

The “Black Sounds” of Ene Mihkelson’s Katkuhaud (‘Plague Grave’) and W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz

Part I. Foundations

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Abstract. “Foundations” is the first part of a two-part article to be published in *Interlitteraria*. It gives a brief account of the post-humanistic, foundationless, and traumatic world encountered in Ene Mihkelson’s *Katkuhaud* (‘Plague Grave’) and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, and continues with more detailed elaborations of the loss of specific foundational ideals, such as their contemporary experience of the failure and limits of language, of sense-making, and memory; the haphazardness of history; the invalidity of compensatory justice, and above all the deletion of their childhood fields of joy and love or of what Panksepp calls their “affective mind.” It prepares for a fuller comparison of Mihkelson and Sebald’s tonality, and their art of valediction and memory in Part two.

Keywords: Ene Mihkelson; *Katkuhaud* (Plague Grave); post-humanism; Jacques Lacan; Jaak Panksepp; Octavio Paz; W. G. Sebald; *Austerlitz*

Fish swim, birds fly, people feel.

Heim G. Ginott

In Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, the protagonist’s childhood nurse, Vera, relates that she spent hours looking at mineral samples in the lapidarium, “wondering at the nature of the foundations on which our world is built” (Sebald 2001: 180). Reading Ene Mihkelson and W. G. Sebald one feels there may be no more foundations. Their works reveal holes in a reality once filled with intelligibility and meaning. Their texts often fall as if into a void. It is only because holes have rims and edges to which one can cling¹ that these narratives hold up and seem able to continue. It is by an arduous writing – by weighted words, abundant syntactic subordinations, and clauses in long and complex verbal chains, reminiscent of past eras of prose – that Mihkelson and Sebald build and procure for themselves rims to cling to and support on edges, surrounding

¹ “Saying the hole is the essential thing about the round does not entirely satisfy me. In fact, what is a hole if nothing surrounds it?” (Lacan 1974–1975)

the void that Lacan called the real, or “the blank of sense” (Lacan 1974–1975, Lesson of March 11, 1975).

In the universe of Aristotle and St. Augustine there were no holes. A black hole in the cosmos, a kind of vanishing point into which the universe may ultimately be swallowed, did not exist. For Stephen Hawking, “Black holes represent a physical singularity, that is to say, an exception, a place within space–time where the laws of the universe cease to apply” (Paz 1995: 202–203). Lacan’s real (as opposed to what he called reality) is a theoretical attempt to name such a place of exception in the psychic domain. This psychic territory of the real – lawless, reasonless, and languageless – is where Mihkelson and Sebald struggle and take up arms. It is apprehended in extreme moments of consciousness when the powers of the mind cease to apply, when blankness invades the plane of reality, and opens fields of fearful emptiness.

By contrast, in the world of Aristotle and Augustine, powerful symbolic and imaginary pillars closed off both their cosmic and psychic world to emptiness. Reason and God were for them, respectively, the anchors that moored their being and filled all space and time. With these they knotted us to happiness. For Augustine, God was “the firm foundation” of his bliss. Unlike human speech uttered in time, God’s sacred Word was out of time, in an eternity “where nothing moves into the past”, where “all is present”, and that, so Augustine believed, is what we long for: “union with the eternal presence of eternity and with God, the ultimate Good” (1962: 259–261).

For Aristotle likewise, the highest good, the *summum bonum*, was that towards which all that exists strives (1976: 63). But Aristotle did not think that we could have eternal bliss, which was reserved for the gods in their rational purity. We could, however, with hard work and luck have happiness, a rational happiness, such as “by itself makes life desirable” (ibid. 74). The *Nicomachean Ethics* was his teaching of how the hybrid being or “rational animal” that we are could hold in check its irrationality or animal side so as to attain this desired state. For Aristotle, reason and happiness were inexorably tied, and the special condition and function that distinguished men from animals.² It was our final cause or reason for living: “If we consider what the function of man is, we find that happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul in accordance with or implying a rational principle.” (Ibid. 75–76)

Aristotle believed in *entelechy*,³ in the possibility of a movement from an unformed state to a state of full realization, completion, or perfection. This

² To Aristotle it seemed that animals, lacking reason, could not be happy.

