

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

Part II. Memory and Emotion

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Abstract. Part I of this article appeared in *Interlitteraria* 2016, 21/2. Part II elaborates on how Mihkelson and Sebald represent their experiences of emotional memory and their feelings of fear, grief, emptiness, and loneliness – in the post-World War II and our historical era. In its comparisons of Mihkelson and Sebald, and both with Lorca, the essay stresses the emotional affinities between human beings that may exist alongside linguistic, historical, political, and other cultural differences.

Keywords: Ene Mihkelson’s *Katkuhaud* (Plague Grave); W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*; Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Play and Theory of the Duende*; Octavio Paz; memory; fear; hate; love as “giving what one does not have”

For Augustine, memory is “like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds... In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea... In it I meet myself as well,” and all “my feelings” and all the “facts I know” (1962: 214–215, 218–220). But where in his memory is God? “Where am I to find you? If I find you beyond my memory, it means that I have no memory of you. How, then, am I to find you, if I have no memory of you?” (224) He asks, is God something he has forgotten? He answers, “We do not entirely forget what we remember that we have forgotten,” unless we have “forgotten it so completely that we do not even remember having forgotten it” and, in that case, we “would not even be able to look for what is lost” (226). Bewildered, he continues seeking, pressing on “to the seat of the mind itself – for this too is in the memory, since the mind can remember itself – but you were not there” (231).

Memory is “a vast immeasurable sanctuary” that allows the replay, repetition, contemplation, and re-examination of all our experiences, and that seems able to reflect and contain everything in the universe – only God is elsewhere. God is in his desire, not in his memory (226).¹ God has to be sought as his emotional

¹ Desire is, for Augustine, one of the four major emotions in memory along with joy, fear, and sorrow (221).

desire to know something no one has ever known – namely, the Truth. God “is Truth itself” (230). He is the sole Truth by which all else is true, and which transcends the uncertain and incomplete truths available to the human mind. Augustine believed that his emotional desire for the Truth and for eternal joy are instances where his own mortality and God’s immortality almost touch, the way the finger of Adam almost touches that of God in Michelangelo’s mural on the ceiling of the Vatican.

In contrast, for Mihkelson and Sebald, memory is not a “sanctuary” in which their selfhood or self-being exists. They cannot speak, as Augustine does, of “the vast cloisters of my memory” (215) or of memory as something that offers them the universe, and the exercise and fulfillment of their desires. Their memory deals as if with scattered leftovers of what has haphazardly passed through them and survived because intense affects clung to some remnants, without their knowing to what these affects refer. At times, Austerlitz senses that something he is experiencing is affecting him, even to the point of illness and madness, but he knows nothing about why this suffering and pain arises, and he has no means of countering what he is feeling.

Austerlitz or Mihkelson are in quest of an emotional interiority – a native, necessary, and indispensable foundation of love and safety for living that fear and trauma have destroyed. They do not aspire to ascend to a transcendent Truth, but to descend to a knowledge of what Mihkelson calls “*a personal unconscious climate*” – a wordless psychic climate of emotions, which, in her case, is one of fear, despair, and anguish, and of sensations of numbness, deadness, and emptiness.² Even now, says Mihkelson’s narrator, “I see clearly how memory forks and disintegrates from omniscience into forgotten emptiness”. This “forgotten emptiness” does not disappear; it is not nothingness. “It forms an altered nest in the unconscious.... [These nests] create for each one *a personal unconscious climate*.... Kaata is an inseparable part of one level. As is the society of that time, as is my nervous structure and body in its reactions to exterior events (Mihkelson 2007: 55–56, my italics). These “nests” or voids of the forgotten constitute as if a graveyard of unbearable experiences and feelings that mark her. They make themselves felt in her “nervous structure and body”.

² This “personal unconscious climate” or passionate modality echoes with “the foundational emotional mind” of Jaak Panksepp (see Part I of this essay, Jaanus 2016), and relates also to Mihkelson narrator’s constant references to actual weather conditions.

There are “affective nests” for all the unclear and anxious feelings aroused in her by the entire period of her life spent with Kaata³ among which is, preeminently, fear: “Fear transformed me into a human pillar of breathing pain” (54). But “I was not conscious of that fear. My unacknowledged fear helped to make me see the simplest situation inaccurately”. Fear prevented her from understanding her own experience. “Even now, I do not yet know what is behind that fear, what knowledge the instinct of survival helped me to repress into nonexistence” (56). She knows fear acted as a defense to help her survive, but its protection cost her lost memories that nonetheless haunt her.

These “nests” of repressed and dead emotions reverberate in her body, wordlessly, like different chords, attesting to her singular emotional history, but without revealing to her why she feels, thinks, or acts as she does or why she feels so much pain and fear. This massive and, sometimes, paralyzing necrotic, emotional material makes such thinking and believing as brought comfort to Augustine unavailable. At other moments it has the power to awaken her out of a nightmare, crying like a child and suffering from a powerful feeling of terror.⁴

For Austerlitz, part of his emotional singularity is his passionate interest in a limited number of particular architectural constructions, such as prisons and railroad stations, and suddenly, one day in Terezín, the site of the camp where his mother perished, he is as if spellbound by a stuffed squirrel with “beady button eyes implacably fixed on me” that he sees in the window of a closed antique shop. The squirrel’s gaze pierces and holds him until he suddenly recalls its Czech name – *veverka* – “like the name of a long-lost friend. What, I asked myself... was the meaning of *veverka*, the squirrel forever perched in the same position?” (196–197) Vera, his childhood nurse, expands on the meaning this

³ Kaata is the aunt with whom she lived when her parents joined the Forest Brothers, the Estonian partisans and anti-Soviet resistance fighters, who waged guerilla war against the Soviet occupation in 1940–1941 and more intensely in 1944–1945 and through most of the first decades of the long 50-year occupation. The last Forest Brother died in 1978, trying to escape the KGB.

