

Baffling Narrators:

Barthes's Neutral in Novels by Szabo,
Sebastian, and Sebald

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Abstract

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This essay uses Roland Barthes's concept of the Neutral to explore the narrative styles of three 20th century European novels: *The Door* by Magda Szabo, *For Two Thousand Years* by Mihail Sebastian, and *The Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald. In each case, the essay locates some unwillingness on the part of the narrator to make affirmations about himself or herself or the world, or an effort to baffle others' attempts to do so. Given that each of these novels, to varying degrees, deals with the persecution of Jewish people in mid-century Europe, the essay tests the limits of the Neutral as a narrative impulse.

Introduction

In November, I read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which is largely about the author's relationship with her partner Harry, who does not fit into the traditional gender paradigm. More importantly, Harry resists the titles that we would usually assign to this specific form of non-conformity: that *he* is *transgender*, a transgender man. Harry feels that "words are not good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is flow" (4). Harry resists the way we produce meaning by assigning words to concepts that stand in opposition to one another, in conflict—which is to say, language. He resists the semiotic paradigms in which, when we speak or write, we are forced to take up a side.

Late in the book, Nelson describes a class she took with Eve Sedgwick in which students were asked to introduce themselves with a personal "totem animal." Nelson feels the same mix of anxiety and disdain that I would in such a situation. She dislikes the mooniness of the game and, more profoundly, doesn't want to pigeonhole herself with some symbol.

When it got to me, I burped out *otter*. Which was a form of true. It was important to me back then to feel, to be wily...I didn't know then Barthes's book *The Neutral*, but if I had, it would have been my anthem—the Neutral being that which, in the face of dogmatism, the menacing pressure to take sides, offers novel responses: to flee, to escape, to demure, to shift or refuse terms, to disengage, to turn away. (112)

In this way, she's not unlike Harry. They both resist being pinned down, though Nelson has more faith in the ability of language to convey what can't be said by way of what can.

The title of the Barthes book piqued my interest in part because a few of my classmates had taken to calling me “Switzerland,” and Nelson’s description of the Neutral valorized something that is, in their mouths and those of most, pejorative.

In fact, Switzerland is not an example of what Barthes means by the Neutral. But I think his description of it, of the impulse to pursue the Neutral, to avoid asserting yourself as this or that sort of person with this or that set of opinions or values, is relevant to the reasons I’ve garnered the nickname. And reading the book, I not only saw myself in the desire for the Neutral, but found that it illuminated an impulse at play in a number of books I cared about, books that I took as models for my own writing. Each of the narrators in the three novels I’ll look at—*The Door* by Magda Szabo, *For Two Thousand Years* by Mihail Sebastian, and *The Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald—pursue the Neutral in a different manner. Or rather, the first two go in almost exactly opposite directions, and the third employs elements of both and is a limit case for the concept, for its usefulness in dealing with polarizing historical material. My goal in this essay is to illuminate the tendency towards evasion in these first-person narrators, and at the same time to grapple with the explanation or defense that the concept of the Neutral provides them.

The Neutral

“I define the Neutral as that which outplays {*déjoue*} the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm” (6). With this definition, Barthes commenced a course on the Neutral at the Collège de France two years before his death, the notes for which are the basis of the book. To Barthes, the paradigm is “the opposition

of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning” (7).

The easiest example of this is political ideology. Arguing with my uncle Grant, an investment banker, we each step into established positions in a conflict, and that conflict is the basis for our making sense of ourselves and each other: he is the free-market capitalist; I’m the defender of government intervention and the welfare state. In arguing with my classmate Deven, on the other hand, I become the liberal, the supporter of the price mechanism and individual freedoms, in opposition to him as the old-fashioned communist. (Though he probably wouldn’t call it “old-fashioned.”)

Political ideology is an easy example, but Barthes and other post-structuralists argue that all meaning or significance arises from these sorts of semiotic conflicts. We are able to name and categorize colours, for example, on the basis of their non-equivalence: red means not-blue and not-yellow and not-orange. House means not-skyscraper and not-apartment building, and etc. As opposed to a referentialist approach to language where the fundamental element defining the term “house” is its relationship to the thing itself, to the sort of smallish buildings that often shelter one family, the fundamental element defining the term “house” on this post-structuralist model is negative: “house” is defined in opposition to the terms “apartment building” and “skyscraper” and etc. (In fact “house” is defined in opposition to “liberal” and “blue” as well: “house” is not a political ideology, it’s not a colour, and so on.) Barthes highlights the opposition of “two virtual terms” because every non-equivalence is, fundamentally, a binary opposition: to say that a liberal is neither a fascist nor a communist is to say, more simply, that liberal \neq fascist, and liberal \neq communist. And of course fascist \neq communist as well: language is like a web in which every node is connected to every

other node, and each of those connections is negative, a relationship of non-equivalence: a conflict.

The meaning of all words and concepts arises out of this sort of conceptual conflict. And if I argue with Deven about communism, I'm sort of imitating or taking a cue from the conceptual conflict that's already present on the most fundamental level of the structure of the language itself, of how these terms make any sense in the first place. The fact that I understand and affirm myself as a neurotic tidier in relation to my girlfriend's comfort with mess is a sort of personal analog to the way the word "tidy" makes sense only in its negative relation to "messy." (Or, less optimistically, Barthes might say that I am in the grip of the authoritarianism of language when I find myself identifying as a tidy guy—I'll return to this below.) Any affirmation stands opposed to some other value or trait or choice, a conflict from which both derive meaning. Even wearing a certain pair of pants around town is, on some level, a declaration of war against all other styles and colours.

To *baffle* or *outplay* the paradigm, then, is to speak or act in a way that sidesteps the affirmation of any such term as far as possible. The Neutral is not the same as neutrality; Switzerland is not a figure of the Neutral, but rather affirms the value of not fighting wars in relation to other, warring states.¹ The example of the pants shows just how impossible any thoroughgoing Neutral would be: to wear no pants would be a different sort of affirmation, so you're sort of stuck. Similarly, a systematic silence does not outplay the paradigm because the refusal to speak will itself come to signify in

¹ It helps to remember, on this point, that Barthes wrote and taught in French, and the translation of the term he employed, *le Neutre*, isn't perfect; the translator also considered making it "the Neuter." For a description of what each of these translations would capture about the French term, see the translator's introduction, pages xiv to xv.

opposition to those who do: if I took a vow of silence, I would become the guy who never speaks, who disapproves of speaking. To outplay the paradigm to any extent at all is a tricky task. The words *outplay* and *baffle* indicate the wiliness that is necessary, the ingenuity. There can't be an absolute or pure example of it. Barthes often notes that he is identifying the *desire* for the Neutral rather than the Neutral itself, its flickering or shimmering in a given figure.

