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Getting out of history: Levitation and paralysis in Sebald and Nabokov

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Abstract: Nabokov and Sebald confronted the dark sides of their national histories and tried to exempt themselves from them. Nabokov liberated himself from its burden by escaping into levitation, whereas Sebald's willing exposure to its consequences ended in paralysis. Nabokov appears in his *Emigrants* as the equivocal figure of the 'butterfly man' who is simultaneously mobilizing and immobilizing. This is like the Russian writer himself, who used to adopt butterflies' metamorphoses as a writer and paralyze them as a lepidopterist. Contrary to him, Sebald was horrified by their immobilization and sincerely empathized with them. Eluding the detached position of an ultimate authority and making his author deeply attached to all kinds of 'nocturnal' creatures, he created an unreliable but indispensable narrative agency. If Nabokov was at pains to deaden the uneasy memories of his past in order to relieve the present of their contamination, Sebald took the other way around, adhering to the most painful of them in order to enlighten their subterranean existence. He was committed to manifest these deeply buried remnants via his protagonists and narrators, however this amounted to the expulsion of those among them that had no other choice but to stick to life in darkness.

Keywords: history, levitation, paralysis

Inseparable opposites

National histories hurt their participants, especially those who must confront the dark sides of their turning points. Two cases in point are Vladimir Nabokov, a victim of the Russian Empire's violent disintegration, and Winfried Georg Sebald, a secondary witness of the Third Reich's atrocities that took place some quarter of a century later with the support of his parents. The Russian landlord Nabokov was violently catapulted out of his comfortable youthful levitation above the worries of life and

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into the paralyzing labyrinths of his pauperized exile, while the petty bourgeois provincial Sebald decided to escape from the guilt-ridden paralysis of his godforsaken German border region by entering into the compulsive mobility of his expatriate life. To restore the butterfly-like hovering capacity of his youth, the enforced exile Nabokov had to get the paralyzing burden of his irretrievable past off his back; to stop fleeing from his irreparably contaminated past, the voluntary emigrant Sebald had to confront its paralyzing consequences. Following these trying agendas, they established two opposite but interdependent modes of exemption from the pace of history – levitation and paralysis – that are epitomized in Wittgenstein's released and entrapped fly from *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009: 110) or, closer to Nabokov's repertory, fluttering and pinned-down butterflies. If purposiveness gives history its human distinction, levitation and paralysis might be interpreted as paradigmatic forms of resistance to it. Those that practice the former or endure the latter are beings of a superhuman mobility or subhuman immobility, or ambiguous in-betweeners.

Sebald's fascination with the writer and lepidopterist Nabokov – the 'butterfly man' from his *Emigrants* – followed from his interest in such 'monstrous' creatures that through their peculiar behavior elude established historical rules and thereby surreptitiously instigate their mutation (cf. Sebald 2002c: 22). In the long-standing European tradition of 'care of the self' (Foucault 2014), which, in my understanding, Sebald's works masterfully resume, monsters figure as the relays of the ultimate truth of nature. According to an early modern representative of this tradition, Michel de Montaigne, this truth escapes us because we are victims of habits and apply the term 'monstrous' to "anything which outstrips our reason" (Montaigne 1993: 201). What contradicts established opinions does not necessarily contradict nature. "What we call monsters are not so for God who sees the infinite number of forms which he has included in the immensity of his creation" (Montaigne 1993: 808).

Several centuries thereafter, Sebald shares Montaigne's enthusiasm for misfits: Although "imponderable", they use to "steer huge processes around many corners, periscopically, in another direction" (Sebald 2011a: 151),[1] becoming human history's catalysts either through freeing themselves from its pace or lacking the ability to catch up with it. In the first case of sovereign observers, they inhabit the heavenly area above the tiring bustle of life, in the second case of subaltern leftovers, they are riveted to the 'zones of indistinction' underneath the human battles for recognition. As the 'butterfly man' is an equivocal figure whose butterfly aspect is fluttering and human aspect pinning down to earth, his interventions in Sebald's fictional worlds

1 All translations from other languages into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

are ambiguous, driving his characters into both levitation and paralysis. Significantly, both are contained in the German word *Schmetterlingsschlag* (smash; literally: butterfly stroke), which refers to the paralyzing blow delivered by a human that briefly usurps butterfly levitation. This blow, among all other options, can also be delivered with the butterfly net and thus paralyze the very creature whose levitation it takes advantage of. Having become a 'butterfly', the catcher for a brief moment takes up its levitating perspective by getting the opportunity to *diminish* his or her (until recently) earthly companions by making use of it; after having landed again, s/he on the contrary gets the privilege to *enlarge* the tiny, paralyzed prey in his or her net under the magnifying glass. Levitation and paralysis, diminishing and enlarging are closely interdependent indeed.

