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**Childness and the Writing of the German Past:**

**A study of the narrative functions of tropes of childhood in German  
literature 1990-2001**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

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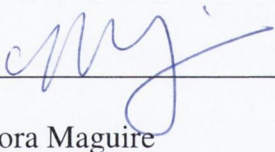
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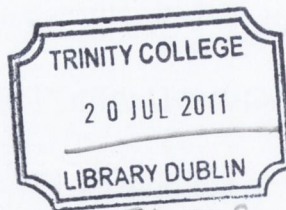
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## Summary

The thesis examines the narrative functions of tropes of childhood in a selection of post-reunification German novels for adults. The methodology is based on a practice of close textual analysis, focusing particularly on focalization, narration and the implied reader. The conceptual tool of “childness” is also developed as a means of distinguishing clearly between childhood as empirical state and childhood as socio-cultural construct; this concept also facilitates analysis of child figures as agents of narration and focalization, as well as of the significance of childhood and child figures as objects of narration.

The selected texts, by Dieter Forte, Martin Walser, Marcel Beyer and W.G. Sebald, represent a variety of ideological positions, stylistic approaches and areas of thematic focus in relation to Germany’s National Socialist and wartime past. The thesis finds that tropes of childhood operate in the service of narrative projects of local exculpation and cultural rehabilitation in the work of Forte and Walser. In the texts by Beyer and Sebald that have been discussed, the complex myth of childhood innocence is found to be central to the texts’ structures of fascination, yearning and, in the case of Sebald, mourning. The thesis argues that across the corpus of texts examined, tropes of childhood play a strong role in the production of reader response, at times closing critical distance through emotive effects of pathos and persuasion.

The thesis introduction defines the terms of analysis and locates the work in relation to the relevant critical fields. Part I examines the role of child figures as focalizers and protagonists in texts by Forte and Walser. Part II focuses on the structures

of the innocence myth and the child as object of narration and focalization in Beyer and Sebald. Part III returns to matters of focalization, examining the role played by childhood tropes in Sebald's constructions of memory and subjectivity. The thesis conclusion synthesizes these findings and addresses their wider relevance for further scholarship.

## **Acknowledgements**

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### Central primary texts: abbreviations and editions cited

- A – Sebald, W.G., *Austerlitz*. Original publication: Munich, Vienna, Carl Hanser: 2001. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer: 2003
- BU – Sebald, W.G., *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*. Original publication: Salzburg, Vienna, Residenz: 1985. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer: 1994
- CS - Sebald, W.G. (ed. Sven Meyer), *Campo Santo*. Original publication: Munich, Vienna, Carl Hanser: 2003. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 2006
- DA – Sebald, W.G., *Die Ausgewanderten*. Original publication: Frankfurt a.M., Eichborn, 1992. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1994
- F – Beyer, Marcel, *Flughunde*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1995
- JS – Forte, Dieter, *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*. Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1995
- K – Beyer, Marcel, *Kaltenburg*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2008
- LL – Sebald, W.G., *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Original publication: Munich, Vienna, Carl Hanser: 1997. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 2001

- RS – Sebald, W.G., *Die Ringe des Saturn*. Original publication: Frankfurt a.M., Eichborn, 1995. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1997
- S – Beyer, Marcel, *Spione*. Original publication: Cologne, DuMont: 2000. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 2002
- SB – Walser, Martin, *Ein springender Brunnen*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1998
- SG – Sebald, W.G., *Schwindel. Gefühle*. Original publication: Frankfurt a.M., Eichborn, 1990. Edition cited: Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 1994

## Introduction

Wir wollen alle wieder Kinder sein,  
So lieb und harmlos wie vorm großen Krieg!  
Wir wolln nicht mehr die alten Sünder sein  
Wir wollen würdig sein der Republik!  
(Friedrich Holländer, 1921)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Statement of thesis

This thesis is concerned with narrative constructions of childhood in German literature for adults published after 1989. It examines the roles played by tropes and myths of childhood in texts engaging with the German past of 1933-1945 from the standpoint of the new Federal Republic. In order to best pursue this project, I have chosen and developed a methodological stance which views 'childhood' as a social and cultural construct reflective of adult desires, anxieties and agendas. This stance can also be understood as a response to a basic problem of conceptual and verbal distinction when it comes to the discussion of childhood, that is between 'childhood' as an empirical state and 'childhood' as a socio-cultural construct. As well as to some extent hampering clarity of analysis, this problem of distinction is also associated, at times, with wider failures of distinction between the planes of empirical reality and of construct or representation. These moments of elision and boundary-blurring, furthermore, are inhabited by (adult) desires, as Dieter Richter has suggested:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Wir wollen alle wieder Kinder sein' (Song) (1921). From the album *Berlin Cabaret Songs*, performed by Ute Lemper, Decca, 1996. Song lyrics printed in compact disc liner notes pp. 46-7.

Wie jeder historisch forschende Wissenschaftler ist auch der an Kindheit Interessierte auf Quellen angewiesen: Geschichten, Bilder, Urkunden, Grabsteine, Museumsbestände etc., sie alle reden von Kindern, sie stehen der Wirklichkeit, von der sie berichten, ferner oder näher; niemals sind sie freilich mit ihr identisch. Dieser hermeneutisch und für sich selbstverständliche Sachverhalt scheint, wo es um Kinder geht, besonders leicht vergessen zu werden. Ein Sujet wie das der Kinderdarstellungen [...] verleitet offenbar in ganz besonderer Weise zur vorschnellen Identifikation des Dargestellten mit der »Realität«: Projektion im Freudschen Sinne scheint dabei im Spiel zu sein. (Richter 1987: 19)

Richter's statement relates primarily to the historical study of childhood. However, a similar failure of distinction, together with the presence of projection and desire, is also cited by the historian Stefan Maechler in his study of the Wilkomirski scandal, in relation to the literary production and reception of the effect of the child's perspective in the false Holocaust memoir, *Bruchstücke* (Wilkomirski 1995):

This assumed perspective suggests that the child's world of experience is directly present within the text, that what is being told is an unadulterated version of what has happened – experience writes itself, as it were. This posture conceals the fact that every word is written in the present and that the author surely shapes his memories with the conscious, knowing mind of an adult. (Maechler 2001: 279)

Here, the effect of the child's perspective elided the distinction between the adult, writing subject and the child he claimed to have been. The reported memories gained an intensified air of authenticity, and readers readily invested, emotionally and imaginatively, in the voice of the child survivor that appeared to speak from the text. In the context of the Wilkomirski scandal, of course, this tendency to project unwarranted values of immediacy and authenticity onto the literary artifice of the child's perspective

further troubled waters that were already exceedingly muddy. The scandal was not about the fact that a child does not ‘really’ speak through the text, but rather about the fact that the text was not the Holocaust memoir it was claimed to be, its author not a Holocaust survivor named Benjamin Wilkomirski but a Swiss-born man named Bruno Dössekker. None of the texts I examine in this thesis have made truth-claims similar to those attached to *Bruchstücke* (1995). However, even in the absence of such truth-claims, it is my argument that the appearance of tropes and myths of constructed childhood in texts engaged with Germany’s past warrants careful analysis from a position of deliberate scepticism. My readings of texts by Dieter Forte, Martin Walser, Marcel Beyer and W.G. Sebald draw attention to slippages, elisions and blind spots, and impulses of yearning and desire that are connected to the narrative construction of childhood. I explore the impact of these constructions of childhood on the texts’ participation in post-reunification discourses of German cultural memory. The texts examined represent a variety of literary styles and narrative structures, three different generational affiliations regarding their authors, as well as various political and ideological affinities. As my analyses will show, they also represent a broad spectrum of stances in relation to Germany’s National Socialist past, from exculpatory yearning to guilt and mourning, and from denial of suffering to voyeuristic fascination. Nonetheless, this thesis finds that tropes and myths of childhood, particularly of childhood innocence, perform similar narrative functions across this spectrum in relation to the production and regulation of reader response, and that these functions are central to the texts’ participation in the discourses and debates of German memory. As I demonstrate below, each of these four authors subscribes to some extent to patriarchal modes of identity discourse in relation to the German past.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 43-8 below.

selection of these four authors as the focus for the study thus reflects my intention to examine literary tropes of childhood as products of patriarchal discourse and ideology, counterbalancing the prevailing critical emphasis on their potential for facilitating defamiliarization and social critique. Before proceeding with these analyses, I next lay out the methodological and theoretical framework of this project, and discuss the fields of scholarship from which the thesis has emerged and to which I hope it will meaningfully contribute.

## 2. 'Childhood' as discursive construct

That 'childhood' may usefully be understood as a discursive construct is, by now, widely accepted in literary, sociological, historical and cultural scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Of course, that is not to suggest that childhood is nothing but a discursive construct, or that there is not such a thing as an empirical child. Rather, in a manner akin to gender, perhaps, childhood can be understood as both empirical biological state and discursively produced construct.<sup>4</sup> As I have said, it is the constructed aspect of childhood that is of interest in this thesis. Here, I discuss some constructivist approaches to childhood which have been of central methodological importance to this thesis.

Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*, originally published in 1960, is a seminal text in this regard (Ariès 1996). Understanding childhood as a cultural and social construct, it attempts to map the development of the idea of childhood from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. Ariès observes changes in visual representations and written

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> An important difference here being the limited extent to which the discursive construction of childhood has been subject to critique, as Jenks points out. Chris Jenks, *Childhood: Key Ideas* (2nd edn.; London: Routledge, 2005).



descriptions of children, assembling cultural artefacts into an evolutionary narrative. In broad terms, his argument is that childhood did not exist as a clear social category until sometime after the medieval period; prior to this, children were understood as smaller and less significant versions of adults. A firmer and more distinct idea of 'childhood' emerged slowly between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, and as industrialisation and urbanisation took place in later modernity, the child increasingly became the focal point of a new family structure. Many scholars have since taken issue with Ariès's arguments relating to medieval life and with his methodology in general, which, as Richter hints, tends to disregard the considerable gaps that exist between the disparate images and texts of childhood, created mostly by adults, that are his sources, and the ultimately un-reconstructable psychological, social and imaginative landscapes of the past (Richter 1987: 19). The central flaw in Ariès's study might be said to be linked to the subject matter itself, for historical documents pertaining to pre-modern childhood are comparatively scarce, and documents authored by children scarcer still, making it difficult for the historian to construct a representative picture of general conditions at a given time. Furthermore, as Phillips suggests, the emerging political consciousness of the 1960s can also be read in Ariès's study, as his focus on increasing surveillance and regulation of children in late modernity pre-empted Foucauldian concerns to some extent and contains "a nostalgia (...) for a world before the mass retreat into institutions and families." (Phillips and Ariès 1996: 7) Ariès's pinpointing of later modernity as the period in which childhood became increasingly sentimentalised, and children increasingly subject to surveillance and discipline, is a key observation for my study's understanding of the myth of childhood innocence. As numerous subsequent studies have

shown, this is very much a myth of modernity, and it is one in which adults' projective yearning, sentimentality, anxiety and repression are combined in equal measure. The structures of innocence as a modern myth will be a key consideration in my discussion of W.G. Sebald's work. Where *Centuries of Childhood* provides a groundbreaking historical study of this and other discursive constructions of childhood, work by Jacqueline Rose, James Kincaid, Hans-Heino Ewers and others has approached the innocence myth from psychoanalytic and literary perspectives.

Itself a rather polemical discourse on children's literature, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Rose 1994) demands that adults question the assumptions and motivations involved in the act of an adult writing for, or writing, a child. Her suggestion that "Peter Pan [may be] a little boy who does not grow up, not because he doesn't want to, but because someone else prefers that he shouldn't" is as deeply relevant to the study of representations of children in writing for adults as it is to the study of children's literature (Rose 1994: 3). Rose analyses the ideal of childhood innocence, beginning with Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and ending with the contemporary children's author, Alan Garner. Broadly speaking, Rose's argument is that the ideal of childhood innocence is a product of adult desires and fears regarding sexuality and modernity. The theory of child sexuality elaborated by Freud in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* in particular suggests forms of sexuality profoundly threatening to adult order. The ideal of innocence thus has a fundamentally protective and reactionary function in the adult psyche, serving to protect adult sexuality and identity from a corrupt, modern world (to place "on the child's shoulders the responsibility for saving humankind from the degeneracy of modern society" (Rose 1994: 43)), and from

the sexuality of the child itself.<sup>5</sup> The polemical turn in Rose's argument lies in her suggestion that children, and memory of one's own childhood, threaten adults at the deepest psychological levels, and that all adult representations of, and attempts to speak to, children are driven by this sense of threat. Childhood is thus constructed nostalgically as a lost, innocent world in order to suppress and contain this threat. Karín Lesnik-Oberstein provides a clear appraisal of the consequences and limitations of this stance for the practice of children's literature criticism (Karin Lesnik-Oberstein 1994). Rose's fundamental proposition that innocence is "a portion of adult desire" (Rose 1994: xii), however, is a starting point for this project's exploration of the roles played by tropes of childhood in post-unification literary constructions of the German past.

Also of central significance in the formulation of this project's understanding of childhood as discursively constructed is a group of studies investigating the production of myths and ideals of childhood in Germanophone culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Studies such as Ewers's *Kindheit als poetische Daseinsform*, Alefeld's *Göttliche Kinder* and Baader's *Die romantische Idee des Kindes und der Kindheit* show how different discursive fields, such as anthropology, philosophy, visual art, literature and pedagogic theory interact with each other in the formation of ideals and conceptions of childhood which, though interlinked and interrelated, cannot be assumed to come together as a stable, homogenous image or whole (Alefeld 1996; Baader 1996; Ewers 1989).<sup>6</sup> This understanding of childhood as a discursive construct that is continuously in

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<sup>5</sup> The relationship between childhood innocence and adult sexuality is also explored by James Kincaid, whose work will be discussed further in relation to W.G. Sebald. James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Studies by Simonis and Schindler also add to this area of scholarship. Stephan K. Schindler, *Das Subjekt als Kind: Die Erfindung der Kindheit im Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1994), Annette Simonis, *Kindheit in Romanen um 1800* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1993). Wetzel's study of discourses of

flux, and that is shaped by and shapes in turn many disparate fields of social and cultural discourse has informed my own development of the concept of 'childness', which is discussed more thoroughly below. Thus, although in its exploration of the narrative functions of childhood tropes in post-reunification German literature, the thesis comes to focus on particular aspects of constructed childhood and the myth of childhood innocence, its starting point is one of awareness of the heterogeneity and diffusion of these ideas.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Childhood in German literature and criticism

A large and diverse field of studies of childhood in German literature from the Enlightenment to the present also informs this thesis. Many of them provide historical accounts of the figure of the child in German literature, and I do not intend to contest or add to these accounts here.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I attempt to provide an overview of the field itself, highlighting those texts that have been of greatest significance for my project. My discussion distinguishes between what I have identified as two main strands in the criticism. The first of these might be described as inheriting from Liberal Humanist thought an optimism regarding the power of the literary text to engage and educate its

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girlhood and sexuality in the 'Goethezeit' is also a significant addition. Michael Wetzel, *Mignon. Die Kindsbraut als Phantasma der Goethezeit* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink 1999).

<sup>7</sup> In this light, for example, see discussions of pre-Enlightenment constructions of childhood by Assmann, Gray, Liebs and Bergdolt et al. Aleida Assmann, 'Werden Was wir waren'. Anmerkungen zur Geschichte der Kindheitsidee.' *Antike und Abendland*, XXIV (1978), 98-124, Klaus Bergdolt, Berndt Hamm, and Andreas Tönnemann, *Das Kind in der Renaissance* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2008), Ursula Gray and Bartholomaeus Metlinger, *Das Bild des Kindes im Spiegel der altdeutschen Dichtung und Literatur* (Bern; Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1974), Elke Liebs, *Kindheit und Tod: Der Rattenfänger-Mythos als Beitrag zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Kindheit* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> For recent historical overviews of child figures in German literature, see Pinfold's excellent introduction to her study, and Spielmann's account, which also considers historical developments in children's literature. Debbie Pinfold, *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature: The Eye Among the Blind* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), Monika Spielmann, *Aus den Augen des Kindes: Die Kinderperspektive in deutschsprachigen Romanen seit 1945* (Innsbruck: Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, 2002).

reader, and these studies, despite considerable variations in scope and methodology, share an understanding of child figures in literature as facilitating narrative projects of social criticism. The second strand might be associated more strongly with a 'history of ideas' or social semiotic stance, and tends to view the textual child somewhat more sceptically, as evidence of wider social myths and "cults,"<sup>9</sup> and as a product of the West's "Prozeß der Zivilisation."<sup>10</sup> I do not intend this distinction to be understood as definitive; there is clearly plenty of room for overlap between the two strands I have suggested, and works of persuasive scholarship relevant to this thesis appear in both. Rather, my discussion of the field is organized so as to highlight the methodological issues and approaches that are attached to the study of childhood in literature.