It might be helpful to note here that Zen Buddhism and Taoism are hugely influential on the concept, and Barthes is constantly making references to one or the other. One figure of the Neutral Barthes discusses at length is the Tao concept of *Wou-wei*, which is essentially the art of not choosing. "The *Wou-wei*: obviously, it's not the opposite of will-to-live: it's not a will-to-die: it's what baffles, dodges, disorients the will of life" (176). Barthes calls the West the "land of proselytism" and says, for this reason, that any figure of *Wou-wei* will be partial, "only moments, tendencies, aspects of some individuals" (177). But he pulls, amongst others, a quote from *War and Peace* in which Prince Andrei decides that he must "live out his life, content to do no harm, and not disturbing himself or desiring anything" (Tolstoy qtd. in Barthes, 178).

Looking at what Harry says about language in *The Argonauts* helps explain where this desire for the Neutral comes from. Like many people, Harry doesn't fit nicely into the paradigm of man ≠ woman, which is a linguistic paradigm whose terms have already been set out in opposition to each other before Harry arrives to occupy one. Many people who don't fit into one term or the other posit a third one. These days it might be "trans," and so we then have trans ≠ man and trans ≠ woman. But Harry is uncomfortable with

any term that might signify his gender identity, any term to which he'll be pinned. As the narrator of *For Two Thousand Years* worries, there's a risk of this seeming vain or sort of childish, but I think that misses something important. There is a sort of bullying in the way language forces you to take up a side in some conflict you had no part in creating. "Trans" or "transgender" are the accepted umbrella terms to describe Harry's gender, while other arbitrary signifiers that might have once been used have been rejected over time after coming to signify the bigotry of those who used them derogatively. Maybe "trans" will one day be supplanted by something else. I think Harry is trying to step back and say no to that whole process, to the affirmation of one term that's set in opposition to others, a term that will accrue its meaning behind our backs.

Or, with regards to my arguments with Deven: on one hand I really do believe that planning the entire economy is not a good solution to economic inequality, but I also feel sort of frustrated with myself when I find myself arguing on behalf of the liberal position. It feels as if the linguistic paradigm of liberal \neq communist will, in these moments, descend on me from above, or from the past. The language takes hold of and speaks through me. Such conversations get boring quickly because the paradigm is already so thoroughly defined, but I also wonder how much my belief about planned economies is a result of my own judgment, and how much I've just ended up on one side of the conflict and have taken up the significations of "liberal" as my own identity.

Apart from the trickiness or impossibility of achieving it, there's a paradox at the heart of the concept: as soon as you start talking about the Neutral, *it* becomes the object of an affirmation, or gets pulled into a paradigm of the Neutral \neq affirmative or the polemical.

Speaking or writing about the Neutral is, in a sense, anti-Neutral. At times, Barthes will admit that the best you can do is “to speak, to write, and to hold still about the wound of affirmation” (45). But he also tries to squirm out of affirmation, and in doing so gives his students and readers a demonstration of how the Neutral might be pursued. For example, in organizing the course, he used a randomizing process to decide in what order to present the twenty-eight figures he discusses, a move meant to avoid imposing a master narrative on the Neutral. The course is about the ways people make similar attempts to sidestep assertion as best they can, or to avoid the most arrogant forms of it. (Arrogance is a word Barthes uses again and again to describe assertion, assertiveness.)

But they do not squirm out of or sidestep assertion because they’re indifferent to the terms they might assert—this is maybe the most important point of my summary here. Barthes insists that the paradigm has us in its grip when we make assertions that play into its structures of meaning, such as when I assert the value of markets and prices in opposition to Deven’s communism. The desire for the Neutral is a revolt against that dogmatism, its authority, against the bullying or what he even refers to as the “fascism of language” (42). This is not about indifference. Harry is not indifferent to gender, nor am I indifferent to politics. “‘To outplay the paradigm’ is an ardent, burning activity” (7).

That said, Barthes takes the concept to some places that are not obviously ardent, and it’s important to clarify what sort of “burning” we’re talking about here. Weariness is a figure of the Neutral—one that will be important again below, in looking at *The Rings of Saturn*. It’s strange to say that someone is “ardently weary,” and yet I think that is what he’s saying: weariness is a figure of the Neutral when it’s wearied by the interminable conflicts that give rise to meaning rather than merely indifferent to the

meaning that does arise from them. It's ardent or burning inasmuch as it is looking to subvert those conflicts through the affect of weariness.

One of the forms of weariness he describes is a response to the demand for a position. "How do you situate yourself with regard to Marxism, Freudianism, to *x*, to *y*?' 'What is your position in this debate?' Weariness: the demand for a position" (18-19). As a response to such demands (and to "interminable speaking"), weariness is "a state that is not possessive, that absorbs without putting into question." He adds, "weariness: the price one has to pay in order not to be arrogant?" (20)

Even as I write that out, I can hear the crusader in me objecting: "Absorb without putting into question!? What about the Nazis? What about Charlottesville?" The tension between the part of me that objects and the part of me that is drawn to this concept is part of what's animating this paper. I'll make a few preliminary observations about the difficulty here before turning to the novels.

First, I think Barthes would point out that any thoroughgoing Neutral is impossible, that he is only identifying the places where he sees the desire for the Neutral, where that desire burns. He will describe it in relation to politics at times (and, in the section on *Wou-wei*, even questions the axiom of democratic discourse that apathy is appalling, a scandal), but never mentions the Neutral as a possible response to Nazism. My guess is that he would say "That's not the place" in much the same way that, in *The Human Condition*, describing the importance of forgiveness as a corrective to the unpredictability of political action, Hannah Arendt allows all the same that there are some acts that are unforgiveable, clearly alluding to the Nazi regime from which she fled. The

only evidence I have that Barthes would say this is that he avoids discussing the pursuit of the Neutral as a response to the most heinous political positions. And this wouldn't, in his mind, call into question the concept of the Neutral; it could in fact be seen as anti-Neutral to insist that the Neutral is the appropriate response to every affirmation whatsoever. Part of me thinks he's right to steer clear, and yet much of this paper will be probing at how close the Neutral might get to the Holocaust.