⁴ Mihkelson’s “personal unconscious climate” also echoes, to an extent, the Lacanian real that he described as a limit zone, dispossessed of dreams, images, or words. However, both she and Sebald put a much stronger accent on bodily and emotional symptoms. Jacques Alain Miller calls this level of the psyche the real unconscious, one primarily characterized by a hole. For Mihkelson and Sebald, from the perspective of consciousness there, indubitably, is a hole, which is exactly what makes writing so difficult or “as if about the nonexistent”, as Mihkelson says. However, from the perspective of the body, there is the constant presence of bodily and emotional suffering. For an elaboration of the distinction between the real unconscious and the traditional, interpretive one, the one that “speaks,” see Miller 2007.

word once had for him as a four-year-old child and lays bare the lived reality at the very heart of this re-found word in his mother tongue, a completely forgotten language he never even knew was his.

She tells him that in the autumn, they often went to the Schönborn Garden "to watch the squirrels burying their treasure".

Whenever we came home afterwards I had to read aloud from your favorite book. ...every time we reached the page which described the snow falling through the branches of the trees, soon to shroud the entire forest floor, I would look up at her and ask: But if it's all white, how do the squirrels know where they've buried their hoard?... Those were your very words, *the question that constantly troubled you*. (Sebald 2001: 204, my italics.)

What perturbs and moves us deeply or excessively – as the squirrel's survival does the child – is likely to be remembered the longest.⁵ The child's empathetic and anxious identification with the squirrel may very well have converted it into a long-term memory; Austerlitz, however, recovers no more than one word.⁶ In him all that Vera can remember and re-live is dead. Her words restore a part of his destroyed history, but they lack the power to give him back his emotional memory. What Augustine feared – the possibility of a memory deletion that would disable him from ever finding the object lost, is Austerlitz's irremediable experience.

A squirrel, said Wittgenstein, "does not infer by induction that it is going to need stores next winter as well. And no more do we need a law of induction to justify our actions or our predictions". The squirrel has, Wittgenstein argued, its sense of smell, a bodily memory or "a natural knowledge", severed from language, and with it, it has certitude (Wittgenstein 1972: 287/37e). It is doubt-free, untroubled by a conflicted, binary and dialectical language and

⁵ Neuroscience tells us that a memory fastened to emotions has the best chance of being preserved and that in order to reawaken memory it is helpful to return to the places and the feelings that once were part of the memory.

⁶ The child's insistent question about the squirrel's survival is full of the fear of a potential loss. Why? Where had he learned this fear? We don't know, but by 1938, fear already saturated the social and political fabric of Europe and "the unconscious affective climate" of the adults. Why would a child not feel it as well? The child's anxiety and fearful unease concerning a primal loss of safety and love is what neuroscientists refer to as an encoding. Lacan called it the unary trait or mark (Lacan 2007: 46), and described it as an experience that as if sears and brands, a moment of "burning up," an intensity of jouissance, registered in the body, which remains as "mysterious and complex" to neuroscientists as to psychoanalysts (Medina 2008: 104).

thinking system – whereas we are always asking, as does Vera: “How indeed do the squirrels know, what do we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we find in the end?” (204) And her questions – as does that of Austerlitz’s adopted mother on her deathbed: “What was it that so darkened our world?” – remain unanswered? (64)

A true connectedness to their childhood by recollection is impossible both for Sebald and Mihkelson’s narrators. Their emotional memory field is without a trace of beauty, truth and goodness, and the stillness, serenity, and joy that these spiritual beliefs provided in the past. Neither ever attains the kind of overflow of memory and happiness, even if mixed with nostalgic regrets that comes to Wordsworth, for example, in “*Tintern Abbey*” or to Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* nor do they find even that one good memory that would have the power to save them from unhappiness, as Alyosha believed and urged the children to believe in his “Speech at the Stone” in the final pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* (734).⁷

Vera also recounts that the night they put him on the *Kindertransport*, his mother said: “We left from here for Marienbad only last summer. And now – where will we be going now?” (205–206) Vera’s memory of “three wonderful, almost blissful weeks” in Marienbad, their last summer together in 1938, agitates Austerlitz immensely. He was in Marienbad with Marie in 1972. The first night there, he felt a belief rise in him of release from his illness, and such happiness as he had never known before, but this was immediately and inexplicably followed the next morning by a sense of utter brokenness. He feels “something or other unknown wrenches at [his] heart here in Marienbad, something very obvious like an ordinary name or a term which one cannot remember for the sake of anyone or anything in the world” (212–213). He remains very ill during their entire stay, seemingly causelessly wretched and agonized, tormented by images of Schumann’s madness and of pigeons, mortally sick or in a state of senile dementia, immured in a loft that is “a place of horrors” (214–215).

Austerlitz cannot explain or answer to Marie or himself why he is suddenly “like a machine working by some unknown mechanism” or “like a pool of frozen water?” “Why do I see your lips opening,” asks Marie, “as if you were about to say something, maybe even cry out loud, and then I hear not the slightest sound?” (215–216) Austerlitz is too ruined emotionally to accept the tenderness offered to him by Marie and available to him during these days in Marienbad. As he says, in 1972 he felt nothing but “blind terror in the face of the better turn my

⁷ Austerlitz cannot recognize or identify himself as the four-year-old, self-confident child that he once was, not even when Vera produces his photograph. The photograph is on the front cover of the English edition of *Austerlitz*.

life should have taken at that time" (206). His blindness and his terror give the measure of what he felt as child losing the great treasure of love.