Commenting on a slide projector session dating back to his youth in Russia, Nabokov in his autobiography offers the following reflection on the essence of art:

> In the glass of the slide, meant for projection, a landscape was reduced, and this fired one's fancy; under the microscope, an insect's organ was magnified for cool study. There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic. (Nabokov 1966: 166–167)

As the passionate lepidopterist, he knew what he was talking about. Considering the first addressed 'diminishing of large things', on his lonesome hunting excursions he imagined himself enjoying "a flying seat gliding leisurely over the plant mats and rocks of an unexplored mountain, or hovering just above the flowery roof of a rain forest" (Nabokov 1966: 137). Such a remedial reunion with the time flow of nature and its creatures helped him to get out of the triumphant march of human history, the agents of which had excommunicated him and his family from its blessing:

> As if subjected to a second baptism [...], I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure medium of time. One shared it – just as excited bathers share shining seawater – with creatures that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive. (Nabokov 1966: 21–22)

"Plunging" into "the pure medium of time" like flies and butterflies – exactly this is the "second baptism" that Sebald's giving account of himself aims at. Nature is expected to liberate one from the traumatizing strictures of human history; this is why Sebald's protagonists try to live "after nature" (Sebald 1988). However, according to Nabokov, nature's "multiple metamorphosis", so "familiar to butterflies", amounts to "a diabolic task" for humans who try to plunge into it (Nabokov 1966: 13). Accord-

ing to Foucault's analysis of the early Christian care of the self (Foucault 2014: 114–141), the Christian sinners that undertook the 'second baptism' were exposed to an extremely demanding process of penance. Nabokov invokes his tormenting metamorphosis in connection with his troublesome exile that forced him into "re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place" (Nabokov 1966: 12). Although voluntary, Sebald's penance is even harder as he repents for his parents and compatriots who *committed* the sinful 'fall' instead of being, like Nabokov, *delivered to* its consequences. Contrary to the victimized Russian nobility, German petty bourgeois have chosen the perpetrator side of history.[2]

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald makes his first-person narrator exempt himself from the horrible history that was envisioned by his father's generation and undertake a penitent pilgrimage to trace down its crimes and those of other humans. At the end of the route, "the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot" (Sebald 2002c: 4). Reaching at this ultimate point "artificial silence" (5), akin to that of Kafka's Gregor Samsa after undergoing the degrading metamorphosis, the pilgrim's deadbeat and blurred vision turns everything around him into the wasteland. The narrator of Sebald's poem *After Nature* (1988) clarifies this state of mind by telling us, in the seventh chapter, that getting past developments into the big picture ultimately means confronting all-equalizing death. Plunged through this shocking encounter into a despairingly indifferent condition, he becomes a melancholic observer of a hopeless happening, in the course of which the human "belief [...] in science, progress, meaning, order and happiness" is reduced to absurdity by continuous "acts of violence" (Anz 1997: 59). Eventually, the eternal return of atrocities replaces the envisioned linear progress of human history. Next to Gregor Samsa, the narrator's bird's-eye view reminds of Kafka's another 'sinner' Hunter Gracchus that through his inconsolable neither-living-nor-dead condition alerts the differentiating efforts of earthly beings of the complete indifference of departed.

This is why, contrary to Nabokov's fictional representatives, the immersion of Sebald's doppelgangers into the time flow of nature does not achieve the purifying reunion with its creatures – flies and butterflies – but instead faces the paralyzing awareness of its impossibility because of these doppelgangers' 'sinful' heritage. Persistently haunted by the latter in the manner of the sinful early Christians, they never stop purifying themselves of its polluting impact. The repeated failure of their

2 "I come from a very conventional, Catholic, anti-Communist background," notes Sebald, "The kind of semi-working class, petit bourgeois background typical of those who supported the fascist regime, who went into the war not just blindly, but with a degree of enthusiasm" (2010: 66).

detached levitation to achieve a pleasurable reunion with nature sooner or later activates their attentiveness for the thus neglected 'misfits'. Nabokov's above-mentioned definition of art, to recall, contains such scrutiny of imponderable creatures as its indispensable ethical aspect. Blinded and deafened by the 'elevating' march of history, the winged human imagination tends to ignore them. To prevent its 'aesthetic arrogance', Nabokov used to remorsefully study his pinned-down butterflies with the aid of the magnifying glass. Sebald for his part repentantly focuses on the 'butterfly man' by making him the leitmotif of his *Emigrants*. It looks like the 'monstrous' metamorphosing ability of Nabokov's exile was equally instructive for Sebald as was that of butterflies for Nabokov.

Sebald's doppelganger Nabokov found his artistic inspiration in the mimetic subtlety of insects' and butterflies' protective mimicry, in their spontaneous "game of intricate enchantment and deception" that "by far exceeds a predator's power of appreciation" (Nabokov 1966: 125). Yet far from being spontaneous and protective as that of butterflies, his own artistic mimicry required a perpetual rebirth of his self. According to Sebald, through such "arduous" rewriting of his works, Nabokov sometimes managed to overcome gravity, reaching a kind of relieving transcendence (cf. Sebald 2006: 152). Considering the meticulous revisions of Sebald's own works, the emotional investment in this remark can hardly be overlooked.