The second response, and perhaps the least consoling of them, is that the Neutral is not an ethics—at least not in the sense of systematically positing virtuous or righteous behaviours in opposition to bad or evil ones—and to treat the concept as a new way of getting to the old results is, I think, to miss the point. In describing, ostensibly, how one might abstain from correcting another person's manuscript—though “correcting” can be taken here in a larger sense as well—Barthes writes: “it's selfish? No doubt, for the Neutral doesn't care to fit our image of altruism, of duty. However, think: the density of dogmatism inherent in all correction; the amount of appropriation, (substituting myself for the other)...” (82). The Neutral is almost an inverted Nietzschean anti-morality, where one responds to the social construction of values not with an enormous will-to-power, but with the opposite, with *Wou-wei*, with a refusal of arrogance, a refusal to assert oneself. (One might object that correction, on this account, is cast in such a negative light that refusing to correct comes out seeming virtuous. But to insist that always or in general people ought to eschew correction would itself be dogmatic, anti-Neutral—and Barthes will not say that.) A “refusal to choose” is more nearly in keeping with conventional morality than is the Nietzschean will-to-power, but the two have more in common than either does with other systematic ethics.

But if that sounds bleak, there's consolation: describing Pyrrho, the first Skeptic in the Western philosophical tradition, Barthes says, "he was worn out by all the words of the Sophists and, a little like Gide, asked to be left in peace. In doing so, in assuming his weariness...he created something." What he created was "neither a philosophy nor a system," but perhaps a style of thought, one that incorporated that lassitude without being merely indolent—a style of thought that was "asystematic, adogmatic." "Weariness is thus creative...thus shares in the *new*: new things are born out of lassitude—out of being fed up" (21).

The Door

The narrator of Magda Szabo's *The Door* is fed up with herself. We're told at the outset that she's composing the novel after having betrayed and, indirectly, killed her housekeeper Emerence. *The Door* tells of the relationship between the narrator and Emerence in the years leading up to the betrayal. Emerence is a representative of old-world Hungary. She's come from a peasant village to Budapest and can be both embarrassingly deferential towards the narrator and also, at other times, brusque or controlling or inexplicably hostile. She sees the world very differently than the narrator, who is an artist and intellectual of rising prominence in the country. The narrator's betrayal of Emerence is an assertion of her own view of the world over and above Emerence's—a correction in Barthes's sense, an anti-Neutral affirmation of how the narrator sees the world, which conflicts with Emerence's perspective. She invades Emerence's neurotically-protected privacy, a privacy that seems to the narrator irrational

and detrimental to Emerence's well-being. In the immediate circumstances of the betrayal, the narrator also has in mind her own ambitions and convenience, which adds to the shame and penitence she feels after Emerence's death. It was an assertion of herself—both of her worldview and her ambitions—that caused Emerence's death. And in my view, the Neutral gesture of the novel comes out of the shame and penitence about that betrayal: the narrator pours all her artistic energy into evoking the character of Emerence and, simultaneously, allows her own character to recede into a hazy, unarticulated, Neutral state, as if to make up for the sin of the affirmation that killed her.

I should note, however, that the idea that the pursuit of the Neutral might be a response to shame is in conflict with something Barthes writes in the section on *Wou-Wei*. He writes that there are two kinds of not choosing: one that is “panicked, rattled, ashamed, scolded,” and one that is calm and self-assured (176). He attributes *Wou-wei* to the latter. But the idea that shame could not be a precursor to the desire for the Neutral just seems wrong to me. And in fact two pages later Barthes brings up Prince Andrei from *War and Peace* as a *Wou-wei*-like figure of the Neutral, and part of what gets Prince Andrei to the point of wanting simply to do no harm and desire nothing is his shame over how he treated his wife before she died. I think there can be a burning pursuit of the Neutral that comes about as a response to regret at having asserted oneself badly, over and above others. That's what drives the pursuit of the Neutral in *The Door*.

After having asserted herself in a way that betrayed Emerence, the narrator pours the great majority of her artistic energies into describing the larger-than-life character of Emerence, while leaving her own character to flounder ill-defined in a Neutral haze. The narrator works to make sense of Emerence's mindset and view of the world in a way, or

at least to a degree, that she doesn't with her own character, her own views. For example, Emerence has a great animosity towards the church, and after introducing this to the reader, the narrator works to explain how it came about in her character: she was embarrassed once by Swedish missionaries and wrote off the church forever after. "Henceforth, both God and Church were identified in her mind with those charitable ladies" (24). In the telling of this story, we learn not only the reason for Emerence's antipathy towards the church, but that she is the sort of character to hold a grudge, someone who never forgets—we are able to pin her down and therefore make sense of the things she does later in the book. This is, of course, the usual work of a narrator creating a character.

A larger example, or set of examples: we learn at the beginning of the novel that Emerence works tirelessly, endlessly, despite having no obvious need for the money she earns—she lives alone, simply. At one point, she makes an invitation to someone named Eva to come to her house for dinner, and when Eva doesn't show up, Emerence reacts in a way that seems overly dramatic for a simple snub of an invitation to dinner. But later the narrator visits Emerence's cousin, and between that visit and her conversation with Emerence after returning, the narrator—and, therefore, the reader—learn that Emerence is working to gather money so as to build a crypt for relatives whose graves were left to rot by her grandfather. And the grandfather left the graves to rot in part because he believed that Emerence had a child out of wedlock. But that child wasn't actually hers, but was the child of a Jewish family fleeing the Nazis—Emerence brought the child to her grandfather and pretended it was hers, taking on the indignity of having bore a child

out of wedlock in order to save her. And that child was Eva, which helps make sense of Emerence's reaction to the snub of the invitation.

This is part of the way a novel creates a big, round character: it provides answers about the character's motivations and mindset that allow us to pin her down, to understand *who she is*. The examples I've given here are about factual information, which is easier to summarize, but the subtler work the narrator does is to communicate Emerence's general comportment towards the world, her attitudes and quirks. In fact, knowing that Eva owes her life to Emerence doesn't totally make sense of Emerence's reaction to the invitation snub: it still seems over the top, given the facts of the situation. But we have learned something more subtle about Emerence over the course of the novel, about the extremity of her loyalty to the people she cares about, and her expectations of a similar loyalty from those people. In her own words: "If I invite her—as I did—she should come, even if the whole world is blowing apart" (128). In various scenes leading up to this point, it is easy to pin this characteristic to the character of Emerence, and for that reason she comes to life in the novel. I can know her, know who she is. There is nothing of the Neutral in the narrator's presentation of Emerence.

In itself, this isn't especially remarkable, except in contrast to the narrator's treatment of her own character. On the book's sixteenth page, the narrator writes, of herself: "I make friends easily and chat away with complete strangers" (16). On its face, this seems like an assertion of who she, the narrator, is. But nowhere in the book does she do the sort of work to support or make sense of this assertion about herself; looking back, I find this self-description almost comical because nothing before or after it suggests anything about her being chatty or not chatty, friendly or its opposite, either in the scenes

of the novel or the style of its telling. There's very little sense in the text of what kind of social being the narrator is, and the assertion she makes about herself simply doesn't stick. Later, she glosses something her husband says to her, about her: "I took everything and everyone so seriously, and I was for ever getting myself mixed up in other people's business" (64). I suppose it's true that the narrator gets mixed up in Emerence's life, but in general this description of her just doesn't ring a bell one way or the other, even after having finished the book. The narrator doesn't do for herself all the novelistic work she does for the character of Emerence, providing the sort of background information and subtle psychological hints that allow us to triangulate and get a sense of who she is. This is, of course, a matter of degrees, not absolute—we know that the narrator is writer and intellectual, a more modern figure than Emerence, and so on. But in general the affirmations she makes about herself don't cohere, don't stick, don't come together to form something larger; they fall away and the character is left unarticulated, unaffirmed, a figure of the Neutral.