Trying to enter memory can be like trying to enter a dream, both can be equally muffled, amorphous, ambiguous, and fleeting – at the opposite extreme of Descartes' "clear and distinct" ideas. The memories of Kaata and Sanna, her mother, whom Mihkelson's narrator depends on to recover something of herself and her past, are utterly damaged. To work her way through their defenses, grandiosity, falsifications, artifices, braggadocios, memory lapses (unintentional and intentional), and above all their affective blockages, deadness, and immense fear – is nerve-raking and ruinous to her soul and her health (208). That Kaata and Saana's farm and village were burnt to the ground by the Communists in their first brutal attacks on Estonians, and their sister's throat cut from behind her back with a scythe, remain unforgotten horrors in Kaata, and create an ineradicable fear in her of what ruthless violence [*vägivald*] can do to human beings (171, 179). And that was only the beginning of what Kaata and Sanna do not want to remember – what they must not and cannot afford to remember.

They have "trained themselves to be memory-less" (162) because they needed to forget to survive (261). They need also to hide – from themselves, from others, and especially now, from the newly liberated, democratic, and capitalistic regime – how they survived as collaborators during the second occupation by the communists, this time for fifty years. Extracting information from them is consequently somewhat like trying to unearth the truth from the mind of a criminal or from a psychotic patient in an insane asylum. Everything the narrator hears has to be double-checked and cross-checked, and reconfirmed the next day, and further confirmed by someone else, only to remain, finally, still uncertain.

The fear in Kaata and Sanna, and in the narrator herself, is immeasurable. "Fear and circumspection live in the blood like microbes," says the narrator (40). In Sanna's case, "on the surface, there is impudence mixed with arrogance and at the bottom? – At the bottom is fear" (306). "Fear destroys memory" (189). What Sanna once was no longer exists, because "another era caught her; caught her so completely that say what you will, nothing resounds from this world swallowed into a black hole" (21). What fear, she asks, is she herself suppressing and afraid to know? (56) Yet, these unknown fears are what enable the transference between them. It helps her to feel and read in them what their silences, lies, and memory lapses hide.⁸

⁸ We now believe that memories are never pure because new feelings and experiences constantly mix with the old and alter what was. In fact, the mechanism of remembering and forgetting is not even in our control but to a large extent self-regulating in ways that we do not as yet understand.

The only certainty remaining to the narrator in this unreliable memory terrain is her own solid certitude of the nonexistence of something that once existed. Thus, as the narrator says, nonexistence is actually her theme, her artistic destiny, the thing that she is driven to try to encounter, acknowledge, and describe, even if that seems like folly: "To change the nonexistent into the existent, if only into verbal images, may seem like folly, but that is my only goal" (168). Nonexistent in her is the knowledge of her parents: "I have always known very clearly that as of a certain moment I forgot everything that was bound to my parents and home" (150). It constitutes her fundamental emptiness. Thus, to reach her "destiny", she is "obligated to look when Kaata opens emptiness" (152).

She forces herself to become as if the mirror before which Kaata enacts her life once again, often in her old theatrically evasive, untrustworthy, self-defensive, and treacherous style that the narrator feels she must shun absorbing into herself. Yet, she does not know what makes her cry out at the same time: "O, speak more, demanded my soul, until the one demanding tired, until I understood that a momentary awakening to self-erasure had occurred in me, the memory of even the ashes of which it was not possible to find". Kaata opens doors to fears that the narrator had not even known existed and to scraps of memory she had never before pieced together.⁹ She does not know what compels her to continue

⁹ She had indeed been with her parents in the rye field during the first Communist round-up and, as she torments herself through the night to remember what she has forgotten, while blaming herself for not remembering more, the first pieces of a lost scene emerge: she was carried, half-running, by someone, into the forest, put into a hollow, ordered to lie there until there is a very, very long silence, after which she could run home. "I don't know how to go back from here, I had said, and that someone, about whom I don't even remember whether it was a man or a woman, a known or unknown person, instructed me: 'Look carefully at the grass, the blades were slightly bent by legs, coming this way, you simply follow the way of the bent grass and you'll reach home'" (149, 237).

The scene acquires much more significance when she remembers that it was her father who carried her and when she hears as if his voice, speaking words that sound like fatherly words: "Now remember, father said, stay here sleeping nicely, regardless of any voices about or whatever. You do not move yourself.... When morning comes, search for that path, which we looked at together, and just go.... there is nothing to fear in the forest. The forest is on your side.... Be a brave girl. If you escape, we may also" (281).

Another partial memory is of Pontus (a man with an ambiguous and complex relationship to the family) taking her to meet a man, perhaps her father, come just to see her, and whom her heart might just have begun to recognize, when Pontus introduces her as an orphan, which makes her feel so dizzy that she fails even to look at the man. It grows dark before her eyes; she lies down; she feels so faint. When her vision is restored, the man is gone. Was that her father or a meaningless, chance encounter of no significance with someone else? Why did she suddenly go blind? Was it because she had already felt, without seeing him, that it was her father and that the joy was too much

listening except that she feels it to be her duty, but when she comes close to as if recovering the very moments of self-erasure and self-extinction or her eclipses, she also feels endangered (148).