But since human beings, unlike butterflies, underlie gravity, their no matter how strenuously achieved transcendence is necessarily transient and artificial. The first chapter of Sebald's *Emigrants*, "Dr. Henry Selwyn", addresses the magic lantern projection of the slides that were taken at Dr. Selwyn's trip with his friend entomologist. As the latter is a butterfly hunter, his photo reminds the narrator of Nabokov's, which was taken later in the Swiss Alps. But the glass of the slide that presents the breath-taking panorama of the Lasithi plateau – the same detaching glass whose diminishing effects, in the above quotation, nurtured Nabokov's imagination – breaks up from heat, causing a crack across the screen that shows the panorama (cf. Sebald 2002b: 17). Since the same instrument that fostered Nabokov's imagination now ruins that of Sebald's narrator, the complacent levitation above others must be substituted for the self-denying plunging into them. By force of such a sudden crack that sets atonement in motion, the pleasurable self-magnifying detachment from others gives way to a tormenting self-diminishing empathy with the most insignificant among them. It is precisely through the effacement of their selves that such creatures manage to escape human surveillance. However, to consider switching to their operational mode, humans must be violently catapulted out of their feeling of superiority first. It is only after a "predator" cracks and realizes that his "power of appreciation" is "by far exceeded" by the masterful adaptability of creatures (cf. Nabokov 1966: 125), that he shows readiness to pay attention to them. This paralyzing 'stroke', which Nabokov bitterly experienced in his youth

through no fault of his own, happened to Sebald after he discovered his sinful heritage.[3]

Yet how can one settle in the operational mode of minor creatures without previously approximating, captivating and pinning them down? How can a predator get rid of his habit to 'neutralize' his catch in order to make use of its advantages? Applied to Nabokov's handling of butterflies, here is how he painstakingly enlists the steps of their mortification:

> the soaking, ice-cold absorbent cotton pressed to the insect's lemurian head; the subsiding spasms of its body; the satisfying crackle produced by the pain penetrating the hard crust of its thorax; the careful insertion of the point of the pin in the cork-bottomed groove of the spreading board; the symmetrical adjustment of the thick, strong-veined wings under neatly affixed strips of semitransparent paper. (Nabokov 1966: 121)

The bottle with ether, reminiscent of the famous Wittgenstein's bottle (Wittgenstein 2009: 110), counts as one of Nabokov's habitual "killing instruments" (Nabokov 1966: 121). Whereas the torture of a female monkey and a baby chipmunk as carried out by others on the street abhors him (cf. Nabokov 1966: 223–224), his own choking and stabbing of butterflies – although his wife "accuses [him] of unnecessary callousness" (Nabokov 1966: 305) – are considered 'business as usual'. The summary liquidation of tabanids whose bites are driving his horse crazy affords him even "a wonderful empathic relief" (137). On a walk with his small boy in Paris he once happens to meet

> a quiet girl of ten or so, with a deadpan white face, looking, in her dark, shabby, unseasonal clothes, as if she had escaped from an orphanage [...] who had deftly tied a live butterfly to a thread and was promenading the pretty, weakly fluttering, slightly crippled insect on that elfish leash [...] (305)

She reminds him of a French policeman who takes a rowdy workman to the police station by "catching a small fishhook in his sensitive and responsive flesh" (306). When he diverted his boy's attention from this girl, "it was not because I pitied her Red Admirable (Admiral, in vulgar parlance) but because there was some repulsive symbolism about her sullen sport" (306). Tortured and crippled butterflies get his compassion only if they remind him of tortured humans.

Nabokov's inconsiderate deadening of butterflies is just a constitutive part of his broader strategy of domesticating and naming of whatever stroke him strange

3 During Sebald's study in Freiburg, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials were "the first public acknowledgement that there was such a thing as an unresolved German past. [...] I read the newspaper reports every day and they suddenly shifted my vision. [...] I understood that I had to find my own way through that maze of the German past and not be guided by those in teaching positions at that time" (Brigsby 2001: 146–147).

and unknown, and this included human beings and objects as well. Concerning butterflies, in the poem "On Discovering a Butterfly" published in *The New Yorker* in 1943, after he discovered the *Plebejus melissa samuelis* in the Albany Pine Bush, he writes:

> I found it and I named it, being versed
> in taxonomic Latin; thus became
> godfather to an insect and its first
> describer – and I want no other fame. (Nabokov 1943: 26)[4]

Since the fame of naming, as is known, belongs to God alone, this wish is not quite as modest as it presents itself. In the Book of Genesis, it is God who has the power to give names to humans and creatures and hence bestow distinguishable identities upon them, whereas he himself remains indistinguishable in his in(di)visibility. Apart from insects, Nabokov also used to bestow Russian babbling nicknames such as Dasha, Natasha, Lisbetsha upon his American students.[5] Such divinely nominating attitude to others reveals the tendency of the Russian imperial culture to familiarize, domesticate or 'russify' the representatives of smaller, either 'tribally' affiliated (Slavic) or neighboring (Asian) cultures. Through such patronizing embrace, they become members of a big and steadily expanding Russian family, which offers them protection in exchange for their submission and loyalty. But, along with many other expelled Russian aristocrats, Nabokov was in exile, surrounded by a big and unknown culture that threatened to 'engulf' him, which degraded his imperial attitude to the status of a defense maneuver. Rather than big and open-ended, the family that had to be established through his adoptive nomination now was small and walled in. Nonetheless he managed its members in the same way that he used to manage butterflies. His nominating levitation needed their nominated paralysis as its nurturing soil. In this way, the artist's repenting attentiveness for the creatures previously overlooked by his arrogant aesthetic levitation results in another arrogant levitation, which eventually paralyzes those that he intended to set free. This is the price that the creatures must pay for Nabokov's 'generous' reunion with them.