The narrator also has a tendency to include details that the reader doesn't know what to do with, but those details always pertain to her own character, never to Emerence's. When Emerence takes a shell from the narrator's desk, the narrator mentions that "It once sat on Maria Rickl's console, and was left to my mother when the Kismester apartment was divided up" (79). We don't ever learn who Maria Rickl is, nor anything about the divvying up of an apartment in Kismester. On the next page, she mentions her husband's "bad times," which are equally obscure to us as readers, and obscure in a besides-the-point sort of way. For Barthes, to answer a question with information that is besides the point can be a means of pursuing the Neutral. To the question "Do you think

that the writer seeks truth?” he imagines “that someone answers ‘I have bought myself a shirt at Lanvin’s’[...] or that, if this question is put to you in public, you stand up, take off a shoe, put it on your head, and leave the room” (117). Absurdity is, in this case, a way of baffling the paradigm. Much of the narrator’s treatment of herself in the novel amounts to such a response to the reader’s question of *who* exactly she is. The reader looking to pin this narrator down will be, in many ways, confounded.

The narrator disappears into her evocation of Emerence. It’s true that different first-person narrators will put different degrees of emphasis on communicating who they are to the reader while telling the story, but the self-abnegation of the narrator of *The Door* is, I think, an act of penitence, a refusal to assert herself after the regretful self-assertion that killed Emerence. This disappearance into her subject prefigures a tactic employed by the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*.

The narrator’s pursuit of the Neutral in *The Door* is largely negative. It’s about what she doesn’t provide: a coherent sense of herself in the text, the sense of a character we can pin down and make affirmations about. Like any potential figure of the Neutral, this one is only partial—it’s perhaps the least robust of the three examples I’m looking at here. But *The Door* highlights a possible motivation for the pursuit of the Neutral that Barthes misses—shame or regret—and works nicely in relation to the other two books, particularly in that it takes exactly the opposite approach of the one taken in *For Two Thousand Years*.

For Two Thousand Years

The opposite of “negative” is, of course, “positive,” but to look for the positive of the Neutral is sort of a contradiction, since the Neutral is about refusing to posit anything, or to posit as little as possible. Barthes refers instead to the “active” of the Neutral, though that doesn’t do away with the paradox. In fact, the course he is delivering to his students is a victim of the paradox (as is this essay): he is essentially affirming the evasion of affirmation, and his little tricks like randomizing the order of the topics he discusses (so as not to impose a master narrative on the Neutral) don’t do away with the problem. “To make known, to state the *not to speak*, however lightly, there needs to be speech at a certain moment. Neutral = impossible: to speak it is to defeat it, but not to speak it is to miss its ‘setting up’” (29). Barthes doesn’t want to miss its setting up and therefore has to accept the damage he’ll do to the Neutral by speaking it.

The same is true of the narrator of Mihail Sebastian’s *For Two Thousand Years*. He takes the book’s epigraph from Montaigne: “I not only dare to talk about myself but to talk of nothing but myself.” If the narrator of *The Door* is fed up with herself, with her self-assertions, then the narrator of *For Two Thousand Years* is fed up with the world around him and all it would like to assert about him. The book is about the narrator’s attempts to evade any subject-position that others would like to pin him to. He not only wants to evade those interpellations, to squirm out of what others would make of him, but he doesn’t want us, his audience, to miss the setting-up of the Neutral that he’s pursuing.

The novel’s first line reads: “I believe I have only ever been afraid of signs and symbols, never of people or things” (3). This is an extraordinary statement from a Jewish person living in Romania in the 1930s, a world of shocking anti-Semitism. In spite of

being beaten in the streets, regularly humiliated and kicked out of his university lectures, despite being told in the most casual way by authority figures that the existence of his religious and ethnic minority is a liability to the country, what this narrator is most afraid of are the semiotic structures that demand he play a certain role in this conflict between Jewish people and anti-Semites. His is a world of relentless interpellation: he is constantly being summoned to play the part of the persecuted Jew, particularly by his Jewish friends and colleagues. “What depresses me most,” he writes, “is the feeling of losing, with each day, the refuge of solitude, of finding myself in solidarity with Marcel Winder and Ianchelevici Sapsa” (14), both of whom are Jewish and, in the narrator’s view, too comfortable with the subject-positions they’ve been thrust into, too eager to enumerate and compare the wounds they’ve received. “Marcel Winder is up to fifteen. The other day his hat also got ripped, which puts him well ahead on the road to martyrdom. Loudly, in the middle of the yard, he points out each of his wounds. This one and this one and this one...” (12). When he says he longs for the refuge of solitude, it’s not that he literally wants to be alone, but wants to be able to live without being grouped together with Winder or anyone else. He stubbornly resists “Jewish fellow-feeling,” as he calls it: “At the barber’s, the owner himself takes the honour of cutting my hair and asks during the operation if I have any bruises, scars...if you know what I mean” (8). The barber means bruises or scars suffered at the hands of anti-Semites, but the narrator refuses to play along, pretending he doesn’t know what the barber is talking about. The barber finishes the haircut quickly, grudgingly.

Early on, the narrator articulates exactly where that desire comes from. This is the entire first section of the third chapter, a single paragraph:

The voluptuousness of being alone in a world that believes it owns you. It's not pride. Not even shyness. It's a natural, simple, and unforced sense of being left to yourself. Sometimes I'd like to leave my own body and from a corner of the room observe how I talk, how I get worked up, see what I'm like when I'm cheerful or sad, knowing that none of those things is me. Playing at having a double? No, that's not it at all. (11)

What is it, then? It's a desire for the Neutral, borne of an understanding that anything he might hope to express will already be "owned" by the world and its language. It's a sense that there is something in him that is not that, and that the best he can do is to try to baffle the paradigmatic structures of language and meaning involved, amongst other things, in the conflict between anti-Semites and Jews. I don't think he imagines a self entirely outside of language, nor do I think that Harry does. But both want to resist the excessive bullying effected on them by language when they say something like "I am a Jew," or "I am trans."