She passes out on her bed every night after each session with Kaata, like a drunk, exhausted from what she hears. She stops dreaming. She becomes like a stone. "I had the feeling that I felt nothing... I would have wanted to cry, but couldn't. Actually, I must veritably be without feelings" (141). But in the current time that she is writing, with its global horrors, to which her text makes frequent references, there is yet another fear, the opening up of a gap between this feeling of fear and language as such: "The fear that now grips humanity is a helpless, animal fear, untouched by civilization, and words no longer even come to mind" (224). What happens when words, those last edges to cling to in the void of the forgotten, vanish? And what when all feelings vanish?

Beyond affects lies the domain of the real, fundamentally a territory of non-relationships or dis-relationships. This is the inhuman territory created by the two communist occupations, made more complex, by an interim, but to a degree concurrent German occupation from 1941–1944, and its different style of killing. This is also the territory that Kaata's inhuman look, completely empty of any affect or human relationship, draws her into. It is for the narrator something intolerable: "I am unable to respond to this deep look, as if freed from everything human; I pull a veil of indifference over my eyes" (171). She uses all the energy she has to maintain detachment in order to help bring Kaata to what she is driven to confess, to what is, if not Kaata's actual suicide, that of her being and her persona, that of what she has claimed to be. "She was committing a slow suicide before my very eyes, and under the pretense of a confession, she forced me to watch it" (208).

She and Kaata are actually remembering together. They are in a kind of primitive intimacy and deep identification, below consciousness, such as only a primary, life-long relationship establishes, and that, as she now realizes, she can never escape (48). Only now does she learn that Kaata did not come to get her because she wanted her – an act for which she had always been grateful and for which she has come to thank her, but because the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* or The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

for her, or was it Pontus's devastating declaration that she was an orphan, negating her hopes that it is him? Her child-mind short-circuits, bringing on an eclipse of her vision and possibly, a missed encounter with a father who, as she begins only now to learn, cared for her, and sought news of her from Kaata. It surprises her because she had not even thought of having a father, who besides being the man who was a freedom fighter "(or in the vocabulary of that time, a 'bandit')", was also a family man and father (247).

established to enforce the laws and the will of the Communist Party) ordered her to. Worse is learning that they also ordered Kaata later to put her in a school for training future, communist spies – such as would spy on their own parents (144–145). Up to now, Kaata’s only crime in her eyes was having put her in that school or “prison” for traitors, as she called it, where everyone was leveled, where nothing personal could exist, where all individuality was eradicated, and where they attempted to empty her of her memories and of her own thoughts, all of the effects of which, she says, she still feels fifty years later (119–131).

She is, therefore, completely unprepared for a confession that detonates in her like a bomb: “Yes, I am your father’s traitor... someone would in any case have done that. He plagued Sanna. He plagued all of us. It was eight years after the war; the entire family of Polendiku lived in fear because of him.... Kaata looks at me now. Her eyes are white with fear. Can you forgive me! That phrase seems so impossible to me after this confession that my breath stopped” (259). This stop creates a formidable ethical hole in the text and a challenge to its readers.¹⁰

¹⁰ What I am now saying is what Mihkelson’s stop has made me ask and think. How could any kind of a binary relationship of forgiver and forgiven be established here? Can such a “couple” even exist in this instance? Are we not facing an imbalance that breaks the scales? Two people suffered, one was murdered, the other is alive and still suffering, but the perpetrator of the crime asks for an abatement of *her* “sufferings”! It is not the crime and the many egotistic and survival motives for it that are all too familiar, even comprehensible, given our ego and our mental structure as we to date understand it – it is the request for forgiveness that takes one’s breath away. For one, because to refuse a request for forgiveness may mean to be “unforgiving”, which implies not only to be someone who does “not forgive”, but someone harsh and hostile. The request seen in its most negative light makes crime as if a means by which to impose a forced choice on the victim: be forgiving or be (or appear to be) “unforgiving”, hence also, possibly, morally reprehensible and deficient, in one’s own eyes and that of others. It even smacks of making as if instrumental and unethical use of one’s own position as a criminal to diminish the ethical status of the victim. But from where are adults whose souls are full of “nests of pain” to draw the spiritual resources that forgiveness demands? Does not forgiveness seem to require such a depth of identification with and empathy for the murderer of one’s father that is beyond the emotional reach of most human beings? Could to forgive, not seem as if to allow, or worse, to be as if in collaboration with the act of betrayal? What these narrators are up against, when forgiveness seems impossible and punishment equally futile and impuissant, is an equally impossible and difficult acceptance: the dark and grim acceptance that we are a transgressive species that has discovered many of the laws of nature, but that has not yet been able to find the laws that could bind up its outbreaks of psychotic madness, war, murder and cruelty. Further, in a post-religious and post-enlightenment era of autonomy, where a need or demand for forgiveness of one’s sins should or can no longer be addressed to God, should this demand not, first of all, be imposed on oneself rather than on another? Should Kaata

What really does take one's breath away is that Kaata's request makes clear that she is no longer able to feel human empathy. In that moment she truly is an example of a post-human – in a post-humanistic age that our centuries of crimes have created. Michelson's narrator knows this when she says that it is because our souls are in ashes that we no longer feel empathy for others: "The ashes of our own burnt up souls have up to now found no recognition or commemoration and for this reason we are also numb and blind to the sufferings of others" (106). *Katkuhaud* (*Plague Grave*) is precisely a "recognition and commemoration" of this catastrophic advent in our civilization.