### **The didactic potential of the child in literature: From Liberal Humanism to Narratology and Russian Formalism**

Reinhard Kuhn's *Corruption in Paradise*, though methodologically conservative, provides an invaluable exploration of childhood in Western European literature with a strong focus on German-language texts from Grimmelshausen to Grass (Kuhn 1982). The first chapter on "the enigmatic child," in particular, draws fascinating lines of inheritance from Novalis to Kafka and on to Grass's Oskar Matzerath, and demonstrates the manner in which the figure of the child, as object of adult fascination and yearning, can be imbued equally well with extreme positive or negative significance. Kuhn's comparative observations and textual analyses are of great strength and clarity, and constitute in

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<sup>9</sup> George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: Warburgh Institute, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (3rd edn.; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997). See also Dieter Richter, *Das fremde Kind: Zur Entstehung der Kindheitsbilder des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1987).

themselves a valuable contribution to the field of childhood studies. In terms of its broader methodology, though, my own study differs greatly from Kuhn's. In an assumption not altogether different from that which underlies Ariès's historical study, *Corruption in Paradise* is framed as literary analysis that aims to "take a modest step towards a better comprehension of the real child." (Kuhn 1982: 3) In suggesting that close study of literary representations can gain us a better comprehension of a reality outside of representation, Kuhn is, in a sense, attesting to the edifying power of literature and literary criticism in liberal humanist fashion. Whereas one might argue that Ariès's historical project, based as it is on the interpretation of artefacts and documents, has somewhat of a better chance of attaining its goal of understanding the changing conditions of childhood, Kuhn argues for the superiority of literary over historical discourse in this regard:

It may be true that a study of Lord Shaftesbury's efforts on behalf of legislation designed to eliminate the child abuse attached to the trade of chimney sweeps can help us understand the social position of children in Victorian England. However, it is only through a reading of Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweeper" that we can gain intimations of the inner condition of those diminutive victims. (Kuhn 1982: 14)

Curiously, at the level of his study's framing methodology, Kuhn thus to some extent elides the distinction between the adult-made construct of the textual child, and actual, empirical children. As well as overestimating somewhat the edifying powers of literature and criticism, it seems to me that this stance risks assuming that adult-produced discourse offers at least some potential for 'knowing' empirical childhood, when in fact the voices of actual children are more or less excluded from it. Perhaps surprisingly, this

assumption is repeated in more recent studies, whose scope and analytic sophistication however do not match Kuhn's (Heiss Trombetta 1993; Mader 1990).<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this rather direct form of inheritance from Liberal Humanist thought is far from dominant in the field of studies of childhood in German literature. Another significant area of scholarship – often focusing on the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries – explores the potential created by the effect of the child's perspective for defamiliarisation, social criticism and, in this sense, the education of the reader. Such approaches allow for more focused implementations of literary theory, and by and large avoid Kuhn's transference of literary representation of childhood onto a concept of 'the real child.' They also provide a fascinating picture of the evolution of the child's perspective in times of social pessimism and discontent. Most numerous, and most relevant for this thesis, are those studies of childhood in post-World War 2 literature.<sup>12</sup>

This focus emerged in the 1960s, thus coinciding with the development of more constructivist approaches to childhood. In these early studies, a somewhat conservative methodology assuming unproblematic continuity between representative text and extra-textual 'reality' can be observed. Barbara Hensel's dissertation of 1962, examining texts published between 1945 and 1960, represents a substantial early contribution (Hensel

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<sup>11</sup> Kuhn's assumption that studying literary constructions of childhood can lead us to an understanding of 'real' childhood is also present in Natov's consideration of 'the poetics of childhood' from a loosely psychoanalytic and therapeutic perspective. Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003). The comparative dimension of Kuhn's work is also continued in Grotzer's study of youth in twentieth century literature, which takes a more stringently hermeneutical approach. Peter Grotzer, *Die zweite Geburt. Figuren des Jugendlichen in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of childhood in literature of the fin de siècle and early twentieth century, see Hartmut Böhme, 'Das Verewigen und das Veralten der Jugend', in Klaus-Michael Bogdal, Ortrud Gutjahr, and Joachim Pfeiffer (eds.), *Jugend: Psychologie - Literatur - Geschichte. Festschrift für Carl Pietzker* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 25-37, Angela Winkler, *Das romantische Kind: Ein poetischer Typus von Goethe bis Thomas Mann* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2000), Wolf Wucherpfennig, *Kindheitskult und Irrationalismus in der Literatur um 1900. Friedrich Huch und seine Zeit*. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1980).

1962). Appearing prior to the German-language publication of *Centuries of Childhood*, Hensel's study tends to read literary texts of childhood as indicative of the social conditions of childhood, concluding that post-war literature "enthüllt [...] direkt und indirekt, als Klage und als Anklage die Situation von Kindern und Jugendlichen, wie die ganze Erziehungsnot der Gegenwart." (Hensel 1962: 154) Although her study does not share the universalising tendencies of Kuhn's work, Hensel, like Kuhn, assumes a straightforward relationship between literary representation and external realities, and does not call into question the (adult) author's ability to accurately represent the subjective experience of a child. Perhaps it is for this reason that Hensel does not address one of the post-war era's most explosive texts of childhood, namely Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* of 1959 (Grass 2002a). Nor, indeed, does Jens deal with this text in his essay on 'Erwachsene Kinder', although the figure of Oskar Matzerath seems to exist precisely at the intersection of "erwachsene Kinder" and "kindliche Erwachsene" that Jens sees as definitive of 1950s literature of childhood (Jens 1962). Söntgerath, by contrast, sees in Grass's novel, alongside Elsner's *Die Riesenzwerg* (1964), evidence of a transformation in the literary construction of childhood in the form of a focus on "das Böse im Kind" and the figure of the "Anti-Kind."<sup>13</sup> (Söntgerath 1967: 145, 149) Although Söntgerath's suggestion that this constitutes a radical transformation has since been contested, his discussion does indicate a shift towards a more complex critical stance in relation to childhood in literature, one which no longer assumes continuity between representation and extra-textual 'reality'. This shift opened the way for more

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<sup>13</sup> The focus on the figure of the wicked child is taken on more comprehensively in the 1990s by Schmitt, without however substantially advancing from Söntgerath's basic position. Andreas Schmitt, "Böse' Kinder in der deutschsprachigen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine pädagogische Untersuchung literarischer Kindheitsdarstellungen.' Ph.D. (Mainz, 1996).



theoretically informed studies of the child as a vehicle for social criticism in German literature, and the 1990s and 2000s saw a renewed interest in this topic in relation to the child's perspective in postwar writing.

A much-needed contribution to the field is provided by the stringent narratological focus on the child's perspective, in studies by Daves Baldwin and Spielmann (Baldwin 1990; Spielmann 2002). Both make use of Stanzel's narrative theories of perspective, with Daves Baldwin also engaging with Iser's theory of reader response and Spielmann structuring her analyses in accordance with Petersen's narratological categories. The narratological scope of my own thesis expands on these studies, in that it develops an approach to literary childhood allowing for analysis of the narratological functions of child figures and tropes of childhood alongside child focalizers. The work of Iser remains central in my approach to the role of the reader, as I will discuss when laying out the methodology of my thesis in detail below. In her conclusion, Spielmann offers a more expansive range of functions for the child's perspective than Daves Baldwin does, perhaps because her analysis focuses on novels rather than short stories and takes children's as well as adults' literature into account. Both studies identify social criticism as the most frequent role of the child's perspective in literature, however.<sup>14</sup> The child narrator or focalizer supplies a defamiliarising gaze which functions as a vehicle for satire and critique, and which, according to Spielmann, can also serve to marshal the reader's sympathy to the cause or ideology of the author (Spielmann 2002: 226). Both Spielmann and Daves Baldwin choose the post-1945 period for their analytic scope, and as such a focus on literary engagement with the German

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<sup>14</sup> Spielmann also identifies representation of psychological development, autobiographical memory-work on the part of the author, and, in the case of the child reader, a figure of readerly identification as functions of the child's perspective.

wartime past and postwar conditions and developments, East and West, is implicit in their studies.<sup>15</sup> However, in both cases the primary concern is with narratological analysis rather than historical contextualization.

An emphasis on defamiliarisation and social critique is also to be found in Pinfold's comprehensive study of *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature* (Pinfold 2001). This study has been of central importance to the formulation of my thesis, particularly in the connections it draws between the child's perspective in literature and the myth of innocence. Complemented by the narrower, narratological focus of Spielmann's study, Pinfold's work provides a full and far-reaching analysis of the defamiliarising role of the child's perspective in literature, as one of either shocking or coaxing the reader towards new critical perspectives on the National Socialist past. Pinfold's extremely useful overview of National Socialist youth and education policy provides a compelling foil to her assessment of the function of the child's perspective in literature about this period.<sup>16</sup> Her study demonstrates the tenacity with which this perspective has endured in literature as a vehicle for defamiliarisation and critique, in the face of social conditions and historical facts that would appear to fully demolish myths of childhood innocence and incorruptibility. Her discussion of *Die Blechtrommel*, in particular, reveals the peculiar robustness of the myth of innocence, which, she argues, is simultaneously debunked and revived in the figure of Oskar Matzerath (Pinfold 2001: 147-58). My thesis explores this aspect of the myth of innocence in relation to texts by Marcel Beyer and W.G. Sebald, locating its discursive production and ideological

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<sup>15</sup> Spielmann's study, in particular, has a strong focus on texts dealing with East German postwar experience.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to sources cited by Pinfold in this regard, see also Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

implications in the context of Western modernity. I argue that the robust duality of the innocence myth plays a structuring role in the narratives' discursive projects and modes of address to their implied readers. Pinfold's observation that discoveries about child sexuality and psychology in the post-Freudian era have made surprisingly little impact on Western cultural adherence to the myth of childhood innocence is also borne out by my thesis (Pinfold 2001: 21-2). In this sense, the psychoanalytic orientation of my research is directed towards a questioning of the adult desires and fears that are invested in this myth, and that help, perhaps, to ensure its survival against all odds, rather than with a search for evidence of Freudian awareness in literary constructions of childhood. Rather than further exploring the edifying didactic and aesthetic potential of the child's perspective in literature, I examine the possibilities of elision, trivialisation, objectification and kitsch that can be entailed in the textual construction of childhood. This is, I would argue, now a necessary avenue to pursue in the context of post-reunification literature of the German past, given the intense conflicts that have been sparked by revisionist discourse since the 1980s, and the general cultural perception of increasing distance from the Holocaust and the Third Reich expressed, for example, in Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory.' (Hirsch 1997) The thesis thus develops from and counterbalances Pinfold's work in two ways: by looking beyond the defamiliarizing potential of the child's perspective in literature, and by focusing specifically on post-*Wende* writing rather than on texts published since 1945. This more narrow temporal focus facilitates a stronger awareness of how cultural tropes and constructions of childhood are bound up with wider discourses and ideologies of memory, history and identity.

While Pinfold examines texts written both from Jewish and Gentile perspectives in her study, identifying common traits in the role of the child's perspective in narratives from the victim and perpetrator collectives of the Holocaust, other studies from the 1990s consider the particular issues attached to the child's perspective in texts by Jewish authors (Hetzler 1999; Lezzi 2001; Reiter 2000: 230-41). In this context, matters of autobiographical authenticity, author biography and historical truth take on additional importance, particularly in the wake of the Wilkomirski scandal, so that a less purely text-focused methodology seems to be called for.<sup>17</sup> Here, the tendency identified in earlier criticism to read the textual child as directly corresponding to an extra-textual reality might be said to gain in validity.

Lezzi's study seeks to define the poetics of the distinct genre of childhood autobiographies of the Shoah. She focuses primarily on four literary autobiographies, exploring the extent to which these works share qualities with the genre of childhood autobiography, and the extent to which the context of the Shoah makes them different and raises questions about the genre as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Like the other studies of the 1990s and 2000s discussed so far, Lezzi's examination of the 'literary' qualities of the texts in question hinges on the Russian Formalist concept of defamiliarisation, and again she suggests that the literary child's perspective leads the reader to new insights into and ways of thinking about the Holocaust. It is in the negotiation of the relationship between the 'literary' nature of the autobiographies, and the fact of their extra-textual relationships

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<sup>17</sup> Lezzi devotes a fascinating chapter section to the Wilkomirski affair and its impact on her study. Eva Lezzi, *Zerstörte Kindheit. Literarische Autobiographien zur Shoah* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001) at 133-42.

<sup>18</sup> See also Werner Brettschneider, *"Kindheitsmuster": Kindheit als Thema autobiographischer Dichtung* (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1982), Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 1984), Katrin Lange, *Selbstfragmente. Autobiographien der Kindheit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).

to the Shoah, that her methodology differs from these other studies. Lezzi's approach to these texts is to ground her literary analyses in historical and psychological contexts, positing writing and reading as healing acts, therapeutic tools and imaginative ways of reclaiming or reconstituting a lost self (Lezzi, 2001: 128). Without at all wishing to contest the therapeutic value Lezzi ascribes to survivors' writing of childhood autobiographies, it is clear that her approach and methodology cannot be transposed onto the present project. Although the novels examined here by Walser and Forte both have strong autobiographical elements, and Sebald's works also frequently play with autobiographical referentiality, none of these texts are finally identified as autobiographies and hence do not offer their readers an "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 1975). More importantly, the texts I examine are not accounts of the Holocaust written by its survivors. My intention to assume a sceptical stance towards the literary construction of childhood, and my intention to examine post-Wende engagements with the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust by authors writing out of an inheritance from the perpetrator collective go hand in hand in this sense. My thesis could be said to be concerned with, among other things, the testing of the claim made in Hetzer's study, left largely unsubstantiated by her as far as literary analysis is concerned, that:

Mit der Kinderperspektive eines nichtverfolgten Kindes ermöglichen (...) Texte [deutscher Autoren und Autorinnen nach 1945] dem deutschen Lesepublikum (...) einen »unschuldigen« und »unbeteiligten« Blick auf die Kriegs- und Vernichtungsgeschichte. (Hetzer 1999: 141)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A similar argument has been made, on the basis of more comprehensive literary research, in relation to German children's literature about the Holocaust. Zohar Shavit, *A Past without a Shadow: Constructing the Past in German Books for Children*, trans. Aaron Jaffe and Atarah Jaffe (New York & London: Routledge, 2005). Hetzer's study focuses primarily on texts of childhood that engage with the Holocaust from the perspective of the persecuted, and on their popular reception in German-speaking countries. Mecklenburg and Schirmacher have also made similar arguments in relation to the child's perspective in post-war German adults' literature, as Pinfold points out. However, neither critic devotes more than a few

In order to test this claim and to explore its wider implications for the narrative functions of childhood tropes in post-reunification German literature, I have looked to somewhat more radical approaches to childhood as a cultural construct in the search for an appropriate theory and methodology. Rather than applying Russian Formalist concepts of literariness and defamiliarisation, this area of the field utilises Barthesian structuralist and semiotic theory, as well as psychoanalytic theory and 'history of ideas', and can be seen as continuing the radical, anti-bourgeois leanings of the work of Ariès and Boas. I have already discussed some seminal studies from outside the Germanophone context that employ constructivist approaches to childhood. Here, I highlight a number of German-language publications of the 1980s that have been of significance in developing the theoretical approach of this thesis.

### **Childhood and Myth: Radical readings of childhood in literature and culture**

Elke Liebs's *Kindheit und Tod: der Rattenfänger-Mythos als Beitrag zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Kindheit* traces the Pied Piper myth from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, exploring the relationships between ideas of childhood, death and rats (Liebs 1986). Her analysis is informed by Barthes's theory of mythology, which interprets myth as a social mechanism for avoiding interpretation and questioning, and a way of making social practices and laws appear self-evident and natural. The myth loses

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paragraphs to the issue. Norbert Mecklenburg, 'Faschismus und Alltag in deutscher Gegenwartsprosa. Kempowski und andere', in Hans Wagener (ed.), *Gegenwartsliteratur und Drittes Reich. Deutsche Autoren in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), 11-32, Pinfold, *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature: The Eye Among the Blind* at 27-8, Frank Schirmmacher, 'Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik: Neue Pässe, neue Identitäten, neue Lebensläufe. Über die Kündigung einiger Mythen des westdeutschen Bewußtseins', *FAZ*, 02/10/1990.

its original content and meaning only to be recharged with whatever new significance is required, allowing it “von der Semiologie zur Ideologie überzugehen” (Liebs 1986: 13-14). Like Rose, Liebs highlights adults’ perceptions of children as threatening, and, like Ariès and deMause (1976), she draws attention to adult desire to kill or eradicate children. It is her argument that adults create intermediary figures such as the Pied Piper to control the boundary between adults and children, and she suggests television as one example of a “futuristisches Rattenfänger” (Liebs, 1986: 225).<sup>20</sup> Liebs’s Barthesian approach and focus on adult desire and anxiety have informed my development of the concept of ‘childness’, which is discussed in detail below. Dieter Lenzen also makes use of structuralist thought in his attempt to extrapolate the mythology of childhood, a project rather more ambitious in scope than Liebs’s, taking in forms of cultural expression “von der Gebrauchsanweisung für den Schwangerschaftstest bis zur romantischen Lyrik.” (Lenzen 1985: 26) Lenzen’s conclusions are as polemical as Liebs’s; where she sees a continued adult need for mechanisms to contain and control children, Lenzen diagnoses a general social decline into adult infantilism. Although an understanding of literary discourse as inextricably linked with other forms of social and cultural discourse is central to my thesis, I intend to avoid positing the conclusions of my literary analyses as evidence of general discursive trends in the cultural construction of childhood. Rather, I am interested in the specific conjunction of constructed childhood and post-reunification engagements with the Nazi past in German literary discourse.