But not just that. He is equally resistant to the absurdities of anti-Semitism and the Jewish identity that anti-Semites would like to see in him. (If he resists the fellow-feeling with a touch more fervency than the anti-Semitism, it's because he's expected to resist the latter and feels he needs to find some novel manner of doing so.) And at the same time, when he feels that his whole evasive project is itself settling into an identity, he undermines it by accusing himself of vanity: "Am I not ridiculous here, with my fussy judgements, minding how I 'carry' myself? An aesthete. That's what I am" (15). At one moment, recalling the Tao or Zen aspects of Barthes's Neutral, the narrator wonders why he can't be "profoundly, impenetrably calm, like a horse drawing a cart through mud,

through a storm?” (6). Nine pages later, he denounces decency, reserve, and solitude as “worthless virtues that oblige you to grin through the pain” (15).

As is proper to a pursuer of the Neutral, he despises the dogmatism of his acquaintances—S.T. Haim the Marxist, Stefan Parlea is the Anarchist, Winder the Zionist, and so on. Of the Marxist, he writes: “The messianic impulse and psychological insight are incompatible. S.T.H. is a missionary with no sense of what is going on in the people around him” (40). It’s implied that, if S.T.H. were more tuned-in to other people, he wouldn’t be so arrogant and inflexible. But the narrator also worries that he’s equally predictable or determined. After a confrontation with the Haim, he concludes the section, “S.T. Haim, my good friend, how well we play our roles, and how sadly” (39).

In *The Door*, there is a blankness to the character of the narrator, where certain conventions that would signify who she is, the whole character, are ignored—she is Neutral. At the same time, a great deal of conventional novelistic energy is poured into the evocation of Emerence as a character. As a result, there’s something off-kilter about the novel, an imbalance between the somewhat-hazy narrator-character and her larger-than-life housekeeper. There are a few elements that make it feel different than a more conventional first-person novel, but that, I think, is the main one. And I think the exact opposite is the case in *For Two Thousand Years*: there is a blankness or a haziness to everything and everyone *except* the narrator. I think this haziness is a narrative strategy related to the pursuit of the Neutral. In order to make that point, however, I’ll first have to explain how that haziness manifests in *For Two Thousand Years*.

Like Szabo, he addresses the production of the text we're reading, which is supposed to be a diary, though dates aren't attached to the sections of text and it's a loose conceit to say the least. But the diary entries are often fragmentary and he does very little work to create a full novelistic world for his narrator to move through. He doesn't introduce characters when they appear, doesn't give any background information, and the scenes are so attenuated that for a long time nothing except the narrator seems to come together at all. When I was finally able to figure out who was who amongst his peers, it was only on the basis of their dogmatic ideologies. Haim, Parlea, and Winder stand out because their dogmatism is anathema to the narrator, and he uses them to clarify his own objections, his own pursuit of the Neutral. He has other acquaintances do not stand out as especially dogmatic, and so they don't stand out at all—I found it nearly impossible to keep track of these minor characters, to distinguish which was which.

When he describes being ejected from his classes along with the other Jewish students, it's hard to tell what's going on: other students are the ones doing the ejecting, and are beating them up on the way out, but the narrator is not working especially hard to give a full sense of what such a scene looks like, what the professors are doing while this happens, or what the position of the university is in all this. It's hard to understand why the administration allows Jewish students to attend classes at all, if it's okay with them being regularly beaten and then ejected from their lectures. I think there's something more going on here than my simply not having the background information that a contemporary Romanian reader would have had; the narrator is simply unconcerned with giving a full sense of the world around him. His only concern is to communicate his own

character, the way he's both wearied by his persecution and abhorrent of the persona it forces on him.

Similarly, the narrator is enthralled by—and then later somewhat disenchanted with—a professor of economics who channels Heidegger and Nietzsche in order to argue (put simply) for a “return to the soil,” an argument with a nativist and anti-Semitic bent that somehow does not dissuade the professor from pursuing a relationship with the narrator. I have a very full sense of what the narrator sees in the professor, Ghita Blidaru: he is brilliant, a commanding presence, and instils in the narrator the sort of awe that such a professor can. His anti-Semitism is somewhat subtle (at least relative to that of others in the novel), and the narrator isn't revolted by it at least partly because he wants to relate to the world in a way that sidesteps that paradigmatic expectation. But the other question—Why does this dependably anti-Semitic professor pursue a relationship with his Jewish student, a relationship which lasts the many years the novel covers?—is one the text seems entirely unconcerned with. Early on, Blidaru mortifies the narrator when the latter comes to him sheepishly, explaining that he's being kicked out of the professor's class. Blidaru brusquely dismisses him, asking what the narrator would like him to do about it. It's clear that he endorses the behaviour of the students who are ejecting him. Then, inexplicably, not too long after, the professor sees him somewhere (it's unclear, of course, where they are) and pats him on the back, says he should come visit him sometime. Why the change of heart? A different novel would use this contradiction to give a sense of the fullness of the professor's character: he is at war with himself, unsure of his prejudices, etc. There is no sense of that here. The question of the professor's

motivations simply recedes into the hazy background, along with most of the other characters, the university, the city of Bucharest, and so much else.

What I'm trying to highlight here is a formal haziness that, to me, seems a narrative strategy related to the desire for the Neutral. When I noted the more "conventional" formation of Emerence as a character in *The Door*, I meant that it was conventional in the sense that she comes out as a "round" or "whole" character. Emerence is both hostile and deferential towards the narrator, neurotically protective of her privacy but intrusive on the narrator's, extremely hardworking and somehow tireless despite her age, and so on. Though some of these qualities seem to contradict each other, they have together a sort of dynamic life to them, and as a reader I feel she has a great fullness. But in the end, that fullness—and the work the narrator does to convey it—are basically aimed at pinning Emerence down. I *know* her. She is pinned down in a way that is expansive and dynamic, but she's pinned down all the same. She is not the nexus of the Neutral, or its desire, in *The Door*.

The desire for the Neutral is at odds with that manner of presentation both because it is, or has become, conventional—which is the formal equivalent, perhaps, of dogmatism—but also, more importantly, because it's about *pinning down the world*, and the desire for the Neutral is one at that is uncomfortable, if not at odds, with that goal. There is, in this, the same paradox that Barthes points out in the idea of speaking the Neutral: what is a novel doing if not pinning things down; that's necessarily what language does. There's no perfect solution, but Szabo deals with the problem by investing her narrator's efforts entirely in the pinning-down of Emerence, and leaving other conventions about its narrator aside. And in *For Two Thousand Years*, the narrator

does the opposite, investing entirely in his own worldview (which involves a desire for the Neutral), and allowing everything around him to fall into a hazy, half-present, Neutral state.