During this same encounter, Kaata suddenly tells the narrator: "Furthermore, I want to tell you, that I myself will not kill myself... That is a sin" (253). Ironically and narcissistically, the murder of others is not a sin, but suicide (from the Latin *cidere* 'to cut' + *sui* 'into oneself') is. Kaata's position does away with tragic pagan and neoclassical notions of self-accountability, responsibility, and self-punishment.¹¹ Her negation, which is a defense against such a self-punishment, indicates that she is possibly aware that she ought to do it or that she fears others, like her niece, might think so. As the narrator notes, she has shifted beliefs, clinging now to a bizarre and marginal Christian sect, whose members believe that they will be spared on the final day of reckoning (156).

not ask first whether she could forgive herself? If the answer is "no," then should she not forbear asking for forgiveness from the child of her victim? If on the contrary her answer is "yes," should she then not, in addition, neither expect nor require further forgiveness from the child? But Kaata does neither. Instead, she tries to put all the blame on her victim, the child's father. If she cannot live with the real of her humanity – that she killed to survive; that she killed in order not to have to fear being killed – should she not refrain from seeking to make another bear her burden of her guilt or whatever she feels?

¹¹ Kaata is infinitely distant from Racine's *Phèdre*, for example, who does kill herself "to restore to daylight all its purity". Kaata does not see herself in Racine's ethical light as a blemish on the light of the sun. In Racine's mythical world, the act is portrayed as one of self-sacrifice:

"Et la mort, à mes yeux dérochant la clarté
Rend au jour, qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté."
"Death removes
The light from eyes that have defiled it, so –
Restores to daylight all its purity." (Act V, scene 7)

In Sofi Oksanen's international bestseller, *Purge*, the main protagonist, Aliide, does just that. She burns down, at once, her house and herself, in an act of fierce and resolved abdication that (no matter how it might compare, or not, to such acts in Greek tragedy) remains one sure, self-destructive answer to the unbearable for which the self is accountable.

Most essentially, Kaata sees herself as someone who is “normal”, compared to whom the narrator’s father is “abnormal”.

“He was *not human*, Kaata says, even as if with passion. He did not understand the affliction of staying alive” (185, my italics). After a long pause, she adds, “Everyone wants to live, your father didn’t understand that” (259). For Kaata, those who want to live are human, “the others”, who do not understand that are “not human”. Her facile binary simply excludes “the others” from humanity. The war was finally over, says Kaata, we were young; we wanted to have fun and, above all, to forget. The narrator, however, believes that we must not forget, because if we do we will destroy ourselves over and over again, as if Vico’s cycles of the *corso e ricorso* from barbarism to civilization and back again were true. “There were many of us,” says Kaata, “You cannot even imagine how many of us there were. Only they do not speak about it. I also speak only to you. We were such a traitorous bunch” (179). “But,” asks the narrator, “there were also the others? There were more of them, whispers Kaata, but very many of them were deported, imprisoned, or they vanished” (180).

What “the others lived for” returns with the liberation, as Sanna, her mother, says it, but in a raw and brutal image: “After the constitution of Estonian independence, the memory of that time had to be drowned like a newborn puppy, who had no possibility of survival in the general happiness of liberation” (311). A general happiness returned with independence and freedom. This is the world her father lived for. The world of Kaata and Sanna who forgot these values in order “just to live” has now to be “drowned” and their participation in it hidden, denied, and forgotten.

The dénouement of the agonistic struggle between Kaata and the narrator is for her as if a mutual burning of souls. It is like the passage of two machines through each other at a predetermined point, at which they arrive from opposite sides of the world, in order to crash into each other in a way that:

Only space, the landscape, a level plain remains – of the human being – who ran through or who was run through, who erased and who was erased, so that nothing recognizably human was left, even his living breath vanished into the four corners of open space – a handful of dust remains, blown hither and thither, disappearing as if nowhere. Indeed, the feeling I was finally left with was such that I was already then able to say: there are times and moments in which the human soul burns up. Not even ashes remain (147).

Such a burning up of souls does not lead to purgation (from the Latin *purgare* ‘to purify’). It does not cleanse or renew. It destroys and leaves nothing. There is no remainder left to renew itself. There are not even any ashes to commemorate the previous existence of these souls.

Long ago, we believed that it is the soul that gives life and movement to the matter that is the body. Yet, Mihkelson's narrator sees that, "even around burnt up souls the body, its form and senses survive, and people appear to be quite alive" (148).¹² This is the very opposite and reversal of what we once supposed would be the final destiny of the body and its soul.

The Eclipse of Souls¹³

Katkuhaud begins with a reference to a "solar eclipse" (*päikesearjutus*) and a "dark cloud", and it ends with an eclipse of light (*valgusearjutus*). The narrator

¹² The narrator gives us countless examples of what soulless bodies can do – the betrayals, killings, wars, round-ups, the desecrations of bodies and souls in the Abu Ghraibi prisons (161), the perverse relations of a stepmother with her son (297), the cannibalistic contract between a cannibalistic eater and his eaten (58–59). (The real-life case of the cannibalistic contract between Armin Meiwes and Bernd Brandes was resolved on January 30, 2004 with a sentence of eight years in prison for Meiwes, the surviving cannibal, in part because the German courts had no laws against cannibalism. As Freud said, we do not need laws against transgression that we think humans would not commit, but clearly, we have misunderstood and underestimated the limits of perverse desire and of human transgression. On 10 May 2006, at a retrial, a court in Frankfurt convicted Meiwes of murder and sentenced him to life imprisonment.) She also tells us that Kaata's first victim, a young man she knew, whom she was told to threaten, hung himself the very day that she left him, but she herself seems to have borne it quite well. It seems to have had no effect of purgation on her nor did it make her hesitate or deter her from continuing on her criminal path even for a moment. Her account of how she chatted with the brothers whose bunker she pointed out for annihilation, and Sanna's justifications for betraying a fellow forest brother and finally her husband and child's father are humanly similarly chilling.