³ Greek *entelekheia* from *en*=within + *telos*=end, perfection + *ekhein*=to be in a certain state.

active movement, to which we needed to devote our efforts, was a matter of knowledge (*gnôsis*), which for Aristotle encompassed a wide range of cognitive states from perceptual recognition to a scientific knowledge of the four causes (the material, formal, efficient, and final cause) and of the eternal first principles. Further, "to know" entailed "to know how to do"⁴, or to act. It included a knowledge of *technê* – the skill, craft, or art of making all the levels of knowing operate accurately together – and beyond that a knowing of how to use and apply them in one's personal, social, and political life. Thus, much education, knowledge, training, practice, and repetition were necessary to put the rational soul in action. But such a formation and development of our reason and its application were for him the indispensable foundation of our chance for happiness. However, for the highest happiness, one needed in addition to a perfected rationality and a prudent moral practice – luck, health, wealth, and friendship.

What was closed off with Aristotle and Augustine's conceptions of foundational causes was the possibility that human beings were uncaused, as if accidental or contingent, thrown into *Dasein* haphazardly and incapable of knowing their cause or final goal. What was cut off was the idea that there may be no entelechy: no purposive, orderly movement from potentiality to realization; and no foundational divine, vital, or "rational principle" that guided the functioning, development, and coming to fruition of human beings, nature, or the cosmos. What was cut off as well was a blunt answer such as Freud gave in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "The aim of all life is death," a fact that seemed to him "a truth beyond exception" (Freud 1920: 38–39).

Aristotle's definition of man as a rational animal, destined for rational happiness, also cut out a full analysis of the other half of his being, his animal side, his evolutionary history, his primitivism, his instincts for survival, his drives for sexual and other pleasures, his deep, emotional roots and needs, and his excessive, reason-defying passions that can excite and move him towards sublime experiences, expressions, and enactments at once of unbelievable goodness or evil. We have texts, and ample testimony in history, attesting to our enjoyment (*jouissance*) both of a saintly and a criminal sublime, with the latter utterly indifferent to what Aristotle called "the virtuous activity of the soul". It is certainly not that Aristotle, the tutor of Alexander the Great, did not know the barbaric side of human nature, but that he relegated it to irrationality and abeastliness to which he knew or assumed his teachings in the *Ethics* could have no relevance or application. This left much about both human nature

⁴ *Epistasthai*, a Greek cognate of *epistêmê* or knowledge.

and animal nature for the scientists, artists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and today's neuroscientists, who followed him, to explore.

In about 1487, Leonardo da Vinci made his famous drawing of "The Vitruvian Man" also known as "The Canon of Proportions" that has for some time been an icon of Western man. In this drawing, da Vinci fitted the ideal human proportions that he derived from the ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius (as the writing around the drawing indicates), into the logic of two perfect geometric forms, the square and circle, the latter an ideal confluence of beginnings and ends, and hence a perfect figure of containment and completion.⁵ This Vitruvian Man, this exemplary anthropos, the summit of creation, god's final work on the seventh day of creation, this grandiose master of the universe and of all its inhabitants, this paragon, the culmination of the great chain of being, who is in perfect harmony and accord with nature – praises for whose eminence, freedom of choice, and power of self-making resound in Pico's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" – what has happened to him? This exploiter, profiteer, and destroyer of the earth, who has caused infinite destruction, death, and grief – what more have we to fear from him? This self-proclaimed colossus, with his prodigious memory and demand for eternity, who claims to know causes, who believes his very thinking is in correlation with being as such and that an identity exists between the macrocosm and the microcosm that he himself is – this prodigy – when will his time and centrality be over? When will we stop admiring him? The long era of the reign of his fantastical, raging desires, infinite expectations, aspirations, conquests, his unending potential, his restless Hegelian becoming – something is evermore becoming, something more is ever about to be: globalism, multinational capitalism, universalism, and a flourishing of science that will like magic solve all our problems and bring us the ultimately satisfying totality, the promise of happiness for all – when will it end? When will this balloon of an ever-expanding and all-encompassing happiness that he has been blowing for centuries burst? And when it does, what do we substitute for the failure of his lofty ideals, beliefs, hopes, and self-confidence? If it is true that without visions, beliefs, and "the audacity of hope", mankind will perish, what other visions might we invent and pursue? That is the question.