The Rings of Saturn

Weariness—one of Barthes’s figures of the Neutral discussed above—pervades *The Rings of Saturn* from the first page to the last. It’s as if the narrator can just barely bring himself to relate for us the details of his walk through Suffolk and his reflections on European history inspired by that walk. He explains, at the outset, that he was admitted to hospital a year after the journey, “in a state of almost total immobility” (3). Only then did he begin to write the pages that would become the book.² He attributes that hospital visit to a retrospective preoccupation “not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing sense of horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” (3). The paralysing sense of horror at these traces of destruction is understandable, and is at least in part responsible for the melancholic and exhausted tone of the book. But “unaccustomed sense of freedom”? That seems a strange response to the horrors of modern European history.

You could read the “unaccustomed sense of freedom,” more simply, as the freedom he had to walk wherever he wanted. But that seems unlikely in a book that

² It’s worth noting that all three of these books account for their own creation and authorship, and also that the authors of all three do little work to distinguish their narrators from themselves. I think there’s a relationship between this and the pursuit of the Neutral, though it’s a subject for another (or a longer) paper.

“blurs physical landscape with mental theatre,” as Lecia Rosenthal puts it in *Mourning Modernism* (95). There *is* an unaccustomed—and for her, troubling—freedom in the way the narrator drifts from one historical subject to another, drifts into and out of the voices of his subjects while himself eluding the reader, and in the haze that pervades his photographs and their relationship to the text.

In this section, I’ll be engaging with Rosenthal’s chapter on *The Rings of Saturn*, in part because she alludes briefly to the idea of the narrator as a figure of Barthes’s Neutral—although she ascribes to Sebald’s narrator “a frustrating balance of patience and indifference” (102), the latter of which I don’t think is accurate, nor would it fit the Neutral as Barthes describes it. That said, there’s something obviously troubling in ascribing to this narrator a desire for the Neutral: part of what wearies, according to Barthes, is the demand to take a side; but *The Rings of Saturn* is, on some level, a book about the Holocaust. Rosenthal will be, in this section, the voice of that concern. In contrast, I will try to argue that the narrator’s weariness is not a result of indifference to the subjects he is exploring, but rather an ardent desire to find a novel way of relating to the conflicts of the past, a desire that permeates the unconventional style and organization of the book, its unaccustomed sense of freedom.

Before getting into the specifics of *The Rings of Saturn*, however, I think it will be helpful to return to Barthes and to make a few preliminary remarks about Sebald’s work in relation to it.

At the beginning of most of the sessions of the course, Barthes responds to questions written to him by students, and his notes for these remarks are included as

supplements in *The Neutral*. They are, at times, more illuminating than the lectures themselves. In a letter that is both deferential and challenging, one student writes that Barthes's desire for the Neutral—Barthes's own, personal desire, which is obvious in his lectures—“flirts with the game of power” (67). Even if Barthes doesn't say “you ought to pursue the Neutral” to the class, his obvious desire for it will inevitably come across to them as an imprecation to follow his lead. But the question is larger: is there not some little fascism lurking here too, some arrogant assertiveness about how a person ought to be? Two aspects of Barthes's response will be helpful in thinking about the Neutral in *The Rings of Saturn*.

“Desire is nothing but a passage,” Barthes responds. After describing the way a desire for the Neutral comes on suddenly, in reaction to a certain situation, and then may pass, he says, “The Neutral is not an objective, a target; it is a passage. In a famous apologue, Zen makes fun of people who mistake the pointing finger for the moon it points to → I am interested in the finger, not in the moon” (68). It's helpful to think of the Neutral as a passage to something else, or a pointing finger, though of course the next question is going to be: what is the moon in this analogy. Barthes continues, “the Neutral is perhaps a figure, a mask, a painted screen (a symptom?) that takes the place of something else. Of what? Perhaps, for example, of a political anxiety or a relational anxiety? ... We can meditate on it, without drawing a conclusion ” (68). He doesn't want to dictate or affirm a conclusion to the class, but I think the hint at a relational or political anxiety is clear enough. That relational or political anxiety is, at root, an anxiety about the whole structure of knowing, which for Barthes and other post-structuralist theorists, is a Hegelian structure. For Hegel, to speak is to sin because to speak is to make some sort of

affirmation in the face of others who disagree, to assert something about a world that contains no objective criteria to sort out our disagreements. The key, in Hegel's view—the great dialectic turn—is to realize that sin is sacred, that evil is good, because it's through the confrontations over contrasting affirmations that we come up with our own criteria of judgment, which is as good as we can do. And I think the relational anxiety that Barthes is pointing to is an anxiety over this process, an aversion to asserting my own essentially groundless views in the face of others', duking it out to come to some sort of final judgment, a "master narrative."³

I'm going to argue here that, in his approach to organizing and presenting the materials of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald calls into question not only a particular master narrative—for example the (literal) master narrative of the would-be Nazi empire—but *any such narrative* that affirms itself in this over-arching manner, a manner that Barthes would call arrogant. Sebald implies as much in an interview with James Wood. Wood asks about his aversion to Jane Austen-esque narrative omniscience, and Sebald responds:

If you refer to Jane Austen, you refer to a world where there were set standards of propriety which were accepted by everyone. Given that you have a world where the rules are clear and where one knows when trespassing begins, then I think it is legitimate, within that kind of context, to be a narrator who knows what the rules are and who knows the answers to certain questions. But I think these certainties have been taken from us by

³ I make use, here, of the term "master narrative," which I take from Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. His argument is essentially that post-modernity is defined by the loss of such all-encompassing narratives which can form the solid ground on which our knowledge can stand. A master narrative is like dogma writ-large, dogma that's basically accepted by everyone in a society. One example is that from which we take the word "dogma" itself: the widespread acceptance of Catholic doctrine in medieval Europe.

the course of history, and that we do have to acknowledge our own sense of ignorance and of insufficiency in these matters and therefore to try to write accordingly (qtd in Wood, 4).

Sebald is drawing a connection between his aversion to third-person omniscient narration and the historical events that separate us from the world of Jane Austen. It was a master narrative in Lyotard's sense that allowed everyone to understand the rules of propriety with regards to third-person narration, making viable the fiction of omniscience. (Of course everyone was not included in that "everyone"—the idea was itself a fiction—but that's a subject for a different paper.) But the value he puts on acknowledging our own ignorance and insufficiency brings him not only to avoid the third person, I think, but to avoid an overbearing assertiveness in the figure of first-person narrators who organize the materials that constitute his novels. Inasmuch as the weary narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* desires the Neutral, it is in *response* to all that's occurred in the twentieth century, not indifference to it. If he's averse to "taking a side," it's not because he's unsure whether or not the Nazi Party was in the right, but because he's unsure about the whole epistemic structure that puts terms into conflict in a battle to write stories on the basis of one set of values over and against another.