¹³ In Sebald's *After Nature*, the great German Renaissance painter, Matthias Grünewald, who rejected the classical style of his era for the passionate expressiveness of late medieval art, travels in 1502 to see the eclipse of the sun, the great "event of the century, awaited with great terror," to "become a witness to"

the great sickening away of the world,
in which a phantasmal encroachment of dusk
in the midst of daytime like a fainting fit
poured through the vault of the sky.

Grünewald sees colors never before seen that remain fixed in his memory and that issue from a "deoxygenated void", where "the gasping breath of the figures on the central Isenheim panel", "portend our death by asphyxiation". Beyond that is a "mountain landscape of weeping", depicting and prefiguring "a planet utterly strange, "in an evil state of erosion", and "the ruining of life that in the end will consume even the stones" (Sebald 2003: 30–31).

sees herself as this eclipse of light. “In Vienna, I comprehended myself as *an eclipse of light* and wanted suddenly myself to scream. The eclipse was in me and couldn’t escape” (5, 320, my italics) She has as if swallowed it. It is locked within her. It is a self-identification and self-recognition that makes her want to scream because this incorporated darkness has seemingly no way of exit. There is no method for expelling it. It will never leave her. This embodied blackness cannot be purged. There is no catharsis, which will cleanse her and allow daylight to return. It seems to her to be an unalterable eclipse of her soul.

Fear runs through the novel like the sea. From the beginning to the end, fear is the strongest and the most palpable emotion, arising again and again in surges and never completely absent. It is the substance of her last dream – a dream of her own eclipse. She watches a car, driving ever deeper into watery ruts and into an iced-up lake or pond, and sinking, as the ship, the “MS Estonia”, sank into the Baltic Sea, until it disappears, soundlessly, with the driver not making the slightest effort to save herself. She wants to call out but she has no voice. She grasps her cellphone to push buttons for help even as she realizes that it is already too late. Nothing is visible anymore. The driver froze and failed to act.

At the limit of the bearable, pagan culture posited various kinds of metamorphoses where humans escaped, shape-changing into animal or plant forms, as is the case of Daphne who changed shape into a laurel tree, “under the pressure of a pain from which she cannot flee” (1992: 60). But Mihkelson’s dreamer is a car, a ferry, something mechanical and soulless that is in any case doomed to fail, sooner or later, and not alive or capable of metamorphosis.

These references to darkness, destruction, and the eclipse of souls, or to what Panksepp calls the “dark matter of the unconscious” (Panksepp & Biven 2012: 425), accompany the journey of both these narrators to a Hell into which heaven itself – or the only possible heaven, their childhood – has collapsed and vanished. Listening to Kaata, Mihkelson’s narrator exclaims: “Where can I find a support for my soul, when childhood and youth are shot full of holes right here with conjured up memory bullets” (199). And again: “Does heaven want to sink into hell” (218). Even at the end, the narrator does not know “when or how my inwardly bogged-down heaven would once again open up for flight. Is there even still time for it to open up in a world transmuted by restlessness?” (320)

Black Sounds

The narrations of Mihkelson and Sebald are full of what Manuel Torre called “black sounds” (Lorca 2010: 57). An artist accesses “black sounds” when he passes beyond what Federico Garcia Lorca in his great essay, “Play and Theory

of the Duende," calls the "the angel" and "the muse". The "angel" is the artist concerned with style, decorum, virtuosity, with the appearance of artlessness, and grace. "The angel dazzles", says Lorca, "but he flies high over man's head, shedding his grace, and the man effortlessly realizes his work or his charm or his dance" (*ibid.* 58). On the other hand, the "muse" has do with classical artistic norms, with forms, and with intelligence, but intelligence, as Lorca says, limits and makes the poet forget "that ants could eat him or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on his head." The angel, says Lorca, "gives light, and the muse gives forms.... but one must awaken the duende in the remotest mansions of the blood" (*ibid.* 58–59).

To sing with duende means to send away the muse and the angel and become helpless (*ibid.* 61–62). It means "to sing with a scorched throat: without voice, without breath or color". It means to be able to tear down and "kill all the scaffolding of the song". It means robbing oneself "of skill and security". It is singing, unsupported, in emptiness, to confront and express something harsher and more uncertain than reality – the Lacanian real or Freud's *das Urverdrängte* – the originally repressed, forgotten, or unbearable.

It is an art opposed to any kind of veiling, as is Mihkelson's own. She has no patience with those who mourn an art that hid the real: the void, the hatred, the despair, and the evil, especially not in the way it was done during the communist era. She also rejects the current giving of primacy to images over words. It seems to her that today: "The main thing is to avoid words touching on anything personal and that there be only the image. Words touching on intimacy are as if cords, which undermine the processing of fantasies until you are entirely a fantasy. Then cutting your finger with a nail file is a lot healthier. Thus you feel the warm, animal instinct for life in the sensitivity of your own flesh". She is perfectly willing to become incarnated as the devil "in order to make evil, analyzed with the help of words, accurately visible. Without the devil's methodical breaking there is no way of defending living human beings against cruelty" (273–274).

The duende comes from the most primitive level of the artist's existence, from the body and the affects, from the archeological self (Lorca 2010: 44). It comes from a people who have suffered, who have a deep corporeal intimacy with hardship, hard work, earthiness, earthy toil, punishment, irrationality, disorder, and injustice. Black notes are expressions of the unendurable – of terror, lovelessness, and loneliness. They are an unrepressed, loud, and strong expression of this blackness and darkness that is normally forbidden, hidden, and suppressed as unacceptable to consciousness and society. A duende, which is never anything but an unrepeatably expression of singularity, can, by contrast to traditional mimetic realism, be fearful, even horrifying.