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, discussion on children and ‘new media’ has taken its own course of development since the 1980s. See also David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982).

With a clearer literary focus than the above studies, Dieter Richter employs Elias's model of the process of civilization in his study of the development of ideals of childhood in the bourgeois age (Richter 1987). By situating these ideals in the socio-economic context of the rise of the bourgeoisie, alongside the literary-historical contexts of Enlightenment, 'Sturm und Drang' and Romanticism, Richter succeeds in highlighting their ideological and political implication. This Elias- and Adorno-informed approach also leads Richter towards creating a unifying narrative of the development of ideals of childhood at this crucial point, which, as Ewers suggests, is unable to take into account the degree of discursive variation and contestation that marked the era (Ewers 1989: 24-6). Although Richter's emphasis on childhood ideals as bound up with wider economic, cultural and ideological issues informs my own approach to literary constructions of childhood, I do not seek to impose a unifying socio-political narrative onto my analyses. Rather, I develop a practice of close textual analysis which facilitates an exploration of the presence of ideology and desire in literary constructions of childhood without subscribing to an overarching master narrative. It is to a more detailed explanation of this methodology that I now turn.

#### **4. Definition and discussion of central terms**

##### **'Childness'**

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes refers to a need for neologisms when it comes to the study of cultural myths due to their ephemeral and shifting nature, and, I would add, because of the inevitable implication of existing or commonly used terms in their production and transmission. Barthes writes by way of example that:



China is one thing, the idea which a French petit-bourgeois could have of it not so long ago is another: for this peculiar mixture of bells, rickshaws and opium-dens, no other word possible [*sic*] but *Sininess*. (Barthes 2009: 144)

Although, in contrast to Lenzen, I am not seeking to create a map of contemporary cultural mythology of childhood in this thesis, and am not pursuing strictly structuralist goals or methods, this remark by Barthes points to a need for a new critical vocabulary that has arisen within the bounds of my project. This need springs from two main issues: firstly, my intention to maintain a clear and rigorous distinction between constructed and empirical childhood and to limit my analytic focus and conclusions to the former, and secondly, my goal of looking beyond the defamiliarising function of the child's perspective, by combining an examination of child 'agents' of narration (focalizers and narrators) with a consideration of child 'objects' of narration (figures represented through the focalizing perspective of an adult) and representations of childhood memory. Happily, I have not had to coin a neologism as awkward as Barthes's "Sininess" for this purpose, as a suitable word has been present, though rarely used, in the English language for several hundred years: 'childness.'

In his short theoretical text on children's literature, *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, Peter Hollindale also highlights the need for a new vocabulary of children's literature criticism (Hollindale 1997). He goes back to Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* to revive and redefine the term 'childness' as follows:<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *A Winter's Tale*, 1.2, Polixenes to Leontes about his young son:

POLIXENES: If at home sir, / He's all my exercise and mirth, my matter: / Now my sworn friend, and then mine enemy; / My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all: / He makes a July day short as December; / And with his varying childness cures in me / Thoughts that would thicken my blood.

Childness is a changing, culturally determined concept. (...) For the child, childness is composed of the developing sense of self in interaction with the images of childhood encountered in the world (...). For the adult, childness is composed of the grown-up's memories of childhood, of meaningful continuity between child and adult self, of the varied behaviour associated with being a child, and the sense of what is appropriate behaviour for a given age, of behavioural standards, ideals, expectations and hopes invested in the child as a child. (...) This compound of cultural and personal attitudes is articulated in a text of children's literature, and the *event* of children's literature lies in the chemistry of a child's encounter with it. (Hollindale 1997: 48, 49)<sup>22</sup>

Hollindale's approach to children's literature is strongly focused on the relationship between child reader and adult author. He posits a rather broad definition of childness, applying it in different ways to adults and children, and directing it towards analysis of the production and reception of texts rather than towards textual analysis. However, the term has the potential to lead to fruitful textual analysis exploring constructions of childhood in adults' literature, if understood as a signifier for a set of properties that are attributed by culture to the state of childhood. As a term, it circumvents the loaded adjectives 'childish' and 'childlike' (as Hollindale points out), and, perhaps more importantly, it allows for a very clear conceptual distinction to be maintained between 'childhood' as a construct and 'childhood' as an empirical biological and developmental stage. I have thus modified Hollindale's definition as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> Hollindale's revival of the term has also been taken up in children's literature criticism. See for example Emer O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Routledge, 2005) at 88, Petros Panaou, 'Complex Crossings: European Picture Books and the Construct of Child-Ness in National, European, and Global Contexts', Ph.D. (Illinois State University, 2007). Panaou, however, does not reference Hollindale's study, but appears instead to have deduced the term by way of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'Nation-ness'.

- Childness is the set of cultural and social conceptions of childhood. Childness in a literary text is the set of its communications to the reader about and/or through tropes of childhood, where childhood is understood to be culturally and socially determined.
- If we examine childness in a literary text, we examine its part in the perpetuation (through repetition and adaptation) of conventional constructions of childhood, its part in the introduction of new constructions of childhood, and its part in the subversion or deconstruction of conventional constructions of childhood.
- An analysis of childness in literature must take into account wider cultural and historical constructions of childhood, and must highlight the perceptions the reader is likely to bring to bear on the text and the perceptions that the text predicts in the reader. In this regard, analysing childness in a text means understanding the text as a cultural event that is an active part of a wider process of cultural production.

This definition of childness, which highlights the text's part in a larger network of semiotic production, provides the broad theoretical framework of my project. I analyse childness as an aspect of literature and not as a reflection of the conditions of contemporary childhood, nor as a means for mapping the changing conditions of childhood through history. Here, I concur with Erika Langmuir's criticism of a tendency to "adduce images of children as unmediated reflections of contemporary attitudes and actual conditions, without due attention to the relative autonomy of art and the persistence of cultural *topoi*." (Langmuir 2006: 10) Nor do I intend my study of childness

in the chosen texts to be understood as exhaustive or definitive in relation to the texts themselves. Clearly, in choosing just one aspect of the narratives for my focus, I am not aiming for a 'full picture' of each text, but rather for a clearer view of the specific conjunction of childhood tropes and the German past in post-reunification literature.

### **Narratological concepts**

If 'childness' forms a central conceptual tool for my project, its methodology is also closely informed by narratological analysis. Two conceptual areas of narratology are of particular significance, and my understanding and use of them are explained here.

A central area of enquiry for this thesis is the manner in which childness helps to prompt and modulate readerly responses to the text. Iser's work on the concept of the implied reader has shaped my approach in this regard (Iser 1974, 1978). Iser defines the implied reader as an instance generated by the structures of the text itself that is separate from the real, individual reader, and that can be understood as delineating the role to be played by the real reader in the act of reading (Iser 1978: 24-35). It is my contention that culturally ubiquitous tropes and myths of childhood, bound up as they are with intense forms of adult desire and anxiety, can function as a powerful tool in the narrative production of the role of the reader, often eliciting strong emotional and sympathetic responses. The thesis thus explores the regulation of the implied reader by way of childness in texts engaging with a highly contentious and dilemma-riven area of cultural, historical and literary discourse: Germany's National Socialist past. It argues that childness often performs a persuasive function in this context, smoothing over the presence of highly problematic forms of desire and yearning in relation to the past. I

depart slightly from Iser's definition of the implied reader, insofar as I maintain that a literary text, including its narratological structures, is implicated in the wider – and, in this particular context, highly charged - discursive contexts of its production. I thus understand the implied reader as ideologically inflected rather than sealed off from historical and political contexts (Iser 1978: 34).

A further narratological issue that will be of some importance in what follows is that of perspective, particularly matters of focalization and narration. I have taken the term 'focalizer' from Genette's work on narratology (Genette 1980). The benefit of Genette's approach, in my view, is that it emphasises the difference, and distance, between focalizing figure and narrator. Stanzel's work on perspective, on the other hand, does not place as strong an emphasis on the distinctions between narrator and 'reflector' as sources of narrative perspective (Stanzel 1985). While Daves Baldwin structures her study around Stanzel's categories of authorial, figural and third-person narration, Spielmann highlights contradictory and impractical aspects of Stanzel's approach (Baldwin 1990; Spielmann 2002: 23). Taking this into account, and also bearing in mind that the central aim of this thesis is not to carry out a full and systematic narratological analysis of 'point of view' in the texts studied, but rather to examine the child's perspective alongside other narrative manifestations of childness, it seems to me that Genette's terminology offers greater flexibility than Stanzel's. Furthermore, Mieke Bal's astute clarification and development of Genette's theory of narrative perspective offers a powerful means of drawing connections between narratological issues and wider questions of agency and responsibility, which are central to my analysis of post-reunification literary engagements with the Third Reich (Bal 1996, 1997, 2004). It is

therefore primarily to the work of Bal that I make reference in my discussions of focalization and narration.

## **5. “Wir wolln nicht mehr die alten Sünder sein”: Childness and the discursive landscapes of the ‘new’ Federal Republic**

It has been widely noted that new modes of cultural discourse in relation to twentieth-century German history have emerged since 1990.<sup>23</sup> These emergences can be linked to cultural changes in the wake of reunification, as Germany continues to redefine itself against its own changed political landscape as well as against new European and global social, economic and political structures. They can also be linked to the increasing temporal distance from the events of 1933-1945, and to the dwindling of the numbers of those who witnessed these events at first hand. These new modes of discourse have given rise to and are subject to new modes and categories of analysis in numerous academic fields, such as historiography, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies including media and literary studies, for example. A comprehensive analysis of these new discourses of memory is not possible within the confines of the current project. Of particular relevance to the study of the narrative roles played by childness in contemporary literary constructions of the National Socialist and wartime past is a tendency that has been identified by recent scholarship towards prioritizing the private, the subjective and the felt above the publicly known and documented. Fuchs describes this as a prioritization of

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<sup>23</sup> There is a wealth of scholarly work on these cultural and literary changes and debates. See, for example, Barbara Besslich, Katharina Grätz, and Olaf Hildebrand, *Wende des Erinnerns?: Geschichtskonstruktionen in der deutschen Literatur nach 1989* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006), Anne Fuchs, *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films and Discourse: The Politics of Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), Stuart Taberner, *Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), Maja Zehfuss, *The Wounds of Memory. The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

“feeling structures” (Fuchs 2008: 49) which she links with Hirsch’s emphasis on “imaginative investment and creation” in relation to postmemory (Hirsch 1997: 22 and cited in Fuchs 2008: 48). In his analysis of contemporary ‘Familien-’ and ‘Generationenromane’ Welzer suggests that “[die] gefühlte Geschichte der Bundesbürger” is given precedence in such novels over “die autoritative Erzählung über die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden und die anderen Verbrechen des »Dritten Reiches«.” (Welzer 2004: 53) As brief illustrations of the potential for historical elision and repositioning that childness offers through such privileging of “structures of feeling,” two examples from recent European popular culture are revealing.

In a 2006 *Times* article, the Irish author John Boyne argued the following defense for the narrative strategy of extreme naivety that he employed in his highly successful, profoundly inaccurate novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which narrates a “fable” of the Holocaust centering on a friendship between two children, one a concentration camp prisoner, the other the son of the camp commandant (2006a):

For me, a 34-year-old Irish writer, it seemed that the only respectful way to deal with such a subject was through innocence, using the point of view of a rather naïve child who couldn’t possibly understand the horrors of what he was caught up in. After all, that naiveté is as close as someone of my generation can get to the dreadfulness of that time and place. (...) [I]t is the responsibility of any writer who chooses to base a narrative in those places [i.e. Nazi concentration camps] to uncover as much emotional truth within that desperate landscape as he possibly can. (Boyne 2006b)

Boyne’s defense of his narrative strategy and the narrative itself cast historical inaccuracy as a positive moral stance based on the notion of the child’s naivety. The

implicit assertion that the Holocaust is unknowable and incomprehensible, described elsewhere by Klüger as the “Heiligenschein [der] Unsagbarkeit” and as a “Kitsch-Aura,” is a fundamental principle of Boyne’s novel, and I would argue that it is the trope of childhood innocence which has made the narrative’s denial of historicity acceptable to a global audience (Klüger 2006: 55).<sup>24</sup> The potential connection between the privileging of ‘feeling’ and childhood tropes can be seen in Boyne’s *Times* article. He casts the reader and author of contemporary Holocaust fiction as naïve figures and valorizes this posture of naivety, so that the notion of “emotional truth” is given ethical precedence over that which is publicly and historically documented. This is, of course, a somewhat extreme example of the privileging of “emotional truth” over historicity, which does not reflect the narrative strategies of the texts examined in this dissertation. However, the role played by the myth of innocence in legitimising Boyne’s narrative project does reflect wider literary tendencies, as I seek to show over the course of the thesis.

Nor is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* the only indication that childness may play a role in the construction of our relationship to the past in contemporary European cultural discourse. The ARD documentary series *Kriegskinder*, broadcast in four parts in March and April 2009, presented the childhood recollections of a group of eyewitnesses who were children during the National Socialist period, from Germany and also from occupied and Allied countries (Hübner and Trost 2009). The broadcast was accompanied by comprehensive online resources (ARD 2009) and by a book published by Rotbuch (Winterberg and Winterberg 2009). The website of the *Kriegskinder* documentary is quite clear in its prioritisation of domestic, private history, and it is the use of childhood

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<sup>24</sup> As well as having been adapted successfully for cinema, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has been translated into over thirty languages, including Hebrew and German.



memory and recalled (or imaginatively constructed) “Kinderperspektive” that facilitates this prioritisation. In an interview published on the ARD website, project director Katja Wildermuth emphasises “Kinderperspektive” as the documentary’s defining feature:

Was wir jetzt versuchen (...) ist, ganz konsequent diese Kinderperspektive einzunehmen – und zwar nicht nur die deutsche. Wir wollen wegkommen von dieser fast modischen deutschen Larmoyanz und zeigen, dass während die Hitler-Jungen 1939 noch jubelten, die polnischen Jungen das alles schon ganz anders empfanden. (...) Es ist die konsequente Kinderperspektive, die aber auch die Gefahr birgt, alles einseitig zu sehen. Kinder sind ja immer Opfer – egal, wo. Selbst wenn sie zu Tätern werden, sind sie verführte kleine Täter. (<http://www.mdr.de/kriegskinder/5805464.html> accessed 23/04/2009)

Wildermuth does not suggest here that all children are the same, and the series is at pains to point out the differences between the lives of children living in different countries and under different circumstances during this period. However, as the statement quoted above implies, the use of “Kinderperspektive” – which is, of course, actually the perspectives of elderly adults recalling their childhood memories - creates a single platform upon which disparate realms of experience – for example, of bombardment, of imprisonment in Terezin and Auschwitz, of expulsion from Byelorussia – can be placed together. The platform of “childhood” apparently accommodates Allied, occupied, German, and Jewish experiences, and although there is careful editorial differentiation between these areas of experience, the viewer is invited to regard all of them from a uniformly sympathetic perspective. Conceptions of childhood innocence and vulnerability (to violence and to ideological seduction) are necessary for the validity of

this platform, which, at the same time as it includes an international perspective allows the concept of Germans as victims of National Socialism and of war to be sustained.

These examples, which are not intended to be exhaustive or generally representative, indicate that ideas of childhood, and particularly of childhood innocence, currently play a discursive role in European cultural engagements with National Socialism and its legacy. This dissertation investigates the role of childness in contemporary German literature engaging with these and related issues.