Again and again when reading *The Rings of Saturn*, I find myself wondering who is speaking. I wonder it both in the sense of *What sort of person is this narrator? What attributes does he possess? What are his values?* (The same questions I ask of the narrator of *The Door*.) But also, more literally, the narrator often takes the subjects of his exploration up into his own voice in such a way that he disappears into them, or they into

him, and it makes it difficult to pin down the one or the other.⁴ And to avoid affirming yourself in such a way that you might be pinned down by others is the goal in the pursuit of the Neutral.

Fundamental to this effect is the archaic bent of the language he employs throughout the book. From the first sentences, there is something fusty, not quite of our time, in the voice of this narrator: “I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star” (3). This example shows the ambiguity of his archaisms: “ailments of the body” and “beset us under the sign of” seem like phrases you might find in the writing of some historical figure who actually believed in the old superstition. It’s almost as if those believers were speaking through him, as if they’ve been taken up into his voice. At the same time, I can open the book at random and find a sentence describing, with a slightly archaic tinge, the scene in front of him in the present: “From afar came the rumble of thunder” (88).⁵ Are the historical documents he’s so steeped in modulating his description of the thunder outside his hotel room—it comes “from afar”—or is he the sort of person who indulges in olden-days, profound-sounding language? Maybe he used “beset” not to evoke the days in which the old superstitions were prevalent but because he is a person who would say, in his own words, that he was beset by an ailment. It’s hard to tell where the history ends and the narrator begins in his prose—it’s hard to pin him down.

⁴ Rosenthal also makes this observation: that he can disappear behind the objects he describes while also remaining “the voice through which all others speak” (102).

⁵ I really did open the book at random to find this example. “From afar” is certainly not the most archaic phrase in the book, or even the most archaic that seems to come from the narrator’s own lexicon, but my point is that the touch of archaism is pervasive.

From this baseline archaism, he's able to drift easily into actual quotations from the 17th or 19th Century figures he brings to life. He does this, improbably, with the prose of Sir Thomas Browne, whose style might be as different from the way we would write as anything written in English⁶—the narrator drifts into and out of his voice while maintaining the same steady tone that characterizes the prose of the whole book. But a better example is his treatment of the 19th century poet and translator Edward Fitzgerald. Here, the narrator describes how Fitzgerald mourned the loss of his friend William Browne:

Fitzgerald was in his fiftieth year when he lost Browne. From then on he withdrew increasingly within himself. He had long been refusing his mother's regular invitations to her sumptuous dinner parties in London, because to his mind the ritual of communal dining was the most abominable of Society's abominations, and now he forwent his occasional visits to the capital's galleries and concert halls, only in exceptional instances venturing beyond his immediate circle of friends. I think I shall shut myself up in the remotest nook of Suffolk and let my beard grow, he wrote, and would doubtless have done just that, had he not become disaffected with that region too, where a new breed of landowners were working the soil for all it could yield up. They are felling the trees, he complained, and tearing up the hedgerows. Soon the birds will not know where to go. One copse after another is vanishing, the grassy wayside banks where in the spring the cowslips and violets bloomed have been ploughed up and levelled, and if one now takes the path from Bredfield to Hasketon, which was once so delightful, it is like crossing a desert. (202)

⁶ Sebald wrote in German, but he oversaw the translation of his books into English.

There is, here, a very subtle drift from the narrator's baseline prose, to the modulation of that prose by Fitzgerald's own language, to the inclusion of first-person quotations (presumably) from Fitzgerald's writing. The narrator's baseline prose is, again, suffused with the sort of archaisms that already bring him slightly closer to Fitzgerald's language than another contemporary writer might sound. But that baseline prose is modulated by Fitzgerald's language in a phrase like "the most abominable of Society's abominations." This is not a quote from Fitzgerald, or at least isn't present as such, and yet the narrator capitalizes the abstract noun "society" in the way a nineteenth-century writer might. The distinctions between Fitzgerald and the narrator are made even less clear by the subsequent quotes from Fitzgerald—which, as is true of quotes throughout the book, are not set inside quotation marks. The quotes are concerned with the Sebaldian theme of the vanishing or covering-over of the past, and observe that covering-over with a melancholic, Sebaldian weariness. All this combines to make it, I think, very difficult to tell where the narrator ends and Fitzgerald begins.

This seems to me an amped-up version of what the narrator of *The Door* was doing: hiding behind her description of Emerence. Szabo's narrator did not go so far as to blur the lines between herself and her subject. Instead, she avoided the conventional novelistic affirmations that might pin her down as this or that sort of character, and spent all her energy evoking Emerence. But my argument is that both are hiding in the text, refusing to assert themselves, who they are. This is one of the ways that the pursuit of the Neutral shapes *The Rings of Saturn*, and it's the polar opposite of the arrogant, omniscient narrators that Sebald finds untenable in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

The narrator also has a drifting, paratactic manner of moving from one scene or subject to another. It's parataxis in the broadest sense, not so much on the level of the sentence but in the relation between one scene or subject and another. Rosenthal notes, for example, that the section about Major George Wyndham le Strange is conjoined to what comes before it in the text by a "darkening of the sky," which apparently brings the story of le Strange to the narrator's thoughts (59). That's a pretty blank "and" of a conjunction. In Rosenthal's words, it's part of a "masterful suspension of any one hierarchy or scene of significance" (99).

When the book's final chapter drifts from the subject of silk cultivation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe to the industry's revival in Nazi Germany, the text does not seem more invested in the troubling resonance of the treatment of silkworms—sometimes extermination is required to "pre-empt racial degeneration" (294)—than in the particulars of sericulture itself. We spend a great deal of time learning the opinions of Bavarian Counsellor of State Joseph von Hazzi on the virtues of domestic cultivation of silkworms for families and communities. Sericulture is a vehicle through which the narrator finally says something about the Nazi state, but that final stroke is light enough, and the preceding treatment so extensive, that Rosenthal doesn't find the one more significant in the text than the other. And this is part of what brings her to find a "frustrating balance of patience and indifference" in the narrator, which she associates with Barthes's *Neutral* (102)—which is, again, the idea I am trying to push back against.