The ethical impasse that was generated by such discrimination eluded Nabokov but not Sebald. This explains why the 'butterfly man' in his *Emigrants*, moving back and forth between his levitating and paralyzing capacities, mobilizes the immobile

4 The poem refers to the episode described by Field (1986: 207–208), Pyle (2000), and Schiff (1999: 110).
5 "I wrote to Miss Ward, Chekhov, Dasha, Natasha, Lisbetsha" (Nabokov 2015: letter of March 19, 1941). It is telling that Nabokov's doppelganger in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, at the moment he gets his hands on the long-desired booty of 'minor' Lolita (again a babbling nickname bestowed by him!), notices in the camp director's office "some gaudy moth or butterfly, still alive, safely pinned to the wall" (Nabokov 1958: 102).

protagonists and immobilizes the mobile ones, or instigates such switches in one and the same protagonist. Thus, in the third story, the narrator's uncle Ambros Adelwarth suffers from utter inability to activate his rich memory archive, making a smooth history out of its bits and pieces. This drives him into heavy depression that he tries to heal in various psychiatric institutions. It turns out that they apply torturous therapies with the effect of emptying him out, erasing his memories, benumbing and stiffening him; in a word, they handle him in the same manner that Nabokov handles his butterflies. Paradoxically, it is precisely the mobility which the fluttering 'butterfly man' acquires through such immobilization of his butterflies that fascinates the self-immobilized 'butterfly' Ambros who believes to be receiving man's regular visits: "It's the butterfly man, you know. He comes round here quite often" (Sebald 2002b: 104). Nabokov who in his enforced exile admirably managed both to adapt himself to diverse foreign milieus and to make his deeply buried memories speak, circulates in Adelwarth's terrible exile isolation as his polar opposite. Eventually, the versatile Russian nobleman attracts the inhibited butler so fatally that he, usually very orderly and conscientious, once even misses the scheduled appointment with his therapist: "It must have slipped my mind whilst I was waiting for the butterfly man" (115).

However, in the fourth story of *Emigrants,* the 'butterfly man' gets the opposite function. The painter Max Ferber struggles with the same incredible pain in approaching his vertiginous memories as uncle Ambros. On one occasion he observes the enchanting Geneva lake from the peaks of the Swiss Alps, but suddenly, overwhelmed by perilous vertigo, he runs into the 'butterfly man' "like someone who's popped out of the bloody ground" (174) to bring the dangerously levitating Ferber back to earth. That is to say, the same 'butterfly man' that opened to the captured uncle Ambros the opportunity for free fluttering, offers to the 'fluttering' Max Ferber the possibility of safe landing. Depending on whether a riveted or fluttering individual runs into him, the 'butterfly man' either translates as the 'man *fluttering* like a butterfly' or the 'man *immobilizing* butterflies'.

Finally, if one and the same protagonist experiences his or her life at one point as fluttering and at another as riveted, s/he changes his or her perception of the 'butterfly man's' impact on his or her life retroactively – and the reader is invited to do the same. For example, Ferber's young mother is about to liberate herself for the new life with her prospective husband when she sees the long-forgotten Russian boy again who, as if following Wittgenstein's instruction, shows his most beautiful butterflies the way out of his "specimen box" (214). After her beloved man suffers the fatal stroke and after further similar blows narrow down the room for maneuver of her life up until it gets extinguished in a concentration camp, the harbinger of happiness turns into the herald of death. No wonder that her son, desperately trying to painterly catch this elusive figure that never stops breaking through the teleolo-

gical frame of history, repeatedly scratches-off his canvas and re-applies paint to it (174).

It appears therefore that Sebald engages the 'butterfly man' to shift his protagonists and readers back and forth between the limitless area of superhuman mobility situated above the realm of human history and the immured zones of subhuman immobility located beneath it. Opening them to both the ascent into levitation and the descent into paralysis, the 'butterfly man' – along with other such 'shifters' – gets the task to translate the goal-directed march of human history and the indifferent cycling of nature stubbornly and ceaselessly into one another. What this translation repeatedly stumbles over is its untranslatable leftover that ultimately wins the day. From his early poem *After nature* onwards, Sebald developed his concept of nature under the influence of Adorno's and Benjamin's "history of nature" that was directed against the then dominant philosophy of history. What connects his idea of nature with the *Naturgeschicht*e of the Frankfurt School is his effort "[t]o understand human history as a profane individual case of natural history" and "to disillusion the idea of progress" considering "the real dialectics of historical processes" (Birkmeier 2017: 250). But in distinction to Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*, who sticks to the nature's irretrievable decay, Sebald's narrative authority finds its passionate interest in redeeming this decay's 'non-identical' remnants. Through such a reintroduction of redemptive human into the indifferent natural history, he substitutes the perspective of the detached observer for that of the involved participant. Sebald once declared:

> Very often you don't know who the narrator is, which I find unacceptable. The story comes through someone's mind. I feel I have the right to know who that person is and what his credentials are. [...] The field of vision changes according to the observer, so I think this has to be part of the equation. (Lubow 2002: 169)

This distinguishes his 'biased' manner of storytelling from Nabokov's "invisible observer" that sees "the world from above" (Sebald 2006: 150). According to Sebald's sceptical remark, Nabokov is inspired by the hope that from this bird's-eye view "the landscapes of time that have already sunk below the horizon can be seen once again in a synoptic view" (151), i.e. that the past could be saved from oblivion in one and the same move with the present.