## **6. Selection of texts; structure of thesis**

The basic criteria in choosing the central texts for this study was that childhood play a significant narrative role, be it by way of a child protagonist or by way of a major concern with childhood or childhood memory at a thematic or structural level. The choice to limit the selection to texts published since 1990 reflects the aim to investigate the relationship between childness and discourses of German memory and identity following reunification. Because a practice of close textual and narratological analysis is a central element of my methodology, it was necessary to limit the analytic focus of the dissertation to a relatively small number of core texts. It was also important for the choice of texts to reflect a variety of narrative styles and structures, historical focal points, generational positions and political and ideological affinities within the field of post-Wende literary discourse about the years 1933 - 1945. On this basis, out of a very large pool of possible texts, six works by four authors were chosen to form the central focus of the analysis. Dieter Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (1995) is an epic-form novel with a strong focus on German wartime suffering; its child protagonist experiences

multiple Allied bombings and life as a refugee. Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998) is also dominated by epic-form, third person narration, which however is complicated and broken up somewhat by more self-reflexive narratorial interchapters and disruptions of realist convention. It, too, is concerned with the life of a German boy during wartime, but, as will be discussed, it evades almost all confrontation with suffering, violence and atrocity. Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* (1995) focuses on childhood at the elite centre of the NS regime in the Goebbels children, in a complex multi-voiced narrative which however does not provide any unifying or synthesizing perspective. W.G. Sebald's work, by contrast, is concerned with finding an appropriate German voice in which to mourn the Holocaust and acknowledge Jewish experiences of National Socialism, and with practising a critique of the patriarchal structures of Western modernity. His narrative structures are marked by a high degree of reflexivity in which layered voices are scrupulously reported and acknowledged by a central narrating persona. The dissertation focuses on three of Sebald's prose fiction texts: *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001). As is discussed in Section II below, the thesis contributes to the vast host of critical studies on Sebald by calling attention to a hitherto unexplored aspect of his prose fiction texts, and builds on Zilcosky's critique of *Austerlitz* by identifying structures of melodrama and pathos connected to childness in all three of the texts under discussion (Zilcosky 2006).

As well as narratological and thematic variety, the choice of authors reflects three generational positions within German post-war and post-Wende discourse. Forte (b. 1935) and Walser (b. 1927) are of the generation described by Weigel as the "heimliche erste Generation," whose childhood took place during the National Socialist years

(Weigel 1999).<sup>25</sup> Sebald (b. 1944) and Beyer (b. 1965) belong to what are referred to as the second and third post-war generations. Here, I do not invoke this generational model on the basis of any particular empirical or sociological accuracy it may possess in describing cultural change in the wake of National Socialism. Rather, I follow Weigel in understanding it as a hierarchical symbolic structure within contemporary German culture, which is itself a product of patriarchal discourses, and in accordance with which the writers examined here explicitly formulate their authorial personae and historical positions. As notions of childhood frequently enter into these formulations, I discuss them briefly here, chiefly in order to elucidate a distinction between the presence of childness in this cultural discourse of generational identity, and the narratological roles played by childness within the literary texts this thesis examines.

### **A hierarchy of origins: the four authors' negotiations with the generational model**

The close relationship between constructions of childhood and the interests of the “heimliche erste Generation” is clearly articulated in Weigel’s analysis:

Wird hier eine privilegierte Position historischer Wahrheit für die deutschen Zeitzeugen der HJ-Generation konstruiert, so funktioniert das über eine paradoxe Konstruktion, über den Ort eines gleichsam unschuldigen Wissens: im Glück, sich altersbedingt jenseits politischer Verantwortung, jenseits einer möglichen

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<sup>25</sup> As Ewers indicates, relatively small age gaps between authors who were children during National Socialism have a significant impact on the precise nature of their experience of the period. In attributing both Forte and Walser to Weigel’s “heimliche erste Generation” here, I do not wish to elide this distinction, but rather wish to suggest that both authors take up a similar generational identity-position in the post-reunification cultural context. Hans-Heino Ewers, 'Zwischen geschichtlicher Belehrung und autobiographischer Erinnerungsarbeit. Zeitgeschichtliche Kinder- und Jugendliteratur von Autorinnen und Autoren der Generation der Kriegs- und Nachkriegskinder', in Gabriele Von Glasenapp and Gisela Wilkending (eds.), *Geschichte und Geschichten. Die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur und das kulturelle und politische Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005), 97-128.

Täterposition also situieren zu können, aber gleichzeitig im Besitz eines Wissens, das eine historische Teilhabe voraussetzt. (...) Vor 1945, d.h. während des Dritten Reiches: Kind, aber nach Kriegsende: Mann, steht die frühere HJ-Generation in der Nachgeschichte nicht nur außerhalb des Schuldiskurses, sondern repräsentiert gleichzeitig die politische und kulturelle Elite der neuen Bundesrepublik. (Weigel 1999: 169-70)

Weigel herself makes specific reference to Walser as an example of those authors who seek to assert the cultural dominance, and ideological innocence, of their NS-era childhood memories (Weigel 1999: 170). Indeed, Walser's construction of innocent and hermetically preserved childhood memory predates *Ein springender Brunnen* and the 'Friedenspreisrede' by a decade, reflecting the fact that this particular generational claim to privileged and innocent witness-status is a West German one that has endured from the 'old' into the 'new' Federal Republic. In a speech given in Munich in 1988, Walser argues that:

Das Licht, in dem mir die Erinnerung Gegenstände und Menschen von damals präsentiert, ist ein festhaltendes Licht, eine Art Genauigkeitselement. Man hat nicht gewußt, daß man sich das für immer so genau merken wird. Man hat vor allem nicht gewußt, daß man diesen Bildern nichts mehr hinzufügen können wird. Keine Kommentar, keine Aufklärung, keine Bewertung. Die Bilder sind jeder Unterrichtung unzugänglich. Alles, was ich inzwischen erfahren habe, hat diese Bilder nicht verändert. Wenn ich die Bilder umkreise mit den Maßstäben von heute, kommt mir vor, die Bilder bedürfen der Belehrung auch gar nicht. (Walser 1997: 896-7)

The shift in grammatical subject from 'ich' to 'man' denotes a claim for the general truth and relevance of what is initially introduced as a personal experience of

memory. The personification of the memories themselves, as things one might unsuccessfully attempt to 'unterrichten' or 'belehren,' effects a rhetorical leap from 'memories of childhood' to 'memories as children', so that attempts to engage critically with childhood memory are figured as an act of bullying a child. In this way, Walser posits his memories of National Socialist childhood as magically authentic, culturally representative and critically unassailable. Forte uses a less subtle form of argumentation to make a similar case. Here, too, in relation to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald is invoked as a second-generation foil over whom Forte contests the primacy of his own generational position:

[Sebald] übersieht auch meine Generation, die Generation der Kinder in den Großstädten, die sich erinnern können, wenn sie die Sprache dafür finden, und darauf muß man ein Leben lang warten. Es geht nur in einer Art Ohnmacht, in einer Art Absinken, das tief hinabführt in lang Vergessenes, das aber da ist und über die Sprache in die Erinnerung findet. Ein quälender Vorgang, man muß mit Zusammenbrüchen rechnen, ich weiß, wovon ich rede. (...) Ich glaube nicht, daß man sich in einem Universitätsseminar über die restlichen Fakten beugen kann, um mit fast naturwissenschaftlichem Interesse nachzuschauen, wie das damals so war. (Forte 2002: 33)

The anti-pedagogic strain of Walser's rhetoric is visible again here, although Forte does not repeat Walser's elaborate personification of childhood memory. Instead, he constructs the retrieval of childhood memory as a dangerous and heroic Orphic or Odyssean quest into the underworld. This epic construction again has the effect of positioning the memories of those of Forte's generation at the top of a hierarchy of memory, and by placing these questing heroes beyond reproach or critique. W.G. Sebald,

too, though, constructs himself as a child of the ruins, in contrast to Walser discounting 'idyllic' early childhood memories in the process:

Ich habe meine Kindheit und Jugend in einer von den unmittelbaren Auswirkungen der sogenannten Kampfhandlungen weitgehend verschonten Gegend am Nordrand der Alpen verbracht. Bei Kriegsende war ich gerade ein Jahr alt und kann also schwerlich auf realen Ereignissen beruhende Eindrücke aus jener Zeit der Zerstörung bewahrt haben. Dennoch ist es mir bis heute, wenn ich Photographien oder dokumentarische Filme aus dem Krieg sehe, als stammte ich, sozusagen, von ihm ab (...). [E]s sind die [Bilder der Zerstörung], perverserweise, und nicht die ganz unreal gewordenen frühkindlichen Idyllen, die so etwas wie ein Heimatgefühl in mir heraufrufen (...). (LL: 76-8)

Read as an act of generational self-positioning and self-assertion, this statement reveals the extent to which the generational model is founded on notions of origin, with Sebald dismissing his actual early childhood in order to assign himself a point of origin connected to the war, thus inscribing his own authorial persona into the hierarchy of post-war memory discourse. Here, childhood and personal memory stand in the way of Sebald's self-positioning and must be substituted with a more suitable, in the author's terms less "irreal" point of origin. In this sense, the passage might be read as a compensatory gesture whose aim is to establish a place in memory-discourse for the 'second generation' in spite of, rather than because of, its belatedness. A similar gesture can be identified in Marcel Beyer's self-construction as a 'third generation' author, the origins of whose historical consciousness are situated in a moment other than that of his biographical childhood:

Im November '89 hatte ich zum ersten Mal das Gefühl, jetzt passiert Politik und ich stecke mittendrin. Politik war plötzlich nicht mehr eine Sache der

Elterngeneration. (...) Hinzu kam, daß ich über diese Zeit von 1933 bis 1945 außer ein paar Stunden Geschichtsunterricht nichts wußte. Das ist eine Zeit, über die keine Geschichten zirkulieren. (Braese 2005: 99; Klug 1995)

In constructing himself as becoming self-aware as a politically and historically implicated subject at the moment of the *Wende* (when he was in his mid-twenties), Beyer seems to posit this as a moment of maturation; one might follow Grotzer and say of ‘second birth’ (Grotzer 1991). The rather extraordinary suggestion that he came into contact with ‘no stories’ about the NS period prior to 1989 could also be said to help Beyer cast himself as a ‘*tabula rasa*’ prior to the *Wende* in terms of historical consciousness, analogous to the historical blank slate he claims to have encountered in his early years. Like Sebald, then, Beyer finds a way to sidestep his actual childhood in order to construct himself as a ‘child of history,’ thus inserting his authorial persona into the hierarchical discourse of generational identity. In summary, all four authors write themselves into the generational model, thus participating in patriarchal structures which prioritize notions of origin. The four authors locate the origins of their generational identities with a moment of historical caesura – either 1945 or 1989. In the case of the ‘*Kriegskinder*’ generation, this coincides with their childhoods; in the case of Sebald and Beyer, childhood must be sidestepped in the construction of a more suitable point of origin.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to these differences in the authors’ constructions of their public, generational identities, though, and quite apart from biographical considerations, the narrative functions of childness within their literary texts are closely related, as this thesis will show. Briefly stated, these functions are narrative persuasion and the preclusion of a

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, and as is discussed at length below, Sebald does not continue to sidestep his ‘*Heimat*’ in his literary texts, despite what the rhetoric of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* seems to suggest.



sceptical reading practice, an insistence on the 'authenticity' of childhood memory and on childhood as a pure point of origin in terms of subjectivity and identity, the production of an innocent stance in relation to the National Socialist past, and, in the case of Sebald's work, the articulation of post-Holocaust mourning.

Similar or related forms of generational self-positioning might possibly be identified in relation to authors whose backgrounds are in the former GDR, as recent work by Pinfold and others suggests.<sup>27</sup> It is also possible that authors writing from migrant, 'post-colonial' or feminist perspectives might contest the generational model to which the four authors examined here conform.<sup>28</sup> The choice to limit the focus of this dissertation to non-migrant, white male authors of 'old' FRG heritage is not intended to marginalise or peripheralise such voices, which also constitute the discursive field of German cultural memory, a field whose variety and complexity cannot be fully accounted for here. Rather, this choice relates to the ideology of childhood innocence itself. As has

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<sup>27</sup> Debbie Pinfold, 'They Weren't All *Zonenkinder*: Post-Wende Accounts of GDR Childhood', *AGS 2010* (University of Reading, 2010). For examinations of texts of GDR childhood, see also Debbie Pinfold, 'Erinnerung ideologisch entschlacken' or lost in translation: Reflections on Jana Hensel's *Zonenkinder* and its American translation', *German Life and Letters*, 60/1 (2007), 133-48, Dennis Tate, *Shifting Perspectives: East German Autobiographical Narratives Before and After the End of the GDR* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), Nicole Thesz, 'Adolescence in the 'Ostalgie' Generation: Reading Jakob Hein's *Mein erstes T-Shirt* against *Sonnenallee*, *Zonenkinder* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*' *Oxford German Studies*, 37/1 (2008), 107-23, Katja Warchold, 'Ich wollte eine Distel im sozialistischen Rosengarten sein' - Autobiographische Texte von zwei DDR-Jugendgenerationen', *German Life and Letters*, 63/3 (July 2010), 354-68. For a historical study of the significance of the figure of the child concentration camp survivor in GDR cultural memory, see Bill Niven, *The Buchenwald Child: Truth, Fiction and Propaganda* (Rochester; New York: Camden House, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, discussions of Turkish-German writing and post-Wende German cultural memory in Leslie Adelson, 'Touching Tales of Turks, Germans and Jews: Cultural Alterity, Historical Narrative, and Literary Riddles for the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 80/Special issue on the Holocaust (Spring-Summer 2000), 93-124, Leslie Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Towards a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) at 79-122, Moray McGowan, 'Turkish-German Fiction since the Mid-1990s', in Stuart Taberner (ed.), *Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 196-214, Monika Shafī, 'Talkin' Bout My Generation: Memories of 1968 in Recent German Novels', *German Life and Letters*, 59/2 (April 2006), 201-16. See also Littler's discussion of the female child narrator in works by Özdamar and Zaimoğlu: Margaret Littler, 'Anatolian Childhoods: Becoming Woman in Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and Zaimoğlu's *Leyla*', in Eleoma Joshua and Robert Vilain (eds.), *Edinburgh German Yearbook: Volume 1: Cultural Exchange in German Literature* (Rochester; New York: Camden House, 2007), 176-90.

been established by Ariès and others, childhood as it is understood today is largely a construct of modern, bourgeois, patriarchal society and culture. The myth of innocence in particular, for all its radical and revolutionary potential, is a patriarchal myth, defining and containing sexuality and assuring us of the original wholeness and purity of subjectivity and identity.<sup>29</sup> In limiting my analysis of the narrative functions of this myth to the work of authors who subscribe to the generational model, I am to an extent deliberately working against the grain of existing scholarship of childhood in literature, which, as I have discussed, places a strong emphasis on the potential for deconstruction and critique offered by the device of the child's perspective. I seek to counterbalance this view, by showing that childness contributes in a variety of ways to patriarchally configured literary discourses of German history and identity, and often acts as a locus or even hiding-place for problematic and questionable desires and yearnings in relation to the National Socialist past.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is structured so as to demonstrate the efficacy of childness as a conceptual tool for analysing literary tropes of childhood in the context of complex relationships between constructions of childhood, adult desire and the narrative's interpellation of its reader. Part I examines the relationship between childness and exculpatory desire in Forte's and Walser's texts, and argues that tropes of childhood innocence are central to both texts' valorisations of culture and progress. In Part II, the thesis leads out from this consideration of child focalizers and protagonists to wider considerations of the child and childhood as objects of narration, and of childhood

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<sup>29</sup> I discuss this aspect of the innocence myth in detail in my examination of Sebald's work below.

innocence as a structuring myth. The dual narrators of Beyer's *Flughunde* serve as a transition point in this regard. In the novel, the child figure of Helga is constructed as a focalizer and narrator, but also as an object of fascination for the novel's adult protagonist. My examination of Beyer's text focuses on the complex interrelations between childhood innocence and adult desire that the narrative dramatizes. This focus on childhood innocence as an object of adult fascination and yearning is continued in my consideration of W.G. Sebald's prose works. Grounding my analysis in Sebald's reception of Nabokov and Stifter, I discuss the occasional thematisation of erotic desire in relation to childhood in *Schwindel. Gefühle* and *Die Ausgewanderten*. I consider the possibility that, through this low-key thematisation of what might be called 'the paedophilic,' Sebald might be understood to be carrying out a deconstructive critique of innocence as a myth of patriarchal, bourgeois normativity. I argue that this deconstructive impulse is, however, always counterbalanced by a tendency to take advantage of the structural association between childhood innocence and loss, an association which plays a significant role in Sebald's textual engagements with mourning and memory in relation to the Holocaust and Western modernity. I argue that this elegiac connection between childhood, loss and mourning can be seen particularly in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*. Returning in Part III to the relationship between childness, focalization and the politics of memory, I close my discussion of Sebald with an extended, close analysis of the narrative function of childness in the constructions of childhood memory in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*.<sup>30</sup> Close consideration is given throughout to the role of the innocence myth in the production of Sebald's dialectical

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<sup>30</sup> *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995) does not engage extensively with childhood in the manner of Sebald's other three prose fiction publications, and is thus discussed in brief rather than at length.

narrative structures. Here, a point of contrast may be drawn between Sebald's texts and the work of Forte and Walser. I argue that while childness contributes to an endorsement of notions of progress and 'Bildung' in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* and *Ein springender Brunnen*, it plays a part in the dialectical critique of progress in Sebald's works. I close the thesis by synthesizing the findings of these analyses and considering the narrative functions of childness in the creation of an innocent stance in relation to the NS past, the discourse of German wartime suffering and victimhood, and discourses of mourning and memory.