Ene Mihkelson and W. G. Sebald's artistic work is deeply related to a broad-based, post-humanist effort to move this image of massive desires and fantasies, joined to ideals of competency and power, to a cultural graveyard. "Our species' development to date," says Mihkelson's narrator, "is comparable

⁵ Actually, the proportions did not fit but Da Vinci lengthened the man's arms so that they would.

to an uncontrollable earthquake or a volcanic eruption. When these occur, we run like a maddened crowd, stampeding each other to death, towards higher ground, where Noah is, I wanted to say, but I take that comparison back because I do not know from or to where we are running. Behind my omniscient clarity is the enigma of emptiness." (Mihkelson 2007: 57)⁶ What is outside the sphere of traditional ethics or the natural lawfulness of the animal world – what is pathological, criminal, and transgressive of human reason and imagination – is the very substance of Mihkelson's *Katkuhaud* ('Plague Grave'). It is also what disturbs and does as if violence to her writing, thinking, and feeling in a traditional or discursive style. Her language as well as Sebald's aims to evoke and record the extreme responses of their bodies and emotions to a world that, on the one hand, seems fundamentally unbalanced, discordant, and unwholesome and, on the other, deeply enigmatic, unknown, and uncharted in an unprecedented and radical way.

Mihkelson and Sebald seem to know, without anyone telling them, what many neuroscientists have begun to point to. "We are not capable of pure thought; each piece of information we receive engages the body," says John Coates.⁷ "The brain is not a computer, but a biological system; everything has a biological substrate," concurs Rafael Yuste.⁸ To this we can add, from the important work of Jaak Panksepp, that no thoughts or perceptions come without affective reactions and the engagement of emotion, as I will discuss later. The brain and body are always active, not only in sleep, but even when we are in a coma or, as we previously believed, brain-dead. As long as our lungs move to bring oxygen to our circulating blood and our heart is beating, the brain is alive. The brain, with its phenomenal motility, plasticity, and capacity for forging new neural pathways, is always generating a world. It is a vast neurological network that "speaks" an "electrical language," at least on one level, says John Medina. It converts an external source of energy, such as, for

⁶ This and all subsequent translations of *Katkuhaud* ('Plague Grave') are my own. I thank Märt Väljataga for insistently turning my attention to Ene Mihkelson, and for kindly reviewing my translations, but always and above all for being such an inordinately supportive and brilliant editor and translator and for aiding me in finding links to the most beautiful and poetic writings in my mother tongue.

⁷ From notes taken at a lecture given by John M. Coates, a neuroscientist at Cambridge University, England, and author of *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf: Risk Taking, Gut Feelings and the Biology of Boom and Bust*. London: Penguin Press, 2012, at the Harvard Club, June 21, 2012.

⁸ Notes taken at a talk by Rafael Yuste, Professor of Neuroscience at Columbia University, for Café Science, an informal discussion group, led by Columbia University faculty, on July 9, 2012.

example, light (or photons bouncing off an object) into what Medina calls, “a brain-friendly electrical language” and roots it to the visual cortex, engaging – with the aid of chemical messengers – millions of neurons and hundreds of different brain regions in the process (2008: 108–109), while generating physiological, emotional, and verbal reactions.

Such a vision of a bio-chemical-neurological foundation in dizzying motion does not put to rest the Vitruvian Man, dominated by his desires and his consciousness, with its ideational formations, and imaginary-symbolic representations that to him sometimes seem cut off from his organism, but it invites us to question our current philosophical, psychoanalytical, and medical models of the human mind and emotions and to reflect on their interdependence. As yet, this new neuro-physiological foundation, with its perhaps indeterminable number of neuronal pathways is barely mapped. Once it is, the map will still be general and not specifically applicable to any singular being, who is actually at every moment making and unmaking his or her own brain map and neural roads. Thus, it is not surprising that those neuroscientists who are in the very midst of trying to comprehend how the brain and body operate together, warn, as Rafael Yuste for one has, that tampering directly with the brain by surgery or drugs is, at this point, “like trying to fix a car, without knowing how the engine works”.

We want everything to work and to ignore everything that “doesn’t work or go well (*ce qui ne va pas*)”, which is one of the names the late Lacan called the real or the symptom. The real is the failure or flaw or error in the system or the psychic structure. Thus, whereas we have since Aristotle concerned ourselves with flourishing, “with living well and doing well” (66), Lacan concerns himself with “the symptom”, or with “what isn’t going well” (Lacan 2014: 71), as do Mihkelson and Sebald. Such symptoms and flaws are as if small emergences from the mind and body that call attention to impairments or threats to our well-being, safety, and survival, or they point to changes in our bio-chemistry that ready us for self-defensive actions, all in order to prevent us from drifting into the fantasm of a safe and secure “all”: that of being and having it all or of grasping and controlling it all.