The Russian writer's comfortably levitating perspective thus engenders a generous and freely metamorphosing concept of nature in counter-distinction to Sebald's castigating and immobilizing one. The question at hand – how comes such divergence if Sebald's concept of nature is developed, among other means, with the assistance of the 'butterfly man' – requires closer elaboration. Rather than matching the author Nabokov's profile, Sebald's 'butterfly man' is shaped through its aesthetic adaptation that paves the way for its fictional appearance. Sebald eliminates

from the profile of his 'butterfly man' the Russian writer's notorious patronizing of others by transferring this attribute to a nature that therefore, in his one-sided interpretation, paternally disciplines its creatures. In the same way but contrary to him, Nabokov bereft his paralyzed butterflies of their fluttering metamorphosis by transferring this attribute to nature that, in his one-sided interpretation, makes its creatures freely levitate.

Thus, in both instances, nature's equivocal mode of operation is reduced to an *either* paralyzing *or* liberating effect, which concomitantly turns the 'butterfly complex', from which this effect is extracted, into the opposite of nature. In this way one side becomes 'positive' and the other 'negative'. Time and again criticizing such reductions of complexity, Sebald used to approvingly quote Stanislaw Lem's motto from his *Imaginary Magnitude*: "The trick of elimination is every expert's defensive reflex" (Sebald 1999: 11; Sebald 2006: 68). "Removing from his field of vision everything that is alien to his subject area" (Lem 1976: 31), expert in Sebald's interpretation behaves like post-war German literature that erases from its memory all painful aspects of its past. But although behind such replacements of unpleasant facts with wishful fabrications he repeatedly detects self-defense, he eventually resumes it himself, thus reminding us of his uncle Ambros in *Emigrants*, whose analogous memory operations motivated Aunt Fini to suspect him of "Korsakov's syndrome" (Sebald 2002b: 102).

Both Nabokov's and Sebald's opposite concepts of nature come into being through such clandestine compensatory maneuvers. If Nabokov as the victim of the Russian revolutionary history longs for the shelter in nature, the descendant of German perpetrators longs for its retaliating strikes. If nature in Nabokov's conception ensures the traumatized humans the healing flow of time, in Sebald's conception it castigates humans for their crimes. In the German writer's view, rather than fluttering freedom, nature's levitation generates paralyzing vertigo. Next to their divergent ideas of nature, Nabokov's and Sebald's wish-fulfilling transfers affect their attitude to neglected creatures as well, which in Nabokov's understanding have to be sacrificed to nature and in Sebald's understanding saved from it.

Enlightening nocturnal creatures

Whereas Nabokov circulates the pages of *Emigrants* in the shape of the 'butterfly man', in *Austerlitz* his presence is more discreet. Thus its title protagonist acts as Sebald's doppelganger in the same way that Pnin acts as that of Nabokov in his eponymous novel. Both protagonists are haunted by the second-hand experiences of the Holocaust, in Austerlitz's case connected to his disappeared parents and in Pnin's to his first love Mira Belochkin who was murdered at Buchenwald concentra-

tion camp. Whenever Pnin and Austerlitz are confronted with their painfully suppressed pasts, the motif of the squirrel pops up, as if resurrecting the agile spirit of the disappeared (the name Belochkin is derived from the Russian diminutive for "squirrel") (cf. Schowengerdt-Kuzmany 2017: 282). Next to this, young Austerlitz's beloved refuge, the Andromeda Lodge, is starkly reminiscent of the country estate Vyra and the manor house Ardis Hall in Nabokov's *Speak, memory* and *Ada*, probably most idyllic places of Nabokov's childhood.

> Like the seductive Adelaida from the mirror world "Antiterra" in *Ada*, the ethereal landowner Adela bewitches the young Austerlitz; like Nabokov's mother Elena, she emerges from the misty forest in woolen clothes. Sebald quotes this scene almost verbatim from *Speak, memory*. (Schowengerdt-Kuzmany 2017: 282; see Nabokov 1966: 44; Sebald 2011b: 111).

Besides, a scene at the Andromeda Lodge contains a covert reference to Nabokov's butterflies. Gerald's great-uncle Alphonso, the passionate admirer of moths (in German *Nachtfalter*, lit. nocturnal butterflies), puts the lamp in a hollow by showing to his nephew and Austerlitz the myriads of moths' tiny florescent figures. Fascinated by Alphonso's loving entomological explications, Austerlitz attaches to his belief,

> there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life. We are not alone in dreaming at night for, quite apart from dogs and other domestic creatures whose emotions have been bound up with ours for many thousands of years, the smaller mammals such as mice and moles also live in a world that exists only in their minds whilst they are asleep, as we can detect from their eye movements. (Sebald 2011b: 94)

This belief is tacitly directed against Nabokov who despises such "faunal fantasies", advocating a detached disciplinary attitude to animals instead of such retrograde empathy with them (Nabokov 1966: 51). It deserves attention here that the great-uncle Alphonso, who wholeheartedly endorsed the 'outdated' empathy with animals, was modeled on Sebald's adored maternal grandfather, Josef Egelhofer, whose death his grandson never really managed to overcome.[6] "Egelhofer not only filled the space left by an absent father, he also represented an intelligent, forgiving, non-military kind of authority that formed such a marked contrast with Sebald's