## Part I

### Childness, Progress and Exculpation

#### 1. Focalization and the trope of the tabula rasa in Dieter Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*

##### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter argues that the child protagonist in Dieter Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (1995) serves as a vessel granting safe passage to the text's exculpatory impulses, and to its valorisation of social solidarity, art, literature and music as forces resistant to ideologies of hatred and cruelty. In other words, childness is instrumental in the narrative's assertion of faith in the Enlightenment values of progress and civilisation as antithetical to National Socialism, and hence in its implicit rejection of Adornian critiques of progress. This ideological stance stands in sharp contrast to the dialectical critique of notions of progress carried out in the work of W.G. Sebald, which I examine in the last part of the thesis. However, although childness plays very different narratological and discursive roles in the work of Forte and of Sebald, its persuasive function and role as vessel for potentially troublesome narrative desires and impulses are common to both, indeed to all four authors examined here. In this discussion of *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, I focus on the text's construction of the boy as a protagonist figure, including a consideration of his role as a focalizer. I identify the dominant trope of childhood that contributes to the narrative construction of this figure as that of the Lockean 'tabula rasa,' which I show to play a crucial role in the text's

valorisation of community and culture, as well as in the techniques of evasion, elision and selective confrontation in relation to National Socialism that this valorisation requires. As I will discuss below, Forte's representation of Allied bombing raids is less central to my analysis, although it has been the main focal point for discussion of Forte's work since the late 1990s and the so-called 'Luftkriegdebatte.'

The novel is the second of Forte's trilogy, which was published as a single volume in 1999 under the title *Das Haus auf meinen Schultern* (1999), and which describes the experiences of two families, the Fontanas and the Lukaczs, over a long span of time. *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (which is entitled *Tagundnachtgleiche* in the 1999 edition) describes the years of National Socialism, beginning with the birth of the boy in 1933 and ending in 1945. The boy, who remains nameless throughout the text, is born at the beginning of the second novel and serves as a protagonist in this and the third novel, *In der Erinnerung* (1998). Here, I focus only on *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* rather than looking at the trilogy in its entirety, chiefly because the topic under exploration here is the narratological role of childness in Forte's representation of National Socialism. *In der Erinnerung*, which is a narrative of the immediate post-war years, is less relevant to this discussion than *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*.

Having received a mixed response from reviewers on initial publication, Forte's trilogy, in particular *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, became subject to renewed critical interest in the later 1990s and early 2000s, in the context of debates about German victimhood and the Allied strategic bombings. Because of the extended descriptions of the bombings of Düsseldorf and Cologne in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, it was picked up as evidence against contentions made by W.G. Sebald in his Zurich lectures of

1997 and in his subsequent publication, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (2001), that German literary discourse had failed to confront this horrific aspect of wartime experience. Forte added his own voice to the debate with a caustic response to Sebald's theses initially published in *Der Spiegel* in 1999 and reprinted in the collection *Schweigen oder sprechen* (Forte 2002).<sup>31</sup> This aspect of the reception of Forte's work is documented and given a clear and nuanced analysis by Stephan Braese (2002) in an article which also provides a persuasive critique of Forte's narrative strategies. Braese argues that rather than contradict Sebald's thesis that German cultural and literary discourse has failed to address adequately the legacy of the air war, Forte's novel confirms it. He suggests that Forte elides distinctions between the novel's central figures and victims of the regime such as Jewish prisoners and forced labourers, so that the population of the "Quartier" (which numerous critics have identified with Oberbilk in Düsseldorf) is represented as a "doppelte[s] Opfer" (Braese 2002, 15) – of the regime and of the Allied bombings. Walter Hinck also offers a negative critique of the text in his brief article, objecting to what he describes as a "Hang zur Schematisierung" in Forte's representation of National Socialism, and to the "Überzeichnung" of rural Germany in the novel's South German episodes (Hinck 2000: 96-7).

More positive or sympathetic critical responses to the novel come to dramatically contrasting conclusions about the text. Eigler and Müller, for example, read it as radically deconstructive of traditional notions of identity and subjectivity (Eigler 2008; Müller 2002). Eigler argues that the trilogy undermines the concept of a static 'Heimat', while Müller sees it as constructing "'postmoderne' Antihelden," and suggests that the narrative represents "eine kollektive Erfahrung des Gedächtnisumbaus, der Sinnlosigkeit des

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<sup>31</sup> See also Volker Hage (ed.), *Zeugen der Zerstörung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2003).

Lebens sowie des Selbst- und Sprachverlustes.” (Müller 2002: 196) Forte’s representations of social solidarity within multicultural and multilingual, urban working class communities, his focus on experiences of migration, and his excoriating representation of rural, southern German ‘Heimat’ clearly align his texts with non-traditionalist approaches to identity. However, it is my argument that these aspects of his work cannot be understood as ‘postmodern’ or deconstructionist, because the central project of *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* is to rehabilitate a positive and whole image of Western European culture, identity and subjectivity from the rubble of the Second World War and the stains of National Socialism. In contrast to Eigler’s and Müller’s readings of the novel as radically deconstructive, Bogdal approvingly interprets Forte’s trilogy as a return to traditional narrative values, defining the author’s project as “im Chaos des Zufälligen Ordnung zu schaffen, (...) dem sinnlos Gewordenen eine Bedeutung zuzuschreiben, eine Nähe herzustellen zum Entferntesten (...).” (Bogdal 2002: 307) Mary Cosgrove shares Bogdal’s understanding of the text as following a traditionalist narrative structure, and provides an extremely insightful consideration of the wider cultural and ideological ramifications of this return to the structures of epic narrative in the context of German memory discourse and the literary conventions that have evolved in response to it (Cosgrove 2009).

Critical assessments of the nature and function of the novel’s central child figure also differ widely from one another. Hinck and Durzak read the boy as a disguised autobiographical figure, with Durzak suggesting that the text is written in the third person rather than the first person in order to reflect the traumatic nature of the narrative, owing to which the “Hegemonie des Subjekts” cannot be sustained (Durzak 1999: 150; Hinck



2000, 2006). Like Durzak, Müller reads the boy as a representation of fragmentary subjectivity, a “brüchiges Kollektivsubjekt” who functions as “das Auge seiner Zeit” (Müller 2002: 196). As suggested above, my reading of the text argues against such interpretations of Forte’s models of subjectivity, and identifies the primary narrative project as one of reconstruction and rehabilitation rather than deconstruction. Regarding the autobiographical qualities of the text, it is clear that *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* is based on Forte’s own childhood experiences during the war, and Forte himself has emphasised this correspondence in subsequent statements about the text (Forte and Hage 2002). However, critical readings of the figure of the boy as an authentic representation of the author’s biography or of the experience of the author’s generation – compelling and valid though they may be – do not tend to take into account the possible narratological implications of the use of the device of the child’s perspective, nor of important distinctions between narrator, protagonist, and focalization. Braese provides the most sustained consideration of the child status of the novel’s protagonist, although, like Eigler and Durzak, he tends to conflate the narrator and the figure of the boy in his reading.<sup>32</sup> Braese argues that the construction of a child protagonist allows Forte to evade questions of guilt and responsibility, facilitating the “Opferstilisierung” (Braese, 2002: 20) that he sees as a feature of the construction of all the novel’s central figures:

Unschuld oder mangelhafte Schuldfähigkeit des Kindes ist (...) so vollständig durch Widerstand und Opferstatus substituiert, zugleich so vollständig ausgedehnt auf das deutsche Kollektiv, daß die historischen Subjekte des Nationalsozialismus

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<sup>32</sup> As Hermanns shows, this conflation could be justifiable in relation to *In der Erinnerung*, where the narrator states that he *is* the boy, so that the two figures are linked, although their narratological functions remain utterly distinct from one another. However, no such statements linking the narrator and the boy occur in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*. Silke Hermanns, 'Trümmer (in) der Erinnerung: Strategien des Erzählens über die unmittelbare Nachkriegszeit', (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2006) at 228.

nahezu unsichtbar bleiben, zumindest nicht mit im Keller zu sitzen scheinen.  
(Braese, 2002: 17)

In linking the narrative role of the central child figure with the text's evasions and elisions, Braese raises a key question in relation to the role of childness in Forte's text. However, as this essay will explore, Braese's reading of non-culpability, victimhood and resistance onto the boy does not precisely reflect the textual construction of this figure. It is my argument that, rather than being actively resistant to National Socialist culture and ideology, the boy is inscribed with the anti-Nazi values of his family and community, and is insulated by family and community from direct contact with National Socialism. This means that the figure of the boy plays a far more passive role in the narrative than that ascribed to him by Braese. Regarding the qualities of innocence or reduced culpability that Braese expects to find in the figure of the boy, this chapter explores the extent to which the boy is constructed as an innocent figure, and what form his innocence might take. First, though, it is necessary to clear up some ambiguity that has arisen from imprecise critical descriptions of the text's central narratological agents.

## **1.2 Narratological considerations**

In her discussion, Cosgrove highlights a contrast between Forte's narrative project and those of other authors who go about constructing literary narratives out of traumatic personal or collective experience. She suggests that Forte breaks with an "increasingly formulaic" and prescriptive set of norms relating to this kind of literary endeavour, in that, rather than incorporating gaps or silences into his prose style, he creates a "narrative of continuity" with the purpose of "making sense and attributing meaning" to the events

and legacies of the Holocaust and the Second World War (Cosgrove 2009: 164, 172). I diverge to some extent from Cosgrove's conclusion that "whatever his sentimental lapses, on the level of signifying rhetoric [Forte] is not looking for exculpation." (Cosgrove 2009: 173) However, her identification of a project of continuity is borne out by a consideration of the text's narrating and focalizing agents.

*Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* has an extradiegetic, adult narrator.<sup>33</sup> The eponymous boy is not the primary narrator of the text, and indeed seldom functions as a secondary narrator. Although the text can and has been read as autobiographical, there are no narratological indications in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* that the narrator is to be identified with any of the figures in the novel. In this sense, the text's primary narrating voice is external and authorial. This narrating agent also coincides with the primary focalizer of the text; in other words, the reader usually shares the point of view of the external narrator rather than the point of view of a character. Bal's somewhat unwieldy, but precise term of "narrator-focalizer" most accurately describes this coincidence of primary narrating and focalizing agents (Bal 2004: 279). The syntax and style of the voice of narration, which is strongly paratactic, varies very little throughout the text. Use of techniques that would interrupt the flow of the dominant narrating voice, such as direct, indirect or free indirect speech, inner monologue or stream-of-consciousness, is minimal. That is to say that the primary narrating voice, and the very dominant position it enjoys, are a major source of continuity within the text. In her discussion of *In der Erinnerung*, Hermanns identifies a similar narrative syntax and

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<sup>33</sup> As the narrating voice is external, or heterodiegetic in Genette's terms, rather than attached to a figure within the story, it would be more precise to describe it as adult-like rather than adult. The adjective 'adult' is used here for expediency's sake.

suggests that its function is to create a montage effect whereby “die Erzählung als Aufzählung bildhafter Eindrücke erscheint.” (Hermanns 2006: 234) Although this effect is occasionally created by the paratactic phrasing of *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, I would argue that the primary effect of this style is to sustain the dominance of the primary narrator-focalizer even where secondary, character-bound focalization shifts from one figure to another. In the regularity of its uninterrupted rhythms and in the accumulation of images and statements that it allows for within individual sentences, I would also suggest that the paratactic style of the narrative helps to establish what Durzak praises as the novel’s “emotionale Sogkraft,” thus contributing to the text’s persuasive rhetorical power. (Durzak, 1999, p151)

Although always tempered by the style and syntax of the voice of narration, so that the primary, extradiegetic narrator-focalizer is consistently dominant in the text, secondary focalization through various characters takes place throughout the narrative, with the boy and his mother, Maria, functioning particularly frequently as focalizers. In other words, although the narrating agent very rarely “yield[s] the floor to a character,” the focalizing agent does this with more regularity (Bal 2004: 275). However, this mobility of focalization does not prompt readerly consciousness of the different perspectives and interpretative possibilities that might be facilitated by a range of strongly differentiated focalizing positions. Rather, it functions to identify and privilege the central protagonists of the text, and to incorporate these figures into a wider model of collectivity and solidarity. In this regard, the frequent employment of a seemingly collective focalizer, usually denoted by the third person singular “man”, which has been remarked upon by several critics, helps to construct the text’s rhetoric of solidarity and

continuity (Braese 2002: 14; Müller 2002: 195). However, this focalization technique also feeds into the exculpatory tendencies of Forte's narrative, as it encourages the reader to accept and identify with the community's collective resistance to National Socialism without scepticism, and to imagine the agents of National Socialism as largely unspecified 'others' located at the margins of the narrative. Given these tendencies to valorise the community and banish Nazis to the periphery of the story, it is hardly surprising that the child's perspective does not function primarily as a vehicle of defamiliarisation and critique in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*. In fact, where the boy does function as a focalizer, his perspective is rarely marked as 'child-like', that is, as restricted and/or privileged in a manner that would differentiate it strongly from the collective to which the boy belongs. In other words, the child's perspective does not usually have the Romantic function of the "eye among the blind" in Forte's text, but rather represents a wider, clear-sighted collective (Pinfold 2001). Thus, a passage which focalizes the aftermath of a bombardment through the figure of the boy, the vision is presented panoramically and with very little emphasis on the childness of the focalizer:

Dann sah der Junge, nachdem sich seine Augen an das schummrige, unregelmäßige Feuerlicht gewöhnt hatten, daß die Straße voller Menschen war, die alle in einer ungeordneten Bewegung unterwegs waren, oft nur hin und her liefen, sich dabei umrannten, sich nicht ansahen, einfach wieder weitergingen. (...) Eine Frau zog einen halbverbrannten Kinderwagen hinter sich her. Eine andere Frau trug vorsichtig einige Kleiderbügel, auf denen einmal etwas gehangen hatte. Ein Mann oder eine Frau, es war nicht zu erkennen, hockte vor einem Bündel, einem Kind, das sich nicht mehr bewegte, und bekreuzigte sich immerzu. Ein Soldat mit einem Bein stelzte auf seinen Krücken vorbei. Eine Frau trug einen leeren Koffer, von dem der Deckel abgerissen war. (JS: 146-7)

Here, focalization is neutral, listing images without commentary or interpretation. Although he does not make a precise distinction between narrator and focalizer, Müller's description of the narrative voice as "[eine] kommentarlos[e], unbeteiligt wirkend[e] *camera-eye*-Darstellung" would accurately apply to the construction of the boy as focalizer in this passage (Müller, 2002, p197).<sup>34</sup> That is to say that, although this passage is focalized through a child figure, childness does not play a significant role in the construction of the focalizer or the positioning of the implied reader here. There is, in fact, only one passage in the novel in which childness does play a significant role in the construction of the boy as a focalizer, that is, where the boy's perspective is clearly marked as restricted and privileged. This is also the passage in which Forte comes closest to confronting urban civilian complicity with National Socialist ideology and anti-Semitic violence, because it describes the cityscape of Düsseldorf in the aftermath of the 'Kristallnacht' pogroms. It is to this passage that I turn next, before carrying out a wider analysis of the narrative construction and function of Forte's child protagonist.

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<sup>34</sup> Based on Stanzel's discussion of the camera-eye technique, there are arguably some aspects common to this form of focalization and focalization through a child figure. The absence of memory, interpretation, selection or ordering that Stanzel attributes to camera eye focalization could be a feature of child focalization in some instances. However, I would argue that these two forms of focalization, despite some possible similarities, position the reader in radically different ways. Whereas the camera-eye technique suggests neutrality, objectivity and comprehensiveness, the use of a child focalizer often suggests to the reader that the 'whole picture' is not being shown, but rather that a limited view of it is being presented, which may require the reader to fill in contextual gaps, or may appear to present the reader with some kind of essential truth about the situation. That is to suggest that a child focalizer may frequently evince more active and more emotionally invested forms of reader response than camera eye focalization. (F. K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens* (3rd edn.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) at 294-9.

### 1.3 Focalization in the 'Kristallnacht' episode

The passage describing 'Kristallnacht' takes place at the close of Section I of the novel (JS: 97-103). In fact, the pogroms themselves are not described or referred to explicitly. Rather, the aftermath of the events is described through the perspective of the boy, who is about five years old at this point in the narrative, and is out with his mother for St. Martin's night, lantern in hand. Here, focalization through the boy is strongly marked by childness, with a severely limited field of vision being presented and with some linguistic adjustment in the voice of narration. It is my argument that the use of childness - through the St Martin's Night conceit as well as the construction of the focalizer - helps Forte to write about the pogroms without representing the civilians of Düsseldorf as willing and state-condoned perpetrators of anti-Semitic violence and theft. In itself, the St Martin's Night setting of the scene imports childness into the narrative, as the feast day is strongly associated with children's activities. It also allows Forte to describe the aftermath of 'Kristallnacht' rather than directly confronting the night itself, as the feast of St Martin falls on November 11<sup>th</sup>, whereas 'Kristallnacht' took place on the night of November 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> in 1938.