We need to value the error, says Mihkelson’s narrator (10), because in a world where everything is touted as possible, where there are no limits, the error alone points to a limit, to impossibility and impotence. Both she and Sebald understand the human proclivity to discount the error, the failure, or what doesn’t work. It is easier to regard any encounter with a *ce qui ne va pas*

as an irregular, chance event, an exception, or even as an "act of God".⁹ It is preferable to see it as an isolated accident or as a single problem to be solved and corrected – not as something that is an inescapable part of our existence and structure that we need to count in as a constant, an equal power. Mihkelson and Sebald live with their incomprehension, fears, weaknesses, errors, sense of alarm, and despair. They are or let themselves be and feel what they do not want to be or feel. Their writings start from the symptoms. Errors (from the Latin *errare* – to stray, to go astray), mistakes, failures, losses, and screwed up situations (such as that of the removal of the Bronze Soldier from the center of Tallinn) are what challenge them to begin their work. Human error, straying, and erring are their inspiration. To them applies what Carl Jung once wrote: "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious." (Jung 1945: 335)

Incertitude, lack of clarity, and errors are what most of us want to escape, and Descartes, for one, who had just about zero tolerance for any kind of fuzziness, worked to find a method of how to do away with it. He proposed tearing down his mind to its foundations, as one does a building, and rebuilding it brick by brick, as it were, with "clear and distinct ideas", and according to a method that is equally "clear and distinct", such as he outlined in his *Discours de la méthode*. Descartes wanted complete control of his mind and memory. He wanted firm and doubt-free "foundations that would be wholly mine" (Descartes 195: 9–10). Basically, what Descartes proposed was a scientific method that left out the subject altogether, in particular its language and emotions. As regards language, one could possibly speculate that he might actually have preferred the reduced formula H_2O , for example, for the word "water," as that would purge it of all that Kant called "pathological" or of all the historical, personal, and emotional connotations that the word "water" could have for a human being. H_2O gives us a chemical equation or a short notation for the chemical reactions between hydrogen gas and oxygen gas, and therewith, turns us away from language and our subjectivity towards the elemental and material. But minds and memories reduced to cognitions and formulas so cleansed, simplified, materialized, and objectified are, precisely, what Austerlitz and Mihkelson's narrators do not have. What they have is conflicted, fragmented, and disjointed, or existential mental states that are indistinct and unclear.

⁹ I am thinking of Senator Christopher J. Dodd, the Democrat from Connecticut, who called the housing crisis "entirely foreseeable and preventable, not an act of God," during the Wall Street testimonies before the Senate in 2008 that seemed to suggest the contrary.

Mihkelson and Sebald feel they are writing in a time that gives no guarantees that what they write will endure any more than anything else will that had hitherto seemed permanent or long-lasting. In all of Sebald's work, the drive to recount what is actively slipping or wearing away, or being destroyed, or already half-forgotten, or ruined by writing itself, is immense and overwhelming. Worst is that art itself destroys, for even as it preserves, it destroys and replaces in that same act what was irreplaceable lived experience, as he lets Marie Henri Beyle (i.e. Stendhal) realize in *Vertigo*. (Sebald 1999: 7–8) Mihkelson's narrator questions whether her written images and representations have the power to convey what existed and no longer is: "Have I any hope of ever reaching even the rim of the incomprehensible forgotten in spacetime." In lieu of an answer, she notes "that what has survived as an image or a symbol, that simply stays, like a long dead horse, standing always at that gate in the enclosed pasture that points homeward, when you gaze at that pasture's erstwhile dwelling or the ruins of its home" (14). Language immobilizes and produces as if a still life painting or photograph that no longer awakens memory or history. Language is enfeebled, abused by the instrumental use made of it by capitalism and politics, and every kind of articulation seems intertwined with fantasies, errors, lies, and madness, arising from human debility and need. Similarly, every kind of knowledge is a series of systems of interpretation that turn out to be in need of correction, or that have failed, wholly or in part.

The historical causations and sequences, for one, that we formerly posited appear as only so many dubious hypotheses or myths, based on extremely flawed and partial material, as Daniel Lord Smail has argued. Or as he curtly puts it: "History happens." (2008: 57) Sebald agrees: "On the whole, the thing [history] evolves under its own steam.... There is little that we can do to steer it." (Schwartz 2007: 102–103) Historical breaks seemingly happen as geological ones do and severed tectonic plates cannot be fitted back together again. The lingering idea that history is something that we can or readily should "make", in the revolutionary way Marx, for one, recommended, and believed we could, seems infinitely distant, even preposterous, to the thinking of both Mihkelson and Sebald. "As yet, the memory of both periods of the past persisted in me," says Mihkelson's narrator, referring to the historical break that now divides a liberated, independent Estonia from its time under the fifty year-long communist occupation, but "the memory is like a compressed pod, the sides of which no longer fit together" (273). Mentally and emotionally, she lives in many other simultaneous moments of past and present time, as one does in a dream (12). She makes great efforts to find links, but too many are missing to establish coherency, and a fundamental sense of nonrelationships

remains that is as profound and unbridgeable as the one between herself and Sanna, her mother, and herself and Kaata, her aunt.