6 "'My interest in the departed, which has been fairly constant, comes from that moment of losing someone you couldn't really afford to loose,' he said, 'I broke out in a skin disease right after his death, which lasted for years'" (Lubow 2002: 171). Next to the notorious mustache, Sebald shared with his beloved grandfather a heart defect that most probably exempted the latter from the First World War in the same way that it saved the former from the military service in the Federal Republic. However, it "in all likelihood, killed him when he suffered an aneurysm while driving outside Norwich in December 2001" (Schütte 2018: 8).

soldier father, a stickler for order and discipline" (Anderson 2011: 32).[7] This sheds additional light on Sebald's opposition to Nabokov's disciplinary attitude to animals. Like his grandfather and unlike his father, Sebald felt sincere compassion with the encaged or exhibited animals, such as for example with "a solitary Chinese quail, evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage and shaking its head every time it was about to turn, as if it could not comprehend how it had got into this hopeless fix" (Sebald 2002c: 36), or with the stuffed polar bear in the entrance hall that "[w]ith its yellowish and moth-eaten fur [...] resembles a ghost bowed by sorrow" (36). His empathy even exceeds the world of animals by crossing into that of plants as well: "[W]ho knows, said Austerlitz, perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night" (Sebald 2011b: 94).

The moths reappear in *Austerlitz* when the narrator, in winter 1997, pays visit to Austerlitz's newly purchased flat in East End, where the title protagonist plans to write a book. In a hidden room, the narrator finds several containers with dead moths, presumably not only preserved because Austerlitz, after the aforementioned fascinating episode in his youth, still feels the greatest awe for these nocturnal beings but also because their straying revealed to him, in the small garden behind his house, a hidden Jewish cemetery (cf. Sebald 2011b: 93–94; 164; 293). Just as the Jews are saved for descendants by their burial in this cemetery, so are the moths by their burial in his adjacent flat: both expect to be discovered and thus reanimated in collective memory. However shocking this tacit parallel might be – no less than the equally implicit one between the haul of dead herrings and the pile of Jewish corpses nearby the concentration camp at Bergen Belsen (Sebald 2002c: 54–60) – it is by no means accidental, as the Nazis have often pointed out that Jews have to be trampled like insects.[8]

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7 Sebald's father absents completely from the first three years of his son's life. He was released from the French prisoner of war camp in early 1947, "morally and physically diminished (he weighs less than 50 kilos), but authoritarian and demanding; the stern usurper in a family universe heretofore benevolently ruled by a mother, his oldest sister Gertrud, and his doting maternal grandparents, Josef and Theresa Egelhofer" (Anderson, Five "crucial events" in the Life of W. G. Sebald | Sebaldiana | Kosmopolis [cccb.org]). But as he found job in the neighboring town and returned home only on weekends until 1952, his son has rarely seen him up until he was eight (cf. Sebald 2006: 206). Even on such rare occasions, he suffered because of his father's attachment to Bavarian folk music on the radio, "something terrible which I know will pursue me to my grave" (Sebald 2006: 190).

8 To be sure, this analogy was not an original invention of the Nazis but was in use much before them. In his *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn quotes Lenin's order that "all kinds of harmful insects" have to be exterminated (1974: 27). In his *Letter to the Father*, Kafka mentions that his enraged father used to call him and his friends "parasitic insects" that ought to be trampled. If Sebald counters this wide-spread conviction of power-keepers by insisting that each such 'parasite' must be preserved and

Sebald's clandestine polemics with Nabokov's levitating perspective is also conducted via *Austerlitz*'s 'periscopic', 'secondary witnessing' narrative mode, which situates the author, including his narrators and protagonists, *both inside and outside* the happenings they report on (cf. Sebald 2010: 37, 83; Hutchinson 2008: 121; Albes 2006: 58). Because of their splitting these agencies are, like Kafka's Hunter Gracchus, *neither inside nor outside* themselves (cf. Zisselsberger 2008–2009: 114). Nothing fits their displaced selves better than Montaigne's remark that "[w]e are never 'at home': we are always outside ourselves" (Montaigne 1993: 11), i.e. in others. All Sebald's agencies operate in a sort of 'gray zone', as he puts it (cf. Sebald 2010: 160), alluding to Primo Levi's famous term that disqualifies the habitual shifting of responsibility to others. What we use to forget when we blame others is that they are the missing parts of our selves. In accordance with such constitutive ex-centricity of his agencies, Sebald reintroduces in *Austerlitz* the forgotten mode of the 'hearsay narrative' that makes each agency operate as listener *and* teller at the same time. The point he wants to make is that "you don't begin with a blank page [...] You do have sources", which you must be highly responsible to (Sebald 2010: 162). Precisely because they make the inalienable parts of your self-finding, you have to respect their vulnerability.