Fragments of a children's song are woven into the narrative during this episode, creating the possibility of free indirect speech or stream-of-consciousness through the child focalizer. That is to say, the song fragments interrupt the dominant rhythm and syntax of the voice of narration, so that focalization through the boy comes to seem more prominent and more clearly differentiated from other modes of focalization than is usual in this text. There is a strong element of repetition, which establishes the child's limited field of vision. Repeated words include: "Laterne", "Flamme", "Lichter", "Hand",

“Gesicht”, “Augen”, “Mund”, “Glas” and “Porzellan”. These nouns relate to the face on the lantern, the candle inside the lantern, Maria’s hand, and the fragments of glass and porcelain on the ground. Their repetition throughout the episode creates a visual perspective that is placed at a low elevation and directed downwards, towards the ground. The dominance of the lantern, which is made to seem very large, makes the boy holding it seem very small. The vocabulary that is repeated therefore creates a sense of a low, limited, field of vision. The impact of this restricted focalization on the implied reader is that only the objects and aftermath of destruction are seen, not the agents who are responsible. Bal outlines the manner in which focalization techniques can reveal or conceal the agent responsible for a given act, simply by including or omitting the subject of a verb (Bal 1997: 155). I would argue that precisely this kind of evasion is conducted in this passage from Forte’s novel, with the purpose of maintaining a safe distance between his image of urban civilian community and the fact of civilian culpability in relation to anti-Semitic violence. It is the restricted perspective of the child focalizer that facilitates this evasion. Nor does the contrasting use of an adult focalizer in this episode serve to remind the reader of what is lacking in the child’s vision. When Maria becomes a focalizer towards the end of the episode, her adult, upward-directed, wide field of vision contrasts strongly with the perspective of the boy:

[Maria as focalizer:] Am Horizont einer langen Straße sah man Feuerschein, einige Scheinwerfer huschten über den Himmel, irgendwo wurde wieder marschiert, wurden wieder Häuser angeleuchtet. (JS: 101)

[The boy as focalizer:] (...) [D]er Junge trat gegen Töpfe und Pfannen und stand plötzlich mit seiner Laterne mitten in einem zerborstenen Spiegel, das war wie ein



Loch in der Erde, in dem ein Feuer brannte, das bis in den Himmel leuchtete. (JS: 99)

Both Maria and the boy see firelight in the sky. The boy looks down into a mirror and sees its reflection, which could be read as a vision of hell. Maria looks up towards the horizon, and, as a focalizer, provides some of the context that the boy does not: that the fire is the result of human activity. However, the passive construction in this last clause means that the subject who marches and sets fire to houses can still remain unseen and unarticulated. The child's limited field of vision is therefore one of several strategies of evasion used in this episode, the passive construction used in the focalization through Maria being another.

The boy's vision of fire burning in a hole in the ground is clearly reminiscent of Christian iconography of hellfire. In this sense, the child's perspective is not simply constructed as restricted here, but also as poetically privileged. However, I would argue that the primary effect of this poetic privileging is not defamiliarisation, but rather evasion. The hell metaphor is in itself a way of evading direct representation or contextualization of the pogrom. The severely restricted perspective of the child focalizer allows a metaphoric image to be used, which appears to carry a form of symbolic truth about the night, but which allows explicit discussion of the events of the night to be avoided.<sup>35</sup> I would argue that this evasive or indirect mode of engagement with 'Kristallnacht' is due to the narrative's insistence on casting the inhabitants of the

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<sup>35</sup> It could be said that the imagery of hellfire and destruction in this passage pre-empts the descriptions of firebombing that come later in the novel. In this sense, Forte's rather oblique engagement with German civilian anti-Semitic violence is linked poetically with his descriptions of civilian suffering at the hands of the Allies. However, as I seek to show here, the focalization technique in this passage serves to evade rather than confront civilian responsibility. In this sense, Forte represents his community of urban civilians as double victims, of the National Socialists and of the Allies.

bombarded city as resistant to National Socialism rather than as willing participants in its ideology and apparatus. Rather than construct all the inhabitants of Düsseldorf as resistant to Nazism, which would appear ludicrous to practically any reader, Forte focuses attention on one working class, multi-ethnic section of the city's population and draws a veil over the rest of the city. While downtown Düsseldorf is represented as a crime scene devoid of perpetrators, the "Quartier" is represented as a vision of homeliness, peace and order:

Im Quartier was es still, keine Glasscherben, kein Porzellan unter den Schuhen, viele Fenster waren erleuchtet. (JS: 103)

In the St Martin's Night section, where the setting is outside the "Quartier" in the aftermath of 'Kristallnacht,' childness functions to mark the boy's perspective as restricted and poetically privileged, in a manner reminiscent of Romantic ideals of childhood. As such, childness is a key element in the narrative's avoidance of confrontation with anti-Semitic violence and cooperation with National Socialism amongst the city's civilian population. This applies, however, only to one short section of the text, in which Forte comes closest to engaging with the matter of civilian perpetration. In order to gain a fuller understanding of how childness functions in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, it is necessary to look beyond focalization techniques in an investigation of the construction of the novel's child protagonist.

#### **1.4 The construction of the boy as a subject**

By examining the means by which the boy is constructed as a textual subject, and the roles played by childness in this construction, it may be possible to trace a

relationship between the functions of childness in the narrative, and the strategies by which the narrative represents National Socialism. Here, I argue that Forte's child protagonist is constructed in accordance with a 'tabula rasa' trope of childhood – that is, that the child is a 'blank slate,' upon which knowledge and morality may be inscribed through teaching and experience, but which comes into being with no inherent principles of knowledge or of morality. In this sense, the boy is constructed as inscribed with, embodying and regenerating the moral and social codes of his family and community.

This construction is more firmly aligned with pre-Romantic, Lockean constructions of childhood than with later, post-Rousseauian and Romantic ideals. Forte's text thus provides little or no sense of any goodness or morality innate to the child, and other child figures in the text are constructed as embodiments of negative or morally corrupt codes (for example, the children fighting for sweets in the St. Martin's Night parade (JS: 100), or the children who volunteer to whip other, bed-wetting children with chestnuts on cord in the 'Erholungsheim' (JS: 264-5)). That is to say that the conception of innocence attributed to the boy in this text is not that of inherent, self-contained goodness – a notion whose roots partially lie in Rousseau's construction of childhood in *Émile* (1762), and which remains in circulation in contemporary literary discourse (as I discuss below, it is a central element of Beyer's construction of his child protagonist in *Flughunde*). Rather, the boy's innocence - his state of being untainted by National Socialism - is due to his being inscribed with the positive codes and values of his family and community. Without, or prior to, this inscription, at the moment of his birth, he is merely "ein blutiges Stück Fleisch" who cries without comprehending anything (JS: 10-11). This construction of the child protagonist as a tabula rasa allows him to function as

an embodiment of the moral and social codes of the working-class community Forte seeks to valorize throughout this novel, and also as a vehicle for the valorisation of artistic production, in particular storytelling and literary production. This recursion to an Enlightenment trope of childhood thus coincides with Forte's ideological commitment to notions of progress, continuity and culture. The inscription of the boy with this set of values is examined in detail below, but first some consideration of the concept of *tabula rasa* is necessary.

### **The *tabula rasa* and the construction of childhood**

The *tabula rasa* concept is now primarily identified with Locke's theories of consciousness and learning as laid out in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690 (Locke and Woolhouse 1997). Central to Locke's argument in this work is that human infants come into the world with no innate knowledge, perceptions, or principles. All knowledge and understanding is gained through sensory experience in the first instance, which is ordered and interpreted by means of the faculty of reason. At the moment of birth, an infant's consciousness is an "empty cabinet" (Book I, Chapter II, §15), "white paper, void of all characters" (Book II, Chapter I, §2) which is then "imprinted" or "furnished" with sensory impressions.

Locke's picture of infant consciousness is open to misinterpretation. He does not represent the newborn mind as void; although empty of ideas, it possesses the capability to absorb ideas and develop reason. Nor is the capacity to learn and reason the only thing Locke sees as present in the infant mind. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* of 1693, which deals explicitly with practical aspects of child-rearing and education for

upper-class parents of boys, it is clear that the child is constructed as having innate desires and a free will, which he must learn to subordinate to his reason (Locke et al. 1996: 29). This construction of childhood – that of a child as having limited knowledge and ideas but possessed of desires and longings, and of a capacity for learning and reason – differs from the current, common understanding of Locke’s tabula rasa argument, as Hugh Cunningham points out. (Cunningham 2005: 63) Rather than the detail of Locke’s arguments, it is the metaphoric image of the tabula rasa itself that has come to define the general understanding of his construction of childhood: An empty cabinet to be stocked with items and labels, a white sheet of paper to be written upon, with the work of forming the child falling to adult educators. It is principally this image, rather than the nuances of Locke’s writings, that I am referring to by the phrase tabula rasa in the context of the present study of Forte’s novel. I identify the tabula rasa concept as a structuring trope for Forte’s text, through which the child protagonist is constructed as heavily dependent on adult educators for the formation of his subjectivity, identity and morality. Before detailing the social, cultural and moral codes with which Forte’s protagonist is thus inscribed, it is necessary to establish the reasons for viewing him as a tabula rasa figure in the first place.

In the passage describing his birth, the boy is not constructed as a human subject at all – he seems not even to be endowed with gender or discrete body parts or to be a whole body; he is a “blutige[s] Stück Fleisch” (JS: 10), and then “das Kind” rather than “der Junge” (JS: 11). This image reflects, of course, the violent future which overshadows his birth, but also constructs the infant as a non-subject, with corporeality but without consciousness or perception – a tabula rasa, albeit one that is stained

immediately by the violence of the times. The boy is constructed as a subject over the next hundred or so pages, which describe the years between 1933 and the beginning of the war, and the boy's early development.

Forte uses one stylistic device in particular to achieve the construction of the boy's subjectivity, namely the working into the narrative of short sentences and clauses that have "der Junge" as their grammatical subject, and that follow a very basic subject-verb-object pattern. These clauses and sentences often serve to refocus the reader's attention on the boy after passages that present a collective or communal subject such as the population of "das Quartier." That is, they serve to move the focus of the narrative from the general to the particular, and thus help to construct the boy as an autonomous subject. An examination of these sentences and clauses, and the passages that they introduce, reveals a strong emphasis on internal processes rather than external actions. That is to say, the boy is not constructed as actively exploring and negotiating the world around him. Rather he is constructed as receiving the imprint of the world around him by way of sensory perception. The boy sees, hears, senses, and learns to a far greater extent than he plays or actively manipulates his environment. He is constructed as passive in relation to his own development as a subject, which is represented as a process of being imprinted with images, narratives, memories, knowledge, and cultural values. This construction of childhood conforms closely to the *tabula rasa* trope, in that it constructs the child as barely human at birth, from which state it becomes a subject by means of a process of being inscribed or imprinted with ideas and knowledge which are supplied predominantly by the adults around him. By examining in closer detail precisely what is imprinted on the boy in terms of moral, social and cultural codes, it becomes possible to

see how childness functions in this narrative: as a means by which the text's governing ideologies are articulated. These codes are discussed below under three headings: Community, Family and Culture.

### **Community: Solidarity and resistance**

Throughout the novel, systems of solidarity and resistance to National Socialist authority are represented repeatedly as hidden or encoded forms of communication. Communications represented in this way include notices for the exchange of goods that are in short supply (JS: 106), graffiti messages on rubble giving information about who is dead, who is still alive, and where people can be found (JS: 185-6), and indicating directions through the rubble (JS: 186), and anti-Nazi news flyers in tiny print (JS: 118). Most of these communications would not normally be interpreted as acts of resistance against National Socialism. However, because they are constructed as secret, understood only by the community of the "Quartier", they imply a separation between the community and the National Socialist regime. Bartering household commodities becomes a subversive act carried out en masse by the whole community. It is represented as a code that is inscribed upon the boy early in his life:

Diese Zeichensprache, diese Hieroglyphensystem, das die Abkürzungssprache der Ersatzmarken ergänzte, lernte der Junge früher als die deutschen Gedichte in den Schulbüchern. Er wußte, wie man unauffällig, selbst unter den Augen der Polizei, die Waren im Vorbeigehen auf einer Straße austauschte, Fernglas gegen Speck, und dabei noch anständig den Polizisten grüßte, wie es in den Schulbüchern stand, zwischen den Gedichten mit all den schönen Worten von Sonne und Himmel, unter dem die Spatzen zwitscherten und die Wolken zogen, von der guten Mutter Erde, wo der Bauer hinter dem Pflug ging, der Arbeiter in die Fabrik, die Kinder

bei der Mutter saßen und brav waren und die Menschen den ganzen Tag jauchzten, weil das Leben so herrlich war. (106)

This paragraph creates an ironic contrast between the community's activities and the propagandistic texts that the boy learns at school, which allows the exchanges to seem more subversive and radical than they otherwise would. The boy is inscribed with a code of community solidarity and subversive resistance to National Socialism, but the fact that the boy is a schoolchild provides the material for constructing the opposition by which the community's activities are cast as subversive. Although the purpose of this passage is to establish the primacy, in the boy's experience, of positive, community codes and values over the codes of behaviour and belief taught at school, the passage relies on the negative associations of NS educational propaganda to establish the contrasting, positive value of the community's codes. Regarding the tabula rasa trope, the narrative is at pains to emphasise the early inscription of positive, non-National Socialist values and codes on the boy's consciousness, which, the text asks the reader to surmise, immunize the boy against school propaganda. The radical, working-class community of "das Quartier" is therefore instrumental in forming the boy's subjectivity in such a way as will make him resistant to National Socialist ideology. This use of the tabula rasa trope of childhood allows both the boy and the community to be rendered free of complicity with the National Socialist state they are a part of.

### **Family: Difference, continuity and the primacy of narrative**

The first perceptions attributed to the boy are of members of his family, primarily of his mother, Maria, and paternal grandfather, Gustav:



Der Junge spielte auf dem Boden, und aus dieser Perspektive sah er nicht nur seine Mutter und Fin, er sah vor allem seinen Großvater, der auf dem hohen Ledersofa thronte, unendlich groß schien, allmächtig, unsterblich, mit der Würde eines Königs das Wissen der Welt verkörperte, und es war immer der schönste Moment an diesen Sonntagnachmittagen, wenn der Junge sich neben ihn auf das Sofa setzen durfte, sein Großvater ihm die alte Eisenbahneruhr der Fontanas zeigte, die er an einer goldenen Kette trug, ihm mit seiner ruhigen Stimme eine Geschichte erzählte, die von Maria als unglaublich abgetan wurde. Sie begann sofort mit einer Geschichte, die von Gustav als unglaublich abgetan wurde, und beide Geschichten verbanden sich für den Jungen mit dem Baß seines Großvaters und der dunklen, wohlklingenden Stimme seiner Mutter. (JS: 22-3)

As is suggested by the musical metaphor which describes their disagreements in this passage, the figures of Maria and Gustav are constructed in harmonic opposition to one another throughout the text. The personal philosophy of each leaves its imprint on the mind of the boy, and differences between them ultimately resolve into a harmonic set of principles. Maria's code is one of continuity through repetition and circularity. Her family stories are a litany of sorrowful events, the same first names repeated over generations, and they are represented as providing a meaningful context or pattern for her and the boy's suffering throughout the war years. Maria's family stories, and her perception of life as a continuation of these stories, provide the narrative with an image of continuity and create a strong link between the ideas of continuity and of narrative. Maria's worldview, with its fatalism and superstition, is not imprinted onto the boy in its entirety. This – one might say non-rational or pre-modern - worldview is not treated as wholly positive in the text, and indeed a certain element of narratorial discomfort with the

figure of Maria – possibly of a misogynistic nature – is discernible at several points.<sup>36</sup>

The elements of Maria's code of existence that are imprinted on the boy are her principles of circular or repetitive time, and the continuation and preservation of family and identity through oral narrative, which ensures the continued remembrance of the past and the absent:

(...) [U]nd der Junge lernte, daß die Geschichte rückwärts läuft, daß nur das Vergangene wirklich ist, doch alle Jahrhunderte hindurch gab es nur eine Maria, nur einen Joseph, immer nur eine Maria und einen Joseph, und alle Lukacz' waren wie Maria und Joseph. (JS: 47)

Der Junge lernte, daß es neben den Lebenden auch noch Verstorbene gab und daß die Verstorbenen manchmal mehr zu sagen hatten als die Lebenden, daß beide gleichzeitig existierten, die Menschen, die er sah und die zu ihm sprachen, und die Menschen, die man nicht sah und die nicht sprachen, die man deshalb Verstorbene nannte, die aber anwesend waren wie die Lebenden. (JS: 51-2)

The concept of continuity with which Maria's worldview provides the text is one that can accommodate the representations of destruction and violence that the narrative must include, based as it is on the principles of inevitable suffering, stoic endurance, and remembrance of the dead. Regarding the construction of the boy as a subject through the *tabula rasa* trope, Maria's principles inscribe on the boy a sense of the primacy of oral

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<sup>36</sup> The question of gender representation in Forte's work has not been discussed in existing criticism. Misogynistic discomfort with the figure of Maria is arguably discernible in the emphasis on her corporeality in the bombardment passages, where she smothers her two sons with her body to protect them (JS: 141), and where she becomes an animalistic figure whilst rescuing her sons from collapsing cellars, crawling on all fours "wie eine Wölfin" (JS: 145) and, later, "wie eine Katze" (JS: 224). An element of misogyny could also be attributed to the representation of her as rash, unreflective, and incapable of thinking a decision through: "Sie hatte die Neigung, sich ohne Bedenken in das nächste Unglück zu stürzen, sie überlegte nicht, sie handelte, der Junge mußte oft für sie eine Situation durchdenken, sie fragte ihn auch, aber dann tat sie doch wieder das, was ihr gerade in den Sinn kam." (JS: 220)

narrative as constitutive of history, identity and reality, and assert the centrality of remembering the dead and past, ancestral traumas to familial identity. In this sense, the boy is constructed as an inheritor and carrier of memory.

