what she unearths – Kathy is the paragon of a descriptive reader. With her at its perspectival helm, Never Let Me Go

urges us to reflect on the habits of "symptomatic reading," namely, that a text's "most significant truths," as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it, "are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible."[44] Replacing these protocols, Best and Marcus have influentially outlined the rewards of "surface reading": a method that comprises, among other things, a "willed, sustained proximity" to diction, tone, and other "apprehensible" (rather than covert) features of language ("SR" 10). This has much in common with "reparative" criticism more generally, as well as with the aims of "weak theory," since each of these approaches to some extent "stays local," in Heather Love's account, "gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness." As opposed to "powerful reductions," this mode of reading "prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole." With these priorities in mind, I agree with Love that critique often "misses the descriptive richness of weak theory."[45] For while the story told here about solace in contemporary writing doesn't consistently satisfy that theory's criteria, whatever weight my readings have gained in pursuing counterintuitive or unexpected elements of description has in part been afforded by consolation's own definitional "weaknesses": its predisposition to historical generalization, despite its radical variability over time; its susceptibility to continued misrepresentation when viewed as a rather sketchy reason why literature matters thanks to the affective work it performs.

To consider in description's strategies the coalescence of calculated and unintended consequences can also be to contradict writers with whom we want to remain on intimate terms. Yet this is a risk worth taking. Getting up close with McCarthy, Sebald, and Ishiguro, I've given primacy to disruptive connotations and emotively inadvertent implications, and this seems quite distinct in both aspiration and outcome from the desire "to occupy" what Best and Marcus call a "space of

minimum critical agency," where one feels eligible to conduct "literal readings that take texts at face value" ("SR" 17, 12). Moving rather nearer the vicinity of a "strong" rather than "surface" reading of description's consolations enables us to embark on an equally strong reading of the conceptual potential of solace itself, and to gauge the advantages of thinking this affect through the complicated lives led by form. To that extent, I do share Best and Marcus's inkling that to intensify our "attentiveness to the artwork" can spell "a kind of freedom" ("SR" 16), especially if that frees-up a more capacious sense of how writers ethically and stylistically debate consolation – fenced off as solace often is in critical discourse, owing to the dubious pacifications it allegedly kindles.

Whichever way you look at it, consolation faces a pretty steep path to legitimacy. Explicitly negative experiences – trauma, shame, melancholy, despair – are of course consolation's stormy bedfellows, but they're usually cast as its noble antagonists; or, interpretively speaking, as essential counterparts immanently worthy of our critical time and energy. For unlike solace, these solemn, pernicious, often-irreparable affects are dependably relevant, forever urgent, intrinsically venerable. Consolation, by contrast, is a rather more illicit citizen of literary studies; falling between two stools, it's a positive affect that's routinely prone to negative publicity. That consolation could in fact be as historically profound and profoundly enduring as suffering doesn't really make up for its own shaky reputation, leaving solace hard-pressed to promise critics the same gratifications afforded by topics with innate, unquestioned gravity. Yet this same struggle for analytical merit is precisely what makes the consolatory matrix of fiction so productively uncomfortable to work on, challenging our complacencies about which emotional occasions – and the cultural

works they inspire – deserve formal scrutiny, archival enrichment, and methodological innovation.

We are used to seeing consolation as the aesthetic gift that any vigilant and conscientiously chary reader should refuse. But this obedient deprecation of solace runs the risk of becoming a self-satisfying convention in its own right. Presuming consensus over consolation's suspect ploys is irresistibly gratifying: contemporary literature seems to know this, knowing too that it can do more than merely comfort us by confirming our own cherished doubts. For the writers considered here inspire counterarguments that don't easily fulfil criticism's regular forecasts about consolation's detriments. As such they help us to observe that solace isn't about recouping what's left after loss, attenuating grief's duration, or covering up the material causes of psychic devastation. Instead, a closer look at description as a conduit for affect allows us to conceive solace in active, unruly terms – a far more distant cousin of compensation than we might assume. By staging consolation's own acknowledgement of incompletion, these writers disarticulate it from mere distraction, appeasement, and soothing repair. A phenomenon that resists the salve of exchange, that's left open, that isn't really concerned with the prospect of substitution, consolation glimmers in the elegant yet unsettling contours of contemporary literature whose discrepancies we can read more incisively by its light.