> Especially if you are the instigator of making people remember, talk about their pasts and so on, 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. (Sebald 2010: 60)

It is not by chance that *Austerlitz*'s narrator behaves like that of Max Ferber's story in *Emigrants* who doubts his ability to construct a properly 'rounded' story, addressing his tormenting and paralyzing scruples in filtering and coordinating facts from the collected sources and templates (cf. Sebald 2002b: 230). Eluding the position of the ultimate authority, both narrators situate themselves, and concomitantly all their 'assignees', in the space in-between the credibility and incredibility. The case in point are

> the conversations between Austerlitz and other characters, such as Věra in Prague and the librarian Lemoine in Paris, in which the title character becomes the listener. Věra and Lemoine, in turn, become listeners to the stories of Austerlitz's mother Agáta and a survivor, respectively. Lemoine quotes the source of his knowledge from the Austerlitz-Tolbiac camp in Paris: as "[a] man who had worked in it told me not long ago, said Lemoine". (Wolff 2017: 56)

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memorized, Kafka adds a further twist by cautioning his father that it "not only bites but even goes as far to suck blood for the sake of preserving its life" (2008: 85).

This means that, if no single link of the transmittance chain can be unreservedly trusted, none of them can be completely rejected either. Since their testimonies condition one another – both in the sense of making one another credible and incredible – they are unreliable but not disposable. There is absolutely nothing in the past that its recollector can afford to relinquish, no matter how deeply respective memory might hurt or dishonor him. If Nabokov acts as the selective historian, Sebald acts as Benjamin's indiscriminate chronicler who lets "nothing that ever happened" pass unnoticed (Benjamin 1977: 252). Any displeasing trifle might prove to be important for the final account yet to come. "There is nothing absolutely dead, every meaning will experience the holiday of its rebirth" (Bakhtin 1979: 373). If Nabokov is at pains to deaden the uneasy memories of his past in order to relieve the present of their contamination, Sebald takes the other way around and keeps adhering to the most painful of them. Contrary to the Russian exile who gave up both his language and citizenship, the voluntary emigrant Sebald strategically sticks to them. "Moving from one language to another, generally, entails giving up your first language", he says, which was a sacrifice he was unwilling to make with his mother tongue because "I am attached to that language" (Sebald 2010: 69).

In fact, he remains attached to the disgrace that he is determined to atone. Sebald's German is the language of perpetrators, which they continued to "enjoy and celebrate after and despite their deed" and into which he for example translates Austerlitz's and Ferber's testimonies that are, out of these protagonists' deep aversion to German, originally rendered in French and English (cf. Weidner 2017: 237). By re-confronting victims with the language of their humiliation and injury, Sebald deliberately pollutes his 'collaborationist' testimony – an important writerly strategy that, sadly, disappears in translation (cf. Weidner 2017: 237–238). Out of the same shame for his parents' and compatriots' misdeeds, he decided not to get off his back the burden of the German citizenship either. "I feel you can't simply abdicate and say, well, it's nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it, whether I like it or not" (Sebald 2010: 51). "While I don't feel any responsibility [for the injustices of the German past], I do feel a sense of shame" (Brigsby 2001: 144).

Sebald's passionate attachment to the injuries inflicted by his family and national past is reminiscent of the pathological empathy with the infernal which, in the story on the uncle Ambros, is demonstrated by his eccentric and well-off employer and partner Cosmo. Cosmo seems to see "the inferno, the dying, the rotting bodies lying in the sun in open fields. Once he even took to cudgelling the rats he saw running through the trenches" (Sebald 2002b: 95–96), as if he could not permit them to ruin his disgraceful inferno. However, in stark contrast to him, Sebald is determined to rectify his pathological inclination in terms of the above delineated early Christian penance. The Christian sins could be forgiven if the sinner's intoxi-

cated conscience was publicly exposed to sunlight to its very core and darkest corner (cf. Foucault 2014: 87–88). Following this thread, Sebald makes manifest his 'nocturnal' creatures, buried deeply in his memory's 'zones of indistinction', in the shape of his doppelgangers, i.e. protagonists and narrators. He accordingly designates his fictional protagonists Kafka and Stendhal as mere "foils", needed "to get behind my own thoughts that I did not recognize" (Sebald 2011a: 64). He also agrees with an interviewer's remark that his narrator in *Vertigo* "singles out and puts forth the gloomy iceberg" of his life (69), i.e. exposes (also to himself) one aspect of his unfathomable 'true self'. He confesses to another interviewer: "Of course I want to find out something about myself and uncover things, like in a psychogram, that I couldn't grasp before the writing process" (80). Writing is an effort to "figure out things that aren't easily figured out otherwise" (51). "Somewhere under the carpet or in the attic or in other hidden places there must be pieces of evidence that offer an explanation for one's own biography" (77). In a word, opposing Cosmo's passionate attachment to the poisonous abyss of his memory archive, Sebald is at constant pains to exhibit its nocturnal dwellers 'in sunlight'.[9]

The basic assumption behind his consistent strategy of working through is that nocturnal creatures long for the divine sunlight in order to turn equal with other people. However, already in 1951 Adorno argued that 'morally malformed' creatures are violently pushed into irreparable darkness precisely by their societies' discriminating daylight morality. "It is this violence and evil that brings these customs into conflict with morality," spells out Adorno, "and not the decline of morals" for which the daylight morality blames and castigates nocturnal creatures (Adorno 2001: 17). Deprived both of the prerequisites to face and to resist this sunlight, they ultimately internalize its violence in the form of self-blaming, self-humiliation and self-tormenting. Adorno's dictum "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 1978: 39) explains why socially damaged subjects, put under the constant pressure of modern societies' "limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats" (Foucault 2008: 64), eventually become abject objects of self-destruction. It is Sebald's narrator himself, after all, who in *Austerlitz* addresses the terrible pain