"Drift" (or *dérive*) is a word that Barthes employs regularly to describe his own movement between subjects in the lecture course, and it's meant to point to the movement of the *Neutral*, a verb for its pursuit. He doesn't explicitly define "drift," but I

think a sentence from the section on weariness essentially does: “The present-day world is full of [demands for a position] (statements, manifestos, petitions, etc.) and it’s why it is so wearisome: hard to float, to shift places” (19). The freedom to float or drift here does not mean the freedom to drift into support of Nazism; no political position could be more abhorrent to the Neutral, more arrogant, more impositional. But to be able to float or drift from sericulture to Nazism without a strong statement against Nazism overdetermining the exploration of sericulture is, I think, a structural figure of the Neutral. It’s not about indifference. It’s a desire on the part of the narrator to meditate on the one and the other, sericulture and Hitler, the domestic and the abhorrent, to absorb the relationship without explicitly questioning it—or rather to put the question to our impulse to rebut, to correct. It’s a drift related to that of Marcel Ophüls’s documentary *A Memory of Justice*, which drifts from an exploration of Nazi war crimes to the Nuremberg trials—orchestrated in large part by the U.S.—to American war crimes in Vietnam. That film is more explicit about its exploration of the possibility of judgment or correction than is *The Rings of Saturn*, but the manner in which the film moves from the one subject to the other is, I think, a Neutral manner, and is similar to the paratactic way in which Sebald’s narrator moves from sericulture to the Nazi state.

Similarly, many of the photos included in the text seem to “float in an indeterminate suspense of citation,” as Rosenthal puts it, and not only in suspense of citation but “untethered to conventional forms of reference matter” (103), which is to say we often drift into a photo or image without knowing its connection to the text. Rosenthal concludes her chapter by interrogating an image taken by Georges Rodger, of which a hazy and cropped version is included across pages 60 and 61 of Sebald’s book. The

blurring and cropping make it appear, at first, merely an image of trees. And it comes up in the middle of a sentence describing Major George Wyndham le Strange's return, after VE-Day, to his Suffolk estate, which the narrator has reached on his walk. At first, I took the trees to be those of the estate, but looking more closely, it comes to seem that the lumps at the bottom of the frame might be bodies. The image was in fact taken at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, and in the original there's no question as to what is at the bases of the trees. Rosenthal takes the image to be playing off a phrase the narrator pulls, much earlier in the text, from Thomas Browne, about the "iniquity of oblivion." She wonders:

does not such a reading through juxtaposition reduce the gravity of the Holocaust, as metonymically invoked through the photograph and its association with Bergen-Belsen, to Browne's eclectic yet ultimately Christian theodicy, which rationalizes "iniquity" and "oblivion" in deference to the deferred judgment of the divine? Such is one of the possible levelling effects of Sebald's prose, particularly if one follows the narrator in his performance of a naive exhaustion: Having suspended any sustained desire to interpret the world, the narrator leaves the reader with only the barest common thread linking his narrative fragments, a residual theatrics of melancholy, loss, and injustice as the "way of the world" (106).

I hope it is clear by this point that, while sympathetic to her point and even, to some extent, unsure of myself—for one thing, Rosenthal may well be Jewish, and I am not—I don't think that Sebald's deployment of the image or any of the other stylistic choices I've discussed are meant to rationalize injustice as the way of the world. I don't think that's the intention—or, in my view, the effect—of the "performance of naive

exhaustion,” as she puts it, or the suspension of the “desire to interpret the world.” I think, rather, that Sebald is exploring this material in a way that, as far as possible, baffles the paradigmatic structure that underlie the conflict of Nazi ≠ Jewish. He doesn’t want to replace one master narrative with another, but to allow the reader to drift or float in a weakly-determined space, to meditate in the uncertainty of the Neutral.

Conclusion

Uncertainty is another word for the “relational anxiety” behind the desire for the Neutral. If Szabo’s narrator were quite sure that her view of Emerence’s situation had been correct—that Emerence was backwards and stubborn and didn’t know what was best for herself—then the narrator wouldn’t have felt so ashamed in the aftermath of her death, and would have had no reason to try to Neutralize herself in her telling of the story. At the same time, if the narrator had come to see that she had made a mistake, but was also fairly certain that she now understood what she should have done, why she didn’t, and so on, she might still have felt ashamed of how she’d acted, but would have had no reason to avoid affirming *who she was* in the novel. After all, she was ostensibly trying to save Emerence in the moment of her betrayal, opening the door to her apartment to let paramedics in—though in doing so she was brokering an invasion of Emerence’s closely-guarded privacy. The first and last sections of the book recount a recurring nightmare the narrator experiences after Emerence’s death, and much of the horror of the nightmare lies in her *not* being able to open that door to let them in. She isn’t merely ashamed of having made the wrong choice, but feels in the aftermath of Emerence’s death a deep epistemic

uncertainty, feels unsure of herself, her judgment. It would be impossible to tell the story at all without making some affirmations about the world, but because of that uncertainty, she chooses to keep those affirmations to a minimum when it comes to her own character and, as if in penitence, focuses mainly on the novelistic construction of Emerence.

The narrator of *For Two Thousand Years* is, in some ways, the most self-assured of the three narrators I've looked at here, being the most explicit about his pursuit of the Neutral. He can say for certain what he does not want: to be pinned down as this or that sort of person. But that certainty is driven, I think, by a deeper uncertainty about who he actually *is* in the social and political context he finds himself in, what sort of person he wants to be, or can be. I don't think he would protest so loudly against Jewish fellow-feeling, for example, if he were quite certain he didn't want to be drawn into that cultural sphere. He rejects Marcel Winder's Marxist dogma not because he has strong or clear ideas about how an economy would best be organized—nowhere does he rebut Winder in such terms—but because Winder's certainty seems, to him, ungrounded. That we can't well know what to do or be seems the only thing this narrator is certain of.

And, to give Sebald himself the last word on the certainty or lack thereof in his narratorial persona:

I think that fiction writing which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself is a form of imposture which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable. I cannot bear to read books of this kind (qtd in Wood, 4).

As I've argued, in *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald avoids creating a narrator that is stagehand, director, judge, or executor of the historical material he is mustering. And as in the two other cases, his manner of doing so seems to me exemplary of the pursuit of Barthes's Neutral.

The question I have not yet answered, perhaps, is: Why? What do these narrators hope to achieve by doing so? And what do I hope to achieve by saying so much about a desire to say nothing? But I think, finally, that's the wrong question. They aren't pursuing the Neutral to some end that seems to them superior to affirmativeness of arrogance. If they were, that end would itself be the subject of an affirmation. And I haven't written this paper because I think the Neutral is what novelists—or anyone else, for that matter—ought to pursue. I've pointed to some practical reasons someone might want to avoid assertive arrogance: for example, to avoid the sort of "correction" of monstrosity that itself becomes monstrous, the kind of judgment Ophuls is looking at in *The Memory of Justice*. But I think the better explanation for the pursuit of the Neutral is that it's a personal comportment that's in keeping with the profound epistemic uncertainty that these narrators feel. Without knowing what to affirm, they don't. And I think that I tend to share that uncertainty, and for that reason am drawn to novels that put it on display. I think that's as much as you can say, in the end, about why one might desire to say nothing.

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