We posit all kinds of theories and narratives about history and ourselves because we need somehow "to make sense of our nonsensical existence," says Sebald, "and so we build. I think all our philosophical systems, all our systems of creed, all our constructions, even the technological ones, are built in that way, in order to make some sort of sense, which there isn't, as we all know." (Schwartz 2007: 97) Our illusory fantasies, such as those of the great Don Quixote of Cervantes, as well as our more seriously delusional constructions and psychotic deliria are all part of that same, common need for sense building and reason giving, concurs Jacques-Alain Miller (Miller 2009: 152; also Jaanus 2013). There is a common Sisyphian effort to veil or fill a recurring "blank of sense" with some kind of foundational knowledge, which Mihkelson and Sebald strain initially to do, until they realize that far more grave, in fact, necessitous is filling in the blank of feelings.

Initially, both narrators believe that "[T]he unendurable is the consequence of my deficient knowledge," as Mihkelson's narrator says (206). There is, therefore, in both an intense, even dire need for knowledge and learning – for archival research, for historical truth, for facts, and proof – but these pursuits, as both discover, are also their way of avoiding a deeper, unacknowledged knowledge that what they seek is actually unavailable and unattainable. The narrator in *Katkuhaud* comes to know that between Kaata's schizophrenic prevarications and theatrical pretenses and her mother's paranoid hatred, rejection, and sadistic refusal to divulge any information, even to her own daughter – together with the contradictions between what she learns from the many persons she interviews and the facts in the archival documents that she reads (that may, however, have been falsified) – she will never know the truth about her past history or more specifically her own history or known what she would like to know about her father, about when or how he died, who killed him, or who he was and what he lived and died for. Austerlitz admits that the "accumulation of knowledge which he had pursued for decades" served merely as "a substitute" for memories that had been deleted. He comes to believe that his compulsive studies and in-depth knowledge of railroad stations, labyrinthine fortresses, and prisons provided him only with what he calls "a compensatory memory", though he has an uncanny feeling that it is all guided by "an impulse that he himself does not understand" (Sebald 2001: 140). Mihkelson's narrator tells us that she chose knowledge as a substitute for knowing herself: "I studied and forbade myself to think of my situation." (38) But what is a psychic life of substitute memories or of missing self-knowledge

because something more basic in oneself is missing or deleted? As both acquire more knowledge and come to see its limits, their excavations come ever closer to the space of the real in their lived lives. Ultimately, they accept that they exist in a broken world of lost origins and ends: a Miltonic *Paradise Lost* without a *Paradise Regained*, a Dantesque *Inferno* without the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* that should follow. Austerlitz will never recover in his mind a memory image of his mother no matter with what heartbreaking intensity he searches for her in the contexts, the places, and filmic remnants of her time of life that could possibly help to awaken his memory of her. Austerlitz wants to see and feel the presence of his mother, Agáta, and have her as if come towards him out of the frame of the photographs and the scraps of film that he searches through, but it never happens. The pain and shock of separation that burned up his memories during the *Kindertransport* are massive and permanent. (Sebald 2001: 224–225) “But neither Agáta nor Vera nor I myself emerged from the past. Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part...but as soon as I tried to hold one of the fragments fast, or get it into better focus, as it were, it disappeared into the emptiness revolving over my head.” (218–219)

Something always remains in the dark; something is always “eclipsed”. “Even with the help of dreams,” says Mihkelson’s narrator, “recounting life is not possible because even if we were capable of lacing up with all possible completeness what passes, moment by moment, something remains excluded, something always remains excluded that cannot be subjected to wording.” (140) Hegel believed, “The truth is the whole.” (Hegel 1967: 81) Mihkelson and Sebald find it is all in pieces, and in a way that is not amenable to being put back together into a whole. Mihkelson wonders whether the practice of a writer’s craft is not like trying to jump through Einstein or Minkowski’s four-dimensional spacetime, or through the last sliver of intense light that is there before the “eclipse” of the sun that occurs every day, “when the tuned light of the interim between morning and evening is pressed together in a circle of bright toil. When time jumps as if through a ring of fire in the hand of a magician” (140). Although she knows that closure and certainty are never possible because the universe of language is an open system, with the openness guaranteed by the opacity of the real, she welcomes that as a positive: “The world of the gaze and the world of words are, in any case, accompanied at every moment by an immeasurable and incomprehensible beyond. If it were otherwise, there would be no hope on earth at all.” (119)