The duende is as if a repeated crying, starting up, again and again, as a jagged and fragmented set of cries – raucous, harsh, brash, even ugly – rising from the depths of an organism. Mihkelson’s is the harsher voice, full of brokenness, hoarseness, irony, and irreverence. Sebald’s is softer, more mellifluous and melodic, maintaining with Austerlitz the unbroken intonation of a near psychotic melancholia, while hitting black notes that make one want to weep. Mihkelson makes one want to scream. She is tougher. She does not spare herself or her reader. She makes one read every sentence three times because she knows you haven’t understood it the first time, because she has written it in such a way as to make sure you haven’t. Both she and Sebald make sure that you suffer, as you do with the singer who has duende (*tener duende*) or soul. “Neither in Spanish dance nor in the bullfight does anyone amuse himself”, says Lorca. “The duende takes it upon himself to make us suffer by means of a drama of living forms, and clears the stairways for an evasion of the world.” (*Ibid.* 69)

But the duende is expressly not an evasion for the sake of some form of transcendence or sublimation, but a descent into further suffering. It is a matter of honoring suffering. Sebald and Mihkelson know perfectly well that we are used to a prose in which we just flow along, feeling very intelligent because we understand everything right away, since nothing much is actually being said or we are being merely entertained. The consequence is, as Mihkelson’s narrator says, that “now it appears to human beings that even death is not horrible and ugliness is described with great precision, but without the power of empathy, just as one might do, as best one can, a topsy-turvy kind of protective magic” (274).

Mihkelson and Sebald write in the proximity of death, of graveyards, and of ghosts. Sebald says that the dead haunt his texts because he cannot do without them. He says that he learned of death when his maternal grandfather died, because this loss was of someone whom he could not bear to lose. “My interest in the departed, which has been fairly constant, comes from that moment of losing someone I couldn’t really afford to lose. I broke out in a skin disease right after his death, which lasted for years” (Schwartz 2007: 171).

“The duende does not come at all,” says Lorca, “unless he sees that death is possible” (Lorca 2010: 67). In the duende, we hear death sing; it honors the dead required to make the song. But this is not Freud’s stoical, closed death that is an end of life and its negation (Freud 1920: 38–39); it is not a forgotten death. As Lorca says: “Everywhere else death is an end. Death comes and they draw the curtains. Not in Spain, in Spain they open them”. Spain, says Lorca, “is a country of death, open to death”. “Throughout the country, everything finds it final, metallic value in death” (Lorca 2010: 64–65).

“Is there any place in Estonia where nothing horrible has happened?” asks Mihkelson’s narrator. “Were we killed too little, I ask myself, have we

not been killed enough, I repeat the question once again," says the narrator, as she approaches some former ancestor, whom she calls Arp, a hybrid ghost-man or man-statue, whom I associate (as perhaps Mihkelson did too) with the wordless and stony-eyed "master of the horse" and "fellow soldier of Saint Paul", Archippus, whom Paul exhorts to renewed activity in the name of truth,¹⁴ and who arises from his chair repeatedly only to sink back, urging her with this gesture to begin her hunt, her mission, because she is full of fear to do so (10). She knows that the need to write and to investigate arises in her like an inner commandment. She must fill in the untouchable, forbidden, and unapproachable space of the Bronze soldier, symbol of the so-called Soviet liberators of Estonia, cordoned-off and guarded by policemen so as to suggest a scene of a crime, not yet investigated, that needs to be protected against contamination, and at the same time, is as if a sacred space of mystery, a holy space – opaque and beyond meaning-making, interpretation, and debate – a space created so as not to hurt feelings or open old wounds, an attitude judicious from the perspective of politics and diplomacy, but not from that of historical truth or the requirements of ethics.¹⁵ From the moment that she finds this obfuscation intolerable, a realization arises within her that she will have to turn time itself backwards and make what is dying or what the current political and cultural reality wants to forget, alive again.

"The duende must know beforehand that that he can serenade death's house and rock those branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have any consolation", writes Lorca. "With idea, sound, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well. Angel and muse escape with violin, meter, and compass; the duende wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lies the strange, invented qualities of a man's work," or I want to add, even that of an entire small nation (Lorca 2010: 67). I was not there, I did not experience it directly, but still it was transmitted to me that what drove nearly the entire population of this country to the heart of its capital to sing for its freedom was tied up with its ancient intimacy with a singing that has duende in it, a singing that comes when there is the proximity of death.¹⁶

¹⁴ For references to Archippus see *Philemon* 1:2 and *Colossians* 4:17.

¹⁵ As Mihkelson says, with independence the significance that the Bronze soldier had during the occupation, revered as it was then with ceremonies and flowers each year, was already fading as demonstrated by the fact that people sang, drank, and danced around the figure in that square, but with the demand for a change in the status quo of the monument, passions and claims were unleashed that struck her as needing address and redress.

¹⁶ I am referring to the non-violent, Estonian "Singing Revolution," the documentary film by James & Maureen Tusty, that culminated in the peaceful overthrow of a cruel and violent occupation in 1991.