9 Although Sebald admits to have often been allured by the vertiginous abyss of the past, he preferred to "stay upright through all that" temptation (2010: 57). In the same enlightening spirit, in his *Natural History of Destruction* (Sebald 2004: ix-x) he opposes German post-war literature's "suppression" and "anesthetization" of painful memories, whereas in his interviews he criticizes his parents' "taboo zone" put "under lock and seal" (Sebald 2010: 44, 84–85). He also significantly supports Günter Grass's belief that the suppressed truth spreads through post-war German homes like a stench and that it is the writer's task to discover and name it (Sebald 2006: 113–114). One of the reasons for his fascination with Thomas Bernhard is that the latter addressed his readers in the same ruthless way that a Lenten preacher addresses his flock (Sebald 2011a: 230).

of the disoriented and stiffened moths exposed to sunlight (cf. Sebald 2011b: 93–94). In his other works as well, the doppelgangers invoked to externalize the nocturnal dwellers of his memory undergo significant adaptations and adjustments.

In the third story of *Vertigo* devoted to 'Dr K.', for example, Sebald's narrator establishes complicated doppelganger relationships with both Kafka and his figure Hunter Gracchus. This figure's homeless, eternal wandering is emblematic of the fate of the literary author both in Kafka's (cf. Brunner 2009: 479) and Sebald's view (cf. Gray 2017: 270). Daniel Medin has therefore interpreted Sebald's confrontation with Kafka as the basic condition for his own writerly becoming and the development of his own narrative voice (cf. Medin 2010: 91). Nevertheless, his attachment to Kafka is equally convoluted as is Kafka's attachment to the son of a Jewish bookshop's owner in Prag that is described in the writer's letter to Felice (cf. Kafka 1999: 107–108). The guy is an inconspicuous bachelor whom Kafka 'almost lasciviously' follows through the streets of Prag until he disappears into the "gate of the 'German House'", where he stays every evening after business hours and the dinner. In the story, Sebald's narrator discovers homoerotic motives behind this odd fascination (and behind that of the Hunter Gracchus for the mayor of Riva) (cf. Sebald 2002a: 165–167), but Richard Gray puts forth the following counterargument:

> When the German writer Sebald 'follows' the Jewish writer Kafka, he deliberately inverts the described episode from Kafka's letter to Felice, in which Kafka, who sees himself as an unsuccessfully assimilated Jew, 'lasciviously' follows the Jew who feels like a German. It is reasonable to assume that Sebald's identification with cultural outsiders like Kafka is symbolic of his own sense of marginalization and 'homelessness' in his native Germany, which eventually led to his own voluntary emigration. (2017: 272)

It appears, therefore, that Sebald's exposure of his nocturnal creatures via his doppelgangers is coupled with the tacit covering of his real stakes. His enlightenment amounts to the preemptive screening of these creatures, which eventually hinders the sunlight to apply to all of them or their components equally. Interestingly enough, his clandestine selection spontaneously follows the modern state administrations' reformed governmental technique that shifted attention toward the discriminated and excluded, yet without abolishing their "inequality" "in relation to the common regulation" (Foucault 1977: 223). The case in point is Sebald's protagonist from *The Rings of Saturn*, the mighty Chinese Empress Tz'u-hsi (1861–1908), who due to her exclusive focus on providing enough food for her silkworms made roughly ten million of her subjects perish in a drought: "Of all living creatures, these curious insects alone aroused a strong affection in her" (Sebald 2002c: 151). The silkworms' swift metamorphoses, which in the shape of butterflies attract Nabokov's *aesthetic* attention, also attract the Nazis' *political* attention, primarily due to these insects' marvelous productivity. In 1936, Hitler as the supreme breeder of young Germans,

ordered school pupils to be taught "the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to pre-empt racial degeneration" (294).

In a word, only those who are ready and able to sacrifice their selves to the political goal of common being must be preserved and fostered, all others have to be exterminated like 'vermin'. It follows that the 'elected' 'nocturnal creatures' commitment to the future proper commonality spawns the elimination of their 'degenerate' fellows that prove unable or unwilling to follow it. Instead of being restituted in accordance with the mission of literature as proclaimed by Sebald, they are "secretly and silently betrayed" and forced "to do penance in the dark of an all too sober realm where wild confusion prevails in the treacherous light" (Sebald 2006: 214–215). That is to say, Sebald's ethical commitment to the enlightenment of his self's nocturnal zones – which in his view figures as the key prerequisite of proper commonality – amounts to the expulsion from this commonality of those nocturnal creatures (or their memories) that have no other choice but to adhere to life in darkness. From their point of view, Sebald's consistent self-enlightenment is an admirable undertaking of an ultimately privileged voluntary expatriate, which testifies to his own burden rather than to that of all 'fallen' humans. It is not the 'intrinsic' moral pollution of humanity but the fine distinctions of Sebald's personal predicament that pave the way to his extraordinarily demanding and highly elaborate 'care of the self'.

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