Mihkelson and Sebald’s art is as if a valediction to many of the ideals, meanings, self-definitions, and desires that have hitherto driven Western culture. Both exemplarily concede the limits of language, written and spoken, even while they continue to search for the old power of words sometimes to

soothe, heal, resurrect, or grant glimpses of a partial truth. Both know that the truth as such is distinct from knowledge and beyond their reach. It is at best only half-sayable (*mi-dire*), as Lacan believed, because words exclude jouissance or human passions and emotions,¹⁰ a thesis I will discuss further. They know that at a minimum, we cannot continue pursuing an ethics only of ideals, hereby agreeing with Lacan, who said: "The question of ethics is to be articulated from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real," which is the very reason why he believed that we are "at the end of the vein of humanist thought" (Lacan 1992: 11, 273).¹¹ Mihkelson and Sebald's works also depart from humanism to embrace a far darker and more negative view of our desires, a starker sense of time, a more contingent realism, and a far deeper understanding of the fragility of human love bonds.

Both Mihkelson and Sebald also know, for example, that the ancient supportive ideal of a compensatory justice, such as the Pauline belief in an economy that posits an ultimate balance, symmetry, and equivalence between absolute good and radical evil, has been rendered invalid (Rachline 2001: 8–10). Though they would like to rebel and refuse a world built on injustice and inequality, and to reject the very possibility of a compensatory justice for a suffering that has already been lived through (as did Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov), they know in advance that such a rebellious defiance would be utterly pointless (Dostoevsky 1976: 216–217). Instead, they seem to recognize from the start that their ultimate choice is to accept the impossibility of recompense or to destroy themselves physically or mentally in order to end a pain and despair that comes from the experience of a wild injustice. To such utter loss of faith neither Mihkelson nor Sebald succumb.

The worst loss of all for both narrators is the loss of the emotion of love. Perhaps, worse still is to have to doubt its very existence, as Mihkelson's narrator has to, or to have no memory whatsoever of the fact that one did have love once, as is the case with Austerlitz, whose only abiding memory is the terrifying feeling of having lost something infinitely precious, without

¹⁰ Throughout his discussion of the four discourses in Seminar XVII, Lacan argues that no relation between knowledge and truth is possible because the limits of language exclude what he called the object *a*, the mute indicator of jouissance. "If there is one thing that our entire approach delimits...it is that the only way in which to evoke the truth is by indicating that it is only accessible through a half-saying [*mi-dire*], that it cannot be said completely, for the reason that beyond this half there is nothing to say. That is all that can be said. Here, consequently discourse is abolished." (Lacan 2007: 51)

¹¹ For Lacan, the order of the unknowable real is the stark opposite of the all-knowing God who reigned over Renaissance Christian Humanism. For further commentary see Jaanus 1997: 1–18.

knowing or feeling what that might have been. Therein lies their encounter and battle with despair.

Despair is “a characteristic of our species, in evolutionary terms,” says Sebald, “for a number of reasons.”

Because we have created an environment for us which isn't what it should be. And we're out of our depth all the time. We're living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out of it, and that other world which is generated by our brain cells. And so clearly that fault line runs right through our physical and emotional makeup. And probably where these tectonic plates rub against each other is where the sources of pain are. Memory is one of those phenomena. It's what qualifies us as emotional creatures, psychozootica or however one might describe them. And I think there is no way in which we can escape it. The only thing that you can do, and that most people seem to be able to do very successfully, is to subdue it. And if you can do that by, I don't know, playing baseball or watching football on television, then that's possibly a good thing, I don't know. (Schwartz 2007: 56)

Serious fault lines run through our evolutionary history and our psyches. One that in particular concerns scientists, oriented towards various forms of evolutionary neuroscience, and both Mihkelson and Sebald, is the critical difference between what one could call a pre-frontal cortex body-brain, inherited from our mammalian ancestors, who lived in the “natural world”, and the frontal cortex body-brain, living more and more closely with and within a hyperreality – a technological and wired environment – generated by our brain cells. This new reality is an exciting and open one for our minds, but it seems at best to leave behind the emotions when it does not outright damage them. The emotions are what form the most essential bond between us and other humans as well as all else that exists in our universe. Smail for one agrees that “humanities deep history lies in the body,” which is older than the frontal cortex, and that we are shaped “by noncognitive feature of the brain, by moods, emotions, and feelings that have a deep evolutionary history” (112–113). In conflicts and clashes between the higher cognitive functions of the brain and its non-cognitive functions arewhere “the sources of pain” lie for both for Mihkelson and Sebald.