A Coda on Love

Love, says Octavio Paz, “has been the center of our emotional life, both imaginary and real, for thousands of years. The demise of our image of love would be a greater calamity than the collapse of our economic and political systems: it would be the end of our civilization. That is of the way we feel and live” (Paz 1995: 164). Yet, as Paz goes on to say, “A great absent participant in the revolt of this turn of the century has been love” (*ibid.* 189). And although “there is an intimate, causal relation between love and freedom” (*ibid.* 194), “the great moral and spiritual misery of liberal democracies is their affective insensitivity” (*ibid.* 211).

I have never in my life loved anyone, she [Kaata] said at the beginning, and in this saying there was a piercing, bone-chilling bewilderment. When she repeated the same thing in the following weeks, when the veil that comprises humanity was rolled down from all her gestures, an ever more penetrating whisper resounded from beneath her phrases: you neither, you neither, our meeting was only a fabrication.

But then I did not hear this whisper, I didn’t notice. I was looking more at Kaata’s neck, the throat and eyes; they functioned in lieu of a lie detector.

When the flap beneath Kaata’s throat quivered from lack of air – when sometimes neither air or sound came from her, when I waited tensely, – I knew, she was telling the truth. (150–151)

It is a moment of truth, one of the few, as the narrator has learned to read it from her body language, her breathing and the movements of her throat. I believe it is the only time in the text that the word love is used, but in order to tell the child that she was not loved.

There is no love in this text (though there are references to sexual bonds), yet, it is a narrative “not without love”.¹⁷ I am thinking of the fact that although the narrator knows that she is unable to extend truthfully felt sympathy to Kaata, who remains alien, even monstrous and frightening, and cannot believe that she should, she does not distance or exempt herself from the diagnosis of madness or maddening inscrutability that she makes about her. She sees and feels herself to be an inescapable part of our collective post-humanism. She goes to Kaata’s eightieth birthday and to her funeral. Although she does so reluctantly each time, she goes, and again, not in order to extend forgiveness, but to indicate

¹⁷ “Not without,” as opposed to “not within” (or *intus*), is a litotes, a figure of speech that Lacan uses to introduce ambiguity and understated presence (Lacan 2007: 58).

Kaata's inclusion, as it were, into the human community (314–315). It is as if a sorrowful recognition that the inhuman is not outside the human.

The same is true of the narrator's act of tearing up the pleading letter (*palvekiri*) to her mother after her final dream, the letter in which she once again sought a kind of minimal recognition of the most basic of all bonds, that of a mother and child (318). Her mother's hatred and enmity¹⁸ is part of the eclipse of her soul's light, and yet, she decides to bear it. She lets her mother be. She accepts her self-protective, deranged words and feelings, and with that her own increased loneliness.

After her dream, she knows even better than she had before that her loneliness is inescapable (145). But these small acts, arising seemingly only from decency and civility, arise in her from deeper and more exemplary sources of humanity, honesty, and feeling that (given the pain involved for her) make them acts of charity, even saintly acts, and not without love. As she does all these things, without explicitly saying much, the reader understands that she knows the answer to Austerlitz's stepmother's question after "what has so darkened our world?" – as we, in fact, all do. It is that absence of love without which we grow ill, as Sebald did after his grandfather's death. Austerlitz dates his later, severe decline to the loss of his only friend in a plane crash in the Savoy Alps (117).

However, with music and poetry we seem to know more surely, as the squirrel knows without knowing, what our indispensable human treasure is. "Possessed by duende that can baptize in dark water," as Lorca says, "it is easier to love and understand, and one can be sure of being loved and understood" (Lorca 2010: 67). Duende, the singing or writing of black sounds allows something like a reordering and clarifying of turbulent emotions, some kind of alteration and modification of the emotional scales. It is like the tuning of a grand piano, badly out of tune, dissonant, with broken strings and keys. Indeed, as the narrator tells us, the two years after her last visit to Kaata were for her, "like a correction of her moods, a re-establishment of rational balance, so that the everyday would seem real" (313).

We are a civilization of the real that has transgressed all laws, lifted every repression and taboo, and passed into the most primitive and primal levels of hate and barbarism. But care too is a primitive passion, the complex neural mechanism and evolutionary path of which in mammals we are only beginning to understand (Panksepp & Biven 2012: 283–310). There is also a primal human

¹⁸ "You are my enemy," Sanna writes to her (296). And in another letter, pretending to be a third party, an objective observer, giving advice to a wayward daughter – she commands: "Put an end, finally, to the family terror that you are committing against your own mother." (316)

love – the forgotten transference between the mother and the infant that can be an exchange of immense physical tenderness. Lacan says, “love is giving what one doesn’t have” (Lacan 2007: 52), perhaps because none of us have a memory of that unknowable, archaic love, or, as much of it as we had was too little, or it did not match our needs? But perhaps, “love is giving what one doesn’t have” because love truly is inexistent, merely a feeling – ungraspable and immaterial, even less material than language – which cannot be given because there is nothing to give?

But if we have managed, clearly, to reach the primitive passion of hate, why can we not reach that of love as well? Are we more afraid of love than of hate, or is hating quicker and easier? Or does love as care become lost and overwhelmed by the stronger instinct of sexuality and the need for sexual bonding? Will love for all these reasons always remain giving what one doesn’t have, so that the beloved or recipient will sooner or later, inevitably feel that the love given and received is not enough nor nearly all that was wanted? Still, the odd thing is that giving what one doesn’t have can sometimes have an astonishing effect – something like Christ’s “miracle of the five loaves and two fishes” that scarcely seemed enough, but feed a multitude of 5,000.¹⁹ And even more odd, and mysterious, is that this love one doesn’t have is full of unknown meaning. And it is always mutual.

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¹⁹ The first miracle, “The feeding of the 5,000” with five loaves and two fish, is reported in all four gospels: Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44, Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14.

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