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NOTES

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[1] Cormac McCarthy, The Road (New York: Knopf, 2006), 180 (hereafter cited as R).

[2] Andrew Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion," American Literary History 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 487.

[3] Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion," 497.

[4] I'm deeply grateful to Gerard Aching for sharing candid thoughts of his own on this question of consolation's interaction with (rather than displacement of) loss.

[5] To be sure, I agree with David Constantine that it remains "questionable what consolation the active beauty" of literature "might or should bring," because '[t]here is much suffering – man-occasioned – that it would be quite wrong to be reconciled to" Poetry (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 60 (Constantine's emphases). But to assume that solace is always about beautifying sorrow – evincing what Fredric Jameson once called the "transformation" of damaging "realities into style" "for consumption on some purely aesthetic level" – is to underestimate the affective latitude of consolation itself, as well as the supple reflexivity of those literary forms it

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pervades. The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1981; London: Routledge, 1996), 214.

[6] Leo Bersani's polemical account of modernism as an essentially compensatory phenomenon is a renowned case in point. Disparaging the "redemptive aesthetic," Bersani equates terms like "salvaging" and "patching" to consider how the architectonic unities and totalities of modernist fiction offer "a correction of life," one that purportedly "redeems the catastrophes of experience … by the violence of its symbolic reconstructions of experience." The Culture of Redemption (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), 3, 1, 2, 97. The coordinates of Bersani's critique resemble those of Herbert Marcuse's "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937), which speculates that "art pacifies rebellious desire," offering in place of agitation "the consolation of a beautiful moment in an interminable chain of misfortune." Thanks to such exquisite moments, the reader "tolerates the unfreedom of social existence." Marcuse, Negations: Essays in Critical Theory, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 121, 118, 121. Similar misgivings inform the following perspectives on modernist and contemporary writing: Tammy Clewell, "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning," Modern Fiction Studies 50, no. 1 (2004), 197–223; Melissa F. Zeiger, Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality and the Changing Shapes of Elegy (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997); and, more recently, Neil Lazarus, The Postcolonial Unconscious (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011). For Lazarus, the refusal of solace is modernism's most potent legacy: hence in the work of contemporary heirs like Kazuo Ishiguro "a frail light from utopia," he argues, "shines on, or rather, through, the unseeing eyes and unknowing thoughts of Ishiguro's characters," a dynamic that "engenders

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'disconsolation' in us as readers" and that proves such "work as modernist in its thrust and tendency" (32).

[7] Georg Lukàcs, "Narrate or Describe," in Writer and Critic, and other Essays, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin, 1970), 110 (hereafter cited as "ND").

[8] Mieke Bal, "Over-writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time," in The Novel, Vol. II: Forms and Themes, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 575, 576.

[9] Ruth Ronen, "Description, Narrative, and Representation," Narrative 5, no. 3 (1997), 274, 279, 283.

[10] I'm aware that this sketch of opinions regarding consolation is partial thanks to its implicitly periodizing orientation toward modern fiction: scholarship on earlier literary-historical eras has explored the poetics and politics of solace with considerable nuance. See, for instance, Catherine E. Leigla and Stephen J. Milner, eds., The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); and Dorothea B. Heitsch, "Approaching Death by Writing: Montaigne's Essays and the Literature of Consolation," Literature and Medicine 19, no.1 (2000), 96–106.

[11] J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead, "Introduction," in W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion, ed. Long and Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2004), 11.

[12] Timothy Bewes, "Against Exemplarity: W. G. Sebald and the Problem of Connection," Contemporary Literature 55, no. 1 (2014), 4.

[13] Bewes, "Against Exemplarity," 19.

[14] Matthew Hart and Tania Lown-Hecht, "The Extraterritorial Poetics of W. G. Sebald," Modern Fiction Studies 58, no. 2 (2012), 219.

[15] André Aciman, "Out of Novemberland," rev. of The Rings of Saturn, by W. G. Sebald, New York Review of Books, 3 Dec. 1998, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/12/03/out-of-novemberland/

[16] Scholars of trauma in modern literature have typically privileged the kind of fragmented narrative that "resonates beyond what we can know or understand," in Cathy Caruth's phrase, because "it is in the event of this incomprehension that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History [Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996], 56). More recently, though, Roger Luckhurst has suggested that literary and filmic "narratives have developed a repertoire of plots that explore both traumatic disruption and the possibility of release into narrative," even though for historians of catastrophe and literary critics alike this seems "at odds with some of the most influential cultural theories of trauma," which posit the term "in opposition to narrative." As a result, there's now "a flat contradiction," notes Luckhurst, "between cultural theory that regards narrative as betraying traumatic singularity and various therapeutic discourses that see narrative as a means of productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma." The Trauma Question (London: Routledge, 2008), 80, 82.