Both narrators feel inexplicable disruptions in their moods and the irruption of images and thoughts that they do not want. Both feel the breaks in momentary, positive states of mind and feeling that they would like to continue, but cannot make stay. The presence of such symptomatic despair interferes

with any possibility of pleasure, peace, and stability, or worse, it leads to periods of total collapse that happen both to Austerlitz and the narrator in Mihkelson.

During a crucial phase in her tormented dialogues with her aunt Kaata, Mihkelson's narrator is present only as a grammatical question mark. A question mark is not a verbal sound or phoneme that can be connected to another phoneme so as to make a resounding emotional chain, as Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake*, nor does it produce a sense or yield up enough intelligible signifiers to make a signifying chain of meanings. It marks an absence of all sound and sense. It produces no metaphoric or metonymic movement, desire, or time. Rather, it arrests movement and meaning, as all punctuation marks do to different degrees, from the comma that is a short pause to the period that is a full stop: , - ; : ? ! . The narrator's mark represents her very being as absent, and what might have been her question as absent and missing as well. She is as if a question that is not asked and cannot be asked. Her existence only as a mark registers a bewildered, speechless, and utterly inarticulate state of mind. It evidences a desubjectification and helplessness that signals her entry into the real. The real, said Lacan, is only opened up by writing (Lacan 1973–1974: lesson of February 12, 1974). Punctuation marks are the purest writing or what is only written in any text. Making some last, repeated marks, as if on the doorway into the real, is seemingly all that the narrator can, at this moment, do before falling, like an object, into a black void. These marks, written on the edges of the hole that Kaata's revelations have just carved into her innermost being, bespeak to this experience as one of near self-annihilation or death that the narrator had intimated was to be hers at the very beginning: "In anticipation I could say that to this place, in just such weather, I came to die. But then, I did not know that." (15)

These pure question marks go far beyond Socrates' experience of his ignorance and emptiness. For at the same moment that Socrates declared his ignorance as his foundation, he filled the hole of that ignorance with questions. Questioning the youth of Athens became his passion and his mission and, in a sense, the "answer" to his ignorance and emptiness. It healed what disturbed him, or what did not work in him, namely his symptomatic ignorance, and as if sutured this wound in his being. It was his invention of what we now call the Socratic method of teaching and an example of what Lacan calls a *sinthome*, the creative invention of an activity – a product or a work – that gives a function and meaning to a senseless symptom, and makes a symptomatic sense of purposelessness, emptiness, or non-identity bearable.

In contrast to Socrates, Mihkelson's narrator and Sebald's protagonists feel at times not only that they do not have the right questions, but that the questions that need to be asked have not yet been invented or have been posed

in a weak form, without sufficient urgency. Such questions that Austerlitz and the narrator do raise often turn out to be unanswerable or the answers are horrifying. In *Katkuhaud*, the series of question marks register the narrator's gradual discovery of what the autobiography of her life with her mother and her aunt, the two women, who were responsible for her care as a child, had been in reality and who in truth they were, contrary to everything that she had hitherto believed. It is the opening to a horrendous abyss of betrayal, crime, and murder. One wonders what could possibly help the narrator emerge from this total eclipse of what had hitherto been her sense of her existence? Was there a memory that could "come like a rope let down from heaven to draw [her] up out of the abyss of not-being", as happens to Proust's Marcel (Proust 1982: 5–6)?¹² Where is the fragment of jouissance that might knot itself to her trauma so as to make her once again feel alive and happy, and capable of creativity and action?

The extraordinary work of Jaak Panksepp has for a long time been in the field of the neuroevolutionary origins of human emotion. His recently published *The Archaeology of Mind*, together with Lucy Biven, reaffirms that the "neocortex is responsible for almost all of the cultural milestones that human beings have been able to achieve", but his fundamental thesis is that what is more foundational is more ancient than the frontal cortex:

The cortex could achieve nothing without an evolved foundational mind deeper in the brain. Those ancient ancestral neural territories below the neocortex constitute our ancestral mind – the affective mind ... that we share with many other animals. It is "archeological treasure", for it contains the sources of some of our most powerful feelings. Those ancient subcortical brain systems are precious, multihued "jewels" for anyone wishing to understand the roots of all basic values we have ever known and will experience in our lives. The affects are the foundations upon which the beauty and the ugliness of life has been constructed. (Panksepp & Biven 2012: x)