Gustav's worldview is constructed in many regards in binary opposition to Maria's. He values literature, art and science, radicalism, intellectualism, and individualism. Where Maria's family originates from Poland, his family comes originally from Italy. Where Maria values oral narrative, Gustav's family heritage and identity is bound up with a textual object – the old pattern book which gives the first novel in Forte's trilogy its title. If the figure of Maria imprints the primacy of oral narrative on the boy, the figure of Gustav teaches him about text. It is possible to read Gustav and Maria as a binary pair along quite a number of lines of opposition, including male/female, rational/non-rational, West/East, textual/oral, secular/religious, and intellect/instinct. Reading the two figures in this way, it becomes clear that they function as a kind of unit in the construction of the boy's subjectivity, so that the codes from the two sides of his family can be imprinted upon him in a stable and unified, although not homogenous form. The set of values that is thus inscribed onto the boy, helping to construct his subjectivity, is one which privileges language and narrative as medium of continuity and emphasises family as a source of identity. As well as functioning as a binary opposite to the figure of Maria, Gustav serves to introduce a positive cultural code to the narrative, which is imprinted on the boy along with his mother's stories and his community's values. This cultural code encompasses literature, visual art and music, and although introduced through the figure of Gustav, it also exists in the narrative independently of this figure, and is dealt with separately below.

### **Culture: the construction of a child through the construction of a canon**

Literature, music and (to a slightly lesser extent) visual art play a significant role in the construction of the boy's subjectivity as unmarked by National Socialism. The boy is a voracious reader and, although his reading is portrayed as haphazard, dependent on what books and fragments of books can be found for him (JS: 214), a survey of the titles he reads suggests an ideological schema underlying the texts that are referenced in this way. The texts read by the boy that are named or quoted in the novel are: Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyers Abenteuer*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jaroslav Hašek's *Schwejk*, Gogol's *Tote Seelen*, James Fenimore Cooper's *Lederstrumpf* (a section from *The Pioneers* is also quoted in German), Cervantes's *Don Quichotte* and Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>37</sup> This list shows that there is a bias towards eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, male authors, adults' rather than children's literature,<sup>38</sup> satire and adventure. Above all it reveals a pronounced leaning towards translated texts rather than texts originally written in German. We will return to this aspect of Forte's cultural canon shortly. While the boy's reading is dominated by eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, his engagement with music and visual art is dominated by the twentieth century, that is by jazz and expressionism respectively. The musicians he is described throughout the text as listening to are: Louis Armstrong, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Lionel Hampton and Bessie Smith. He does not, in fact, deliberately listen to any music that is not American jazz or blues, even though the novel does make reference

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<sup>37</sup> The titles are given here in their German translations, exactly as they appear in Forte's text. Cooper's *The Pioneers* is not named in the text, which is why its title appears here in English.

<sup>38</sup> This is, of course, a highly problematic distinction, and several of the texts referenced by Forte are sometimes regarded as children's literature, or have adapted for a child readership, although they were not originally published with child readers in mind (e.g. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Don Quixote*)

to the classical music played on German national radio and encouraged by the National Socialist State (JS: 85, 233, for example). The only visual artist that is named in the text is Paul Klee, whom the boy also admires – his exposure to expressionist art is thanks to Gustav, who visits the ‘entartete Kunst’ exhibition and hides works of expressionist and modernist art for their painters (JS: 111-2). The art and music admired by the boy are clearly antithetical to National Socialist cultural policy.

This selection of literature, music and art forms a cultural canon which provides a set of ideological and aesthetic principles. The selection of literary texts evokes a multi-lingual, Northern Hemisphere, pre-modernist literary tradition, and favours texts that provide a critical or satirical view of society as well as providing narratives of adventure. The music and art selected for inclusion, all disapproved of by National Socialist cultural policy, evoke a sense of innovation, modernity, improvisation and experimentalism. What is conspicuously absent from this canon, of course, is any work produced in sympathy with, or (with the exception of Goethe) approved of by the Nazi regime. The books in particular, which form the bulk of Forte’s cultural canon, are themselves represented as double victims, of Nazism and of the Allied bombings. They come to the boy, partially burnt and in fragments,

(...) aus zerstörten Häusern und Kellern und von der Straße, auf die sie durch den Luftdruck der Bomben gepflogen waren, vom Feuer versengt, vom Wasser aufgequollen, mit abgerissenem Einband. (JS: 214)

I have already argued that Forte’s cultural canon is designed so as to appear antithetical to National Socialism. The books, however, are also represented in such a way as to identify them with their original owners, now disappeared. A number of

inscriptions on individual books are described, and the first of these inscriptions has the function of creating an association with the Jewish victims of the regime:

(...) Bücher mit Widmungen, die sich für den Jungen mit dem Buch verbanden, Widmungen von Menschen, die vielleicht schon tot waren, an Menschen, die vielleicht nur noch in ihren Widmungen lebten. *Der lieben Sarah zu Pessach von Moischele, München 1901.* (JS: 214)

By ‘inheriting’ the books from their original, Jewish owners, the boy becomes the keeper, as it were, of these objects which attest to two traumas: that of the Holocaust, and that of the Allied bombings. The books are thus another device by which the narrative works to elide distinctions between the German civilians of the “Quartier” as victims of the Allied bombings, and the victims of Nazi state persecution. Summing up the set of ideological and aesthetic principles provided by Forte’s canon, I would suggest that this canon is constructed as grounded in traditional literary forms whilst embracing modernism and experimentalism in music and art, in such a way as to appear antithetical to National Socialist ideology. Returning to the tabula rasa trope, this constructed canon imprints on the boy a set of positive cultural values unmarked by and antithetical to Nazism, and associates him with the concept of the double victim. It also contributes to the text’s valorisation of narrative and of artistic production in general – a valorisation which is channelled through representations of the boy’s subjectivity in a number of passages that leave no room for ambiguity or misunderstanding, for example:

[Whilst sitting just outside a concentration camp near the Düsseldorf Volksgarten and watching forced labourers at work]...[E]r fühlte, daß das, was er da sah, auf dieser Welt immer geschehen würde, daß es aber auch immer Musik und Bilder und Bücher geben würde, das andere, das er noch nicht so genau bezeichnen

konnte. (...) Er fühlte nur, es würde immer das geben, was er sah, die menschliche Bestialität und Sinnlosigkeit, die mit dem Tod endete, und das andere, und das war immer und ewig und endete nicht mit dem Tod. (JS: 175-6)

Schlug er ein Buch auf, blieb die Zeit stehen, so wie man den Arm des Plattenspielers immer wieder auf Anfang stellen konnte, immer wieder Louis Armstrong hören konnte, immer wieder die Bilder Paul Klees in dem halbverbrannten, aufgequollenen Bildband betrachten konnte, Bilder, in denen keine Zeit war, nur der Augenblick, so schlug er seine Bücher auf, die er immer wieder von Vorne las, für die meisten um ihn herum unbekanntes Land, das sie nicht betreten mochten, für ihn ein sicheres Refugium, dessen Tore ihm immer offenstanden (...). (JS: 215)

In addition to supplying the boy with aesthetic and philosophical values at odds with those of National Socialism, this constructed canon also provides him with quasi-religious imaginative concepts such as peace, eternity, transcendence, and a form of good that outlasts evil in the form of “menschliche Bestialität” (JS: 175). Imprinted with these values and concepts, the boy’s subjectivity is constructed as innocent of and resistant to Nazism on aesthetic and even spiritual levels as well as social ones. While this cultural canon helps to construct the boy as profoundly innocent of National Socialism, its association with the figure of the boy also helps to establish a representation of art and literature as in itself resistant to, and stronger than, Nazi ideology. In this sense, it could be said that a form of cross-legitimation is taking place here. The innocence of the boy is guaranteed by his inscription with a particular cultural and aesthetic code, which I have suggested can be understood as a canon constructed by Forte. However, it is arguably the figure of the innocent child that legitimates this ideal of literature, music and art as

positive and powerful moral forces, capable of providing meaning and continuity in the face of National Socialism. Although it is neither written into the construction of the boy, nor a foundational trope underlying his construction (as the *tabula rasa* trope is), the Romantic conception of the child as closely associated with divinity and with artistic genius is latent in this association of a positive artistic canon with a child figure. Were the reader not to associate the concept of art as redemptive with the figure of the child, the text's assertion that art is redemptive, in the context of National Socialism, would fall apart, given the extent of the discourse about the failure of art and literature as a positive moral force that has taken place since 1945. It is only by saddling this assertion to a trope of childhood innocence – through the figure of the boy - that the text can sustain its barely nuanced valorisation of art and literature.

### **1.5 The boy inscribed: the child's immunity to National Socialism**

So far, I have argued that the figure of the boy is constructed as a subject by means of a *tabula rasa* trope that sees him born in a state of non-subjectivity, growing into subject-hood through a process of being imprinted with codes and values from community, family and culture. I have shown how the narrative is at pains to construct these codes and values as unmarked by and antithetical to National Socialist ideology. Because the boy's subjectivity is imprinted with and formed by these codes and values, he can be represented as passively resistant to National Socialist culture and ideology. This resistance is demonstrated at a number of points in the text where the boy does not understand script and behavioural codes associated with National Socialism.



While staying as refugees in a South German town, the boy and his mother visit a café, where the boy observes the mannerisms of the townspeople. His perception of their behaviour is incomprehending:

Die wirkliche Welt war in dieser Gesellschaft ausgeschlossen und durch eine Scheinwelt ersetzt, deren Sprachregelung der Junge nie begreifen sollte. (JS: 233)

In their enthusiastic support for Hitler and their optimism about the country's position, the Southerners inhabit an unreal world, the grammar of which is inaccessible to the boy, imprinted as he is with the positive codes of his urban, working class, culturally rich upbringing. Where school and the codes and values encountered there feature in the text, they also represent National Socialism-tainted codes that are incomprehensible or insignificant to the boy. The ironic passage on "deutsche Gedichte" (JS: 106) has been discussed above. Later in the text, the boy is confronted for the first time with Sütterlin script in a new school book:

Der Junge bekam neue Schulbücher vom Lehrer, er schlug sie auf und war plötzlich blind. Er saß in der Bank, fror, rührte sich nicht vor Schreck, war erstarrt, der ganze Körper tat ihm weh, er saß da voller Entsetzen, die Welt war ihm plötzlich verschlossen. Konnte er früher, als er stotterte, die Worte nicht hervorbringen, so konnte er die Worte jetzt nicht mehr erkennen, er, der schon vor der Schule viele Bücher gelesen hatte, saß vor einer Schrift, die er noch nie gesehen hatte, Buchstaben, die in einer steilen Auf und Ab wie ein Stacheldrahtverhau aussahen. (...) Der Lehrer schickte ihn wütend nach Hause, und erst Maria erkannte im Vergleich der Schulbücher, woran bisher keiner gedacht hatte: In Süddeutschland schrieb man die lateinische Schrift, in der Stadt schrieb man die deutsche Schrift, Sütterlin genannt. (JS: 247-8)

Here it is the Sütterlin script, whose association with German nationalism predates the advent of National Socialism, but which has a strong association with the Nazi period for contemporary readers, that the boy is unable to read.<sup>39</sup> The likening of the letters to barbed wire further strengthens the negative connotations in this passage, as does the boy's traumatized response to his encounter with the script. The reference to his stuttering connects this incident to the boy's temporary loss of speech after a particularly traumatic experience of bombardment (JS: 144). At several points in the novel, his faculties of speech, reading and memory are represented as threatened, by an Allied bombardment, a script associated with National Socialism, and a spell in a Nazi children's reformatory respectively (JS: 144, 248, 267). The boy's subjectivity is constructed as not simply resistant to National Socialist codes, but also vulnerable to the violence of these codes, and equally vulnerable to the violent experience of bombardment. The double victim concept is thus present again in the representation of the boy's subjectivity as vulnerable.

## 1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has used the concept of childness in order to carry out a narratological analysis of Forte's novel which focuses on issues of exculpation, legitimation and innocence. It has interrogated the means by which the child protagonist of *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* is constructed as untainted by and resistant to

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<sup>39</sup> Walser thematises Sütterlin and latin script in a related manner in *Ein springender Brunnen*, where Johann instinctively favours the latter over the former (SB: 56). For a comprehensive and fascinating account of the political, educational and ideological contexts of Sütterlin and other 'German' scripts, see Gerald Newton, 'Deutsche Schrift: The Demise and Rise of German Black Letter', *German Life and Letters*, 56/2 (April 2003), 183-211.

National Socialist ideology. Fundamental to this is a Lockean *tabula rasa* trope of childhood, which underlies the construction of the boy as a subject. By its nature, the *tabula rasa* trope implies a strong, causal link between the development of a child's subjectivity and the adults who educate the child. In Forte's novel, the source of the boy's innocence is the codes and values imprinted on him by his family and community, and by a literary and artistic canon devised to appear antithetical to the cultural values of National Socialism. The device of childhood innocence is thus linked back to the adult community of "das Quartier" and to the world of books, music and art.

A 'slippage' of forms of innocence can thus be identified in this text. What the reader may well perceive (as Braese does) to be the inherent innocence of childhood is in fact acquired innocence, imprinted on the boy by the adults around him (Braese 2002: 17). This slippage creates space for an ambiguity that is necessary for the narrative to function. The innocence of the child can be reflected back onto community and culture, while the goodness of the community and the cultural canon is written onto the child. The result is a circularity whose function is to dissuade the reader from reading sceptically, and which depends on two separate, interlocking notions of childhood: the child as inherently innocent and good (a post-Rousseauian and Romantic conception), and the child as *tabula rasa*, "white paper" inscribed by adult educators.

Where the figure of the boy is utilized as a markedly child-like, restricted and privileged focalizer, it was found that the boy's limited knowledge and field of vision (themselves attributes that are compatible with the *tabula rasa* trope) are instrumental in portraying the urban population of Düsseldorf, and particularly the population of the "Quartier" as unconnected to, and not complicit with National Socialism. Forte's

engagement with the pogrom depends narratologically on the restricted vision of the child focalizer, while its acceptability to contemporary readers depends on readerly willingness to accept as truth what is delivered through this focalizer – a willingness generated by post-Rousseauian and Romantic associations of childhood with truth and immediacy. Childness is thus a binding narratological element of Forte’s novel, regulating reader response and facilitating the representation of National Socialism as an evil and incomprehensible force, which is not embodied by any subject that “mit im Keller zu sitzen schein[t]” (Braese 2002: 17). The construction of the boy as a passive tabula rasa, together with the latent presence in the narrative of a trope of childhood as a state of inherent moral goodness and truth, are instrumental in the text’s valorisation of the “Quartier’s” working class community and the boy’s family, and in the construction of a literary and artistic canon that allows Forte to resurrect the trope of art and literature as morally and spiritually redemptive.

In many ways, the next text to be discussed, Martin Walser’s *Ein springender Brunnen*, could be understood as diametrically opposed to *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*. Forte’s novel presents us with an “epic” narrative describing urban working class wartime experience with a clear sympathetic leaning towards left wing radicalism (Cosgrove 2009: 171). *Ein springender Brunnen*’s narrative structure is somewhat more fragmented, as I will show. Its setting is rural Southern Germany and its author’s publicly articulated political and ideological affiliations lean, at least from the late 1980s, to the right. Yet, as I shall argue, the texts share more than may be apparent at first sight, and childness performs similar narrative functions in the exculpation of each author’s

biographical 'Heimat' and rehabilitation of a cultural canon in the wake of National Socialism.