[17] W. G. Sebald, "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry," in On the Natural History of Destruction, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 161 (hereafter cited as "AI").

[18] W. G. Sebald, Die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 12–13. I'm grateful to Kevin Brazil for alerting me to Sebald's commentary here and for this translation.

[19] Hart and Lown-Hecht, "The Extraterritorial Poetics of W. G. Sebald," 225, 222.

[20] Sebald, "Air War and Literature," in On the Natural History of Destruction, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 58; Sebald, quoted in Carol Jacobs, Sebald's Vision (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2015), 167.

[21] W. G. Sebald, Austerlitz, trans. Anthea Bell (2001; London: Penguin, 2011), 144. Hereafter cited as A.

[22] W. G. Sebald, "An Attempt at Restitution," in Campo Santo, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 215.

[23] Jacobs, Sebald's Vision, 175.

[24] As readers of the German text would probably attest, fluidity isn't always the right word for Sebald's style (influenced as he was by Thomas Bernhard). So in pursuing these remarks about tone, diction, and tempo, I'm conscious of the analytical limitations of close reading Sebald in translation. That said, critics have made the case for recognizing the translated works as a virtually distinct corpus, given how involved he was in their journey from German to English. As Mark McCulloch observes, Sebald not only "participated in the process of translation as an advisor to his translators" but was also "keenly interested in the problem of translation, and served as the first director of the British Centre for Literary Translation". "Introduction: Two Languages, Two Audiences: The Tandem Literary Oeuvres of W. G. Sebald," in W. G. Sebald: History–Memory–Trauma, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloch (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 7.

[25] Ruth Franklin, A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 186.

[26] Franklin, A Thousand Darknesses, 196, 197.

[27] Luckhurst, The Trauma Question, 83.

[28] W. G. Sebald, "Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction," in Campo Santo, 89.

[29] Sebald, "Between History and Natural History," 88.

[30] Birgit H. Rasmussen, Lilian Jansson, and Astrid Norberg, "Striving for Becoming At-Home in the Midst of Dying," American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care 17, no. 1 (2000), 32.

[31] Astrid Norberg, Monica Bergsten, and Berit Lundman, "A Model of Consolation," Nursing Ethics 8, no. 6 (2001), 545.

[32] Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 258. Hereafter cited as N.

[33] Mark Currie, "Controlling Time: Never Let Me Go," in Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives, ed. Sebastian Groes and Sean Matthews (London: Continuum, 2009), 93.

[34] Anne Whitehead, "Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go," *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 1 (2011), 75.

[35] Whitehead, "Writing with Care," 81, 73.

[36] Bruce Robbins highlights Kathy's propensity to remark on "minor compensations, improvements, or advantages within what might otherwise be seen as an irredeemable disaster." "Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in Never Let Me Go," NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction 40, no. 3 (2007), 296. Using the same phrase, Whitehead suggests (in "Writing with Care") that reading literature, much "like the activity of care itself which is it closely paralleled, is seen to offer minor compensations at the expense of broader political vision, and therefore to restrict rather than enlarge the imaginative capacities of its readers" (57).

[37] Whitehead, "Writing with Care," 57, 67.

[38] Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishguro with Maya Jaggi" (1995), in Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro, ed. Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2008), 116.

[39] Kazuo Ishiguro, "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," by Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger (1990), in Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro, 85.

[40] Robbins, "Cruelty is Bad," 290.

[41] Kazuo Ishiguro, "'I'm Sorry I Can't Say More': An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," by Sean Matthews, in Kazuo Ishiguro, 124.

[42] Whitehead, "Writing with Care," 58.

[43] Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 184.

[44] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," Representations 108, no. 1 (2009), 4 (hereafter cited as "SR").

[45] Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (2010), 237–38, 237. For a bracing consideration of description as a method across disciplines, one that might change the way we think about the aims of literary analysis, see Love's "Close Reading and Thin Description," Public Culture 25, no. 3 (2013): 401–34.