It is precisely a disturbance and ruination on the level of these deeper and more "ancient ancestral neural territories" that constitute the sufferings of both Mihkelson and Sebald's narrators. Both are, essentially, in search of lost "archeological emotions" that could help restore their "affective mind", or one can perhaps simply say their heart – once, initially, filled with hope, belief and love, before it was broken. Their search sets them out on a journey or "hunt",

¹² For Mihkelson, the author, as distinct from the narrator, the answer is clear, as it was in the case of Goethe and his hero, Werther, in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Their "rope" is their absolute mastery of language, and their passion for it.

as Mihkelson terms it, that becomes emotionally torrential and, literally, a battle for the survival or the recovery of any bits and pieces of the emotional self that they would need to feel better. Both have to find something or a way to overcome the ravage and destruction of their field of childhood joy.

Mihkelson and Sebald confront despair, but in a way that is very different from how, for example, more than a century and a half earlier, Kierkegaard and Georg Büchner or even later, in 1922, Alban Berg's dread-inspiring opera, *Wozzeck*, based on Büchner's *Woyzeck*, confronted it. Kierkegaard speaks openly of his terror of the void: "If there were no eternal consciousness in man, if at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power, which writhing with obscure passions produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all – then what would life be but despair?" (Kierkegaard 1968: 30) The despair inspired by such an insatiable void seething with obscure passions (comparable to Schopenhauer's will or to the psychosis that Büchner's *Woyzeck* succumbs to) could, for Kierkegaard, only be filled and soothed by a belief in God's infinity and the belief that a matching spiritual infinite resides within ourselves.

Mihkelson and Sebald have, however, set themselves the task of looking precisely at such a void, with anguish, yes, and with what is at times a towering and overwhelming fear, but without the nihilism of Schopenhauer or that of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, or the suicidal melancholia that haunts Hamlet, or the guilt, punishments, and self-deprivations of a Augustine or a Kierkegaard. Although Mihkelson and Sebald know that our mental stability is precarious and that contemporary cultural reality does not provide adequate protection against the real, they stay to reflect on the black sounds and black holes of history and of the self, without which no post-humanistic art seems worthwhile or true.

Mihkelson and Sebald persist with what seems to be an extraordinary lucidity, a gratitude for words despite their limits, and a new metaphysical courage that is difficult to define but that is way beyond the boundary of what earlier humanists found tolerable. They know that the quest for definitive philosophic answers is over but they allow for the soul's need for metaphysical questioning to continue. For Sebald it is a speculation "beyond one's ken", but it is deeply human. He said, "I've always thought it very regrettable and, in a sense, also foolish, that the philosophers decided somewhere in the nineteenth century that metaphysics wasn't a respectable discipline and had to be thrown overboard, and reduced themselves to becoming logicians and statisticians. It seemed a very poor diet, somehow, to me. So metaphysics, I think, is a legitimate concern." (Schwartz 2007: 115) Both Mihkelson and Sebald know that we need to ask unanswerable questions, somewhat like children do. Sebald

put it like this: “I am not seeking an answer. I just want to say, ‘This is very odd, indeed’.” (Schwartz 2007: 165). It is an ordinary, quotidian way of saying what Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason* addressed more loftily as the “peculiar fate” of our reason that “it is always troubled with questions which cannot be ignored, because they spring from the very nature of reason, and which cannot be answered, because they transcend the powers of human reason” (1966: xxii).

Paz shares the same belief that the great metaphysical questions “that for centuries scientists have ignored, considering them outside their jurisdiction or else superfluous, contradictory, meaningless,” need to be taken up again in the light of new information produced by science (Paz 1995: 245). Paz himself raises a great and fundamental question for our age by asking, “Can a civilization be founded on a neural construction?” (Ibid. 242.) Will the idea of the human person endowed with freedom cease to be once consciousness is realized “as an illusion, an artifice” or “as a neurological orchestra” (ibid. 242, 240)? Paz’s tentative answer is that much scientific knowledge has often turned out to be merely provisional or approximate and that the radical singularity of minds very likely dooms a scientific description of the mind as such to be unachievable. However, he concludes: “It seems to me the time is ripe for embarking on a philosophical inquiry, based on contemporary science, that will shed light on the questions that have always been of passionate concern to human understanding: the origin of the universe and of life, our place in the cosmos, the relation between the part of us that thinks and the part that feels, the dialogue between body and soul.” (Ibid. 246.)

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