## **2. Childness and the politics of memory: Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen***

### **2.1 Introduction**

Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998) is an autobiographically inflected novel of German National Socialist childhood and adolescence set in the rural south. Here, I examine the construction of its protagonist, Johann, as a focalizer and fictional subject. I continue to focus on the manner in which focalization and narration can evoke or elide the structures of agency and responsibility within narrative. Again, I explore the narratological impact of childness in this regard, considering not only the defamiliarising potential of a child focalizer, but also the possibility that it might operate as a kind of "Moralkeule" – to borrow Walser's provocative phrase – in the service of a rhetoric of persuasion that seeks to promote an exculpatory agenda (Walser 1999: 13). I identify a complex and sophisticated narrative strategy at work in the construction of Johann in the first section of the novel ('Der Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei', SB: 9-117), which sees positive and negative tropes of childhood juxtaposed in a manner which gives rise to ambivalence and ambiguity. I explore how this strategy and the configuration of Johann change after the key 'Wunder von Wasserburg' episode (SB: 243-63), in which the figure of Johann appears to be split or doubled, existing in two places at once.

*Ein springender Brunnen* has engendered considerably more debate, and indeed censure, than Forte's novel of wartime childhood, and has been accused of carrying out a blatantly exculpatory project. Sigrid Weigel singles out Walser's novel as an example of the "Begehren nach dem Blick eines unschuldigen Kindes" of the "heimliche erste Generation," while Taberner suggests that it depicts "the intrusion of Nazism into a provincial setting intuitively hostile to it." (Taberner 2006: 173; Weigel 1999: 170) The high degree of critical interrogation, scepticism and censure that the novel has attracted arguably owes as much to Walser's profile as a public intellectual, and particularly to the controversy ensuing from his acceptance speech for the 1998 'Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels', as it does to the text itself.<sup>40</sup> There is, then, a large body of criticism pertaining to *Ein springender Brunnen* already in place, much of it acutely conscious of the text's political and ideological contexts and dimensions, and much of it in the form of very brief discussions within the context of a more general critical scope. Here, I focus on those studies which carry out more concerted analysis of the novel, and which have been of most significance to my own approach. Because a relatively large number of sensitive and incisive analyses of the novel in relation to Walser's political philosophy, in particular the 'Friedenspreisrede' and the so-called 'Walser-Bubis debate' which ensued, are already in place, going back over this territory would not constitute a significant contribution to the field in the context of this project.<sup>41</sup> However, although my

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<sup>40</sup> Regarding the 'Friedenspreisrede' and the 'Walser-Bubis debate' see in particular Thomas A. Kovach and Martin Walser, *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity: Texts, Contexts, Commentary* (Rochester; New York: Camden House, 2008), Frank Schirmacher (ed.), *Die Walser-Bubis Debatte. Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> My brief discussion of Walser's political rhetoric in the thesis introduction shows him personifying memory as a child figure, thus rendering it discursively unassailable. An analysis of references to childhood and children throughout the Walser-Bubis debate would potentially cast light on the rhetorical strategies and central tropes of the controversy, and would facilitate an exploration of how childhood tropes are instrumentalized in German discourses of nationalism and conservatism. However, such an undertaking

analysis prioritizes a tight focus on the narrative of *Ein springender Brunnen*, it by no means subscribes to Walser's own valorization of the aesthetic, as identified by Taberner (2000). Nor is it my wish to lose sight of the ideological and political cloth from which this literary text is cut.

Existing criticism can be drawn roughly into two camps, the first of which focuses on the relationship between the novel, the 'Friedenspreisrede' and the wider context of Walser's relationship with the so-called 'New Right' in Germany (Eigler 2001; Hofmann 2003; Niven 2001; Rohloff 1999; Schödel 2002; Taberner 2000, 2001, 2006; van der Will 2004). In his detailed and persuasive article, for example, Stuart Taberner presents a strong argument for reading *Ein springender Brunnen* as a narrative tailored to fit with the ideological and philosophical agenda of the 'New Right' (2000). Taberner argues that the novel privileges the aesthetic and the transcendent over what he terms the "immanent", by which he means the material and physical conditions of society, politics, economics and even sexuality (Taberner 2000: 126), and that it valorises a homogeneous, xenophobic vision of community. The article presents a clear and persuasive analysis of the narratological balancing act performed within *Ein springender Brunnen*, as the dual goals of articulating a conservative political agenda and distancing this agenda from the ideological tenets and the historical burden of National Socialism are pursued. Taberner highlights the strategies of exculpation, rehabilitation and relativisation employed by Walser in the production of this narrative.

Central to Taberner's argument that the novel is programmatic of Walser's political philosophy is his contention that the narrative establishes a congruence between

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would require a significant shift in emphasis from literary analysis to rhetorical, political, cultural and media analysis. This would, I feel, risk blurring the focus and reducing the impact of the current project.

protagonist, narrator and author, so that Johann's aesthetics and morality are directly representative of Walser's politics.<sup>42</sup> Although this certainly is a persuasive view which serves, one might suggest, a critical agenda which seems in this case to be itself highly politicized, it is not an approach that I utilise in my analysis. *Ein springender Brunnen* does not offer its reader any "autobiographical pact." (Lejeune 1975) If there are occasional, vague indications of biographical continuity between the narrating agent and the figure of Johann, there are no explicit indications of identity between this narrator and Martin Walser. Although it is quite possible to assume congruence between the three agents of author, narrator and protagonist, it is equally feasible in this case not to do so, and furthermore the refusal of this assumption facilitates more precise narratological analysis. I would argue that it is therefore not only valid but necessary to resist immediate identification of an autobiographical congruence between author, protagonist and narrator if we are to cast light on the text's narratological politics and the roles played by childness in their production.

Another strand of criticism limits the focus of analysis more strictly to the narrative itself, arguing for viewing it, a literary text, as separate from Walser's non-literary rhetoric of the public and political arenas (Besslich 2006; Preusser 2004; Takeda

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<sup>42</sup> This tendency to assume congruence between author, narrator and protagonist can also be observed in Michael Hofmann, 'Martin Walser und die deutsche Vergangenheit', *Germanistische Mitteilungen*, 58 (2003), 49-65, Andrea Krauß, 'Dialog und Wörterbaum. Geschichtskonstruktionen in Ruth Klügers *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend* und Martin Walsers *Ein springender Brunnen*', in Barbara Besslich, Katharina Grätz, and Olaf Hildebrand (eds.), *Wende des Erinnerns? Geschichtskonstruktionen in der deutschen Literatur nach 1989* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006), 69-85, Stuart Taberner, "Deutsche Geschichte darf auch einmal gutgehen': Martin Walser, Auschwitz and the 'German Question' from *Ehen in Phillipsburg* to *Ein springender Brunnen*', in Helmut Schmitz (ed.), *German Culture and the Uncomfortable Past: Representations of National Socialism in Contemporary Germanic Literature* (Aldershot; Burlington, U.S.; Singapore; Sydney: Ashgate, 2001), 45-64, Zehfuss, *The Wounds of Memory. The Politics of War in Germany*.



2002). In contrast to Taberner, Arata Takeda (2002) argues against reading *Ein springender Brunnen* in the light of the 'Friedenspreisrede', and carries out a detailed analysis of the novel's narrative structure, casting light on some significant contradictions and problems concerning the text's construction and performance of memory. Given the importance of the questions Takeda raises about the text, his conclusions are remarkably sympathetic to Walser, as Michael Hofmann points out (Hofmann 2003). Takeda shows that, contrary to the images of narrative, language and memory as uncontainable and uncontrollable that the text puts forward, chiefly through the metaphor of the *springender Brunnen*, the narrative itself is governed by a strategy of selective representation whereby painful or unpleasant memories and incidents are excluded from the narrative present. This observation clearly indicates that *Ein springender Brunnen* merits, and even requires, a style of close textual analysis that is not dominated by comparative reference to Walser's political rhetoric and philosophy, yet that does not have the aim of "freeing" the novel from its wider context, as Takeda seeks to do. This exclusion of experiences of suffering from the narrative also indicates a point of significant contrast with Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*. As Zehfuss points out, Walser's protagonist has no direct experience of civilian bombings and doesn't see active combat (Zehfuss 2007: 148). In this sense, Walser could thus, in theory, be accused of evading the representation of German wartime suffering, the horrors of combat and, as Zehfuss suggests, Wehrmacht atrocities in addition to his avoidance of the Holocaust. The text could thus be seen as inviting its readers to participate in a pathologically rose-tinted, nostalgic vision of the Third Reich. On the other hand, these exclusions could be read as narrative gaps which demand that the reader bring his or her own historical knowledge to bear on

the text; this is, after all, a frequent function of the child's perspective in literature about the Third Reich, as Pinfold has shown (Pinfold 2001). As I will argue, the precise manner in which the reader is positioned in relation to the focalizing perspective of Johann in fact varies dramatically over the course of the text.

A further dividing line in the body of criticism of *Ein springender Brunnen* could be drawn between those critiques which see Walser's text as limiting the interpretive possibilities that might be available to the reader (Hofmann 2003; Krauß 2006; Niven 2001; Schödel 2002; Taberner 2000), in order to bring home an underlying ideological agenda, and those which call attention to instances of irony and reflexivity in the narrative (Besslich 2006; Preusser 2004; Takeda 2002), which would appear to give the reader some interpretive flexibility and freedom. In her comparison of the narrative strategies employed in *Ein springender Brunnen* and Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (1992), Andrea Krauß identifies instances of narrative irony and reflexivity in the text, which, she argues, could potentially create space for various interpretive possibilities, were it not for the programmatic 'Vergangenheit als Gegenwart' passages which prescribe how the reader is to interpret the text (Krauß 2006).<sup>43</sup> Krauß also highlights the narrative's continuous employment of established literary topoi and forms – particularly those of the Bildungsroman – as a further method by which reader response is prescribed by the text (Krauß 2006: 83-4). She describes "Strukturelemente" which

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<sup>43</sup> Comparative readings of *Weiter leben* and *Ein springender Brunnen* have proved relatively popular. See also Michael Hofmann, 'Epik nach Auschwitz im Gedächtnisraum ohne Auschwitz. Martin Walsers Erinnerungspoetik in *Ein springender Brunnen* im Kontext von Uwe Johnsons *Jahrestage* und Ruth Klügers *Weiter leben*', in Stuart Parkes and Fritz Wefelmeyer (eds.), *Seelenarbeit an Deutschland. Martin Walser in Perspective* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2004), 323-42, Helmut J. Schneider, 'Reflexion oder Evokation. Erinnerungskonstruktionen in Ruth Klügers *Weiter leben* und Martin Walsers *Ein springender Brunnen*', in Alo Allkemper and Norbert Otto Eke (eds.), *Das Gedächtnis der Literatur. Konstitutionsformen des Vergangenen in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006).

“allgemein bekannte, ja habitualisierte Elementarbausteine der literarischen Tradition aufgreifen und damit ein gleichsam literarisches Museum konventionalisierter Darstellungsmuster errichten.” (Krauß 2006: 79) As the present analysis will show, Walser’s use of ‘topische’ elements in the narrative of *Ein springender Brunnen* is more complex than Krauß suggests, particularly regarding tropes of childhood, playing not only on the “Habitualität” but also the “Potentialität” or semantic flexibility of the topoi it incorporates (Bornscheuer 1976). However, Krauß’s focus on the role of the reader, the construction of the text’s protagonist, and the presence of literary topoi in the narrative indicates that an analysis using the conceptual tool of childness could facilitate a deeper and more nuanced exploration of these narratological features.

## 2.2 Exculpatory agendas?

Despite the accusations of exculpation and denial that it has attracted, in some regards *Ein springender Brunnen* represents a more nuanced picture of National Socialism-infused everyday life than does *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, which, as we have seen, seeks to banish National Socialism to beyond the margins of its central community. Walser’s portrayal of the small, south German community of Wasserburg shows National Socialism as intimately knitted into everyday life. Johann’s mother becomes a party member (SB: 91), his best friend is named Adolf, and the neighbour who plays Knecht Ruprecht in the St Nicholas parade is also an SA volunteer (SB: 103). Yet, in spite of representing village life as saturated by National Socialism, and in spite of constructing the novel’s child protagonist as firmly rooted in and uncritical of this same community, Walser’s representation of Johann seems finally to cast him not only as

largely innocent of and immune to National Socialism, but also as exempted from any post-war moral obligation to acknowledge anti-Semitic persecution.

An exploration of this rhetorical feat reveals, as I will show, that the semantic flexibility of tropes of childhood, and particularly of innocence, is central to the functioning of Walser's narrative. This flexibility allows Walser to portray Johann as by turns receptive of and resistant to National Socialist ideology, a strategy which ultimately facilitates a comedic diminution of the culpability of Wasserburg's natives. In this sense, *Ein springender Brunnen*, like *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, pursues a narrative project of local exculpation, insofar as each author seeks to represent his own, biographical 'Heimat' as bearing diminished or no responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism. Over the course of Walser's novel, however, the narrative shifts from exploiting the tensions and ambiguities present in the notion of childhood innocence to expunging these tensions in order to create a more unitary, unequivocally positive picture of the protagonist's maturation. Like Forte's novel, *Ein springender Brunnen* thus ultimately privileges notions of culture and progress, this time by way of the conventions of the 'Bildungsroman', as Johann's absorption of poetry and philosophy helps him achieve a state of manhood and intellectual autonomy, and thus transcend his ideologically compromised, wartime childhood (Krauß 2006). Although the two authors would thus appear to be diametrically opposed on a number of axes, not least urban/rural and left wing/right wing, I would argue that their texts of National Socialist childhood share some central impulses in their constructions of an 'innocent' German past and a model of future progress. Furthermore, as I go on to argue in my examination of Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde*, this yearning for innocence in relation to the Nazi past is by no

means the sole property of those authors whose own childhoods took place between 1933 and 1945.

That is not to underplay the significant narratological and structural differences between *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* and *Ein springender Brunnen*. In this regard, Walser's text might be said to be more observant of the literary and stylistic 'norms' of writing the wartime past than is Forte's.<sup>44</sup> The central narrative, of Johann's childhood and adolescence, is broken up by three short interchapters, each entitled 'Vergangenheit als Gegenwart,' in which questions of memory are problematised to some extent, and a degree of textual self-reflexivity can be observed. In this sense, the text would appear to be structured so as to call attention to its own gaps and limitations in a manner which seems not to take place in Forte's narrative. The precise nature of the relationship between these interchapters and the main narrative remains a matter of contention, though. Some critics have assumed that the description in the last of these interchapters of the past 'coming to one as if of its own accord' (SB: 283), unmodified by the requirements of the present, is a description of the wider narrative project of *Ein springender Brunnen*.<sup>45</sup> Weigel, for example, takes this as evidence that Walser "die Imagination einer unschuldigen, von keinem nachträglichen Wissen getrüben Erinnerung beschwört." (Weigel 1999: 170) Krauß reads the interchapters as prescriptive and programmatic statements whose function is to steer the reader's interpretation of the text (Krauß 2006). Yet, heavily programmatic and politicized though they clearly are, I would

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<sup>44</sup> See Mary Cosgrove, 'Narrating German Suffering in the Shadow of Holocaust Victimology: W.G. Sebald, Contemporary Trauma Theory and Dieter Forte's Air Raids Epic', in Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger (eds.), *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic* (New York; Suffolk: Camden House, 2009), 162-76.

<sup>45</sup> "Der Vergangenheit eine Anwesenheit wünschen, über die wir nicht Herr sind. Nachträglich sind keine Eroberungen zu machen. Wunschenkens Ziel: Daß sie uns entgegenkäme wie von selbst." (SB: 282-3)

not agree that these interchapters provide the reader with clear instructions on how to understand the rest of the narrative. Rather, at the same time as objecting to ‘public’ memory discourse and privileging ‘private’ memory, they seem to attest to the impossibility of remembering things ‘as they were then’ at all. The full recovery of the past as it was then, without the influence of present knowledge, is marked as “Wunschdenkens Ziel,” a source of impossible yearning, and not as a *fait accompli* (SB: 283). Maja Zehfuss provides the clearest assessment of the conflicted relationship between the ‘Vergangenheit als Gegenwart’ chapters and the narrative of Johann’s childhood and maturation, describing a “performative contradiction” in which Walser “questions the epistemological status of his own memories” but nonetheless, in the main narrative, presents the reader with the illusion that what is told is, in fact, “the past as it was when it was the present.” (Zehfuss 2007: 161-3)

### **2.3 Narratological considerations**

Clearly, matters of perspective are crucial to Walser’s conflicted constructions of memory and the past. Considered in narratological terms, this literary performance of yearning to see the past ‘as it was then,’ rather than as it appears now in one’s memory and in the light of subsequent knowledge, can be understood as a desire for an impossible focalizing position. In contrast to the – at least partial – acknowledgement within the text of *Ein springender Brunnen* of the impossibility of taking up such a position, Walser held up the aesthetic principle of “Perspektivität” as “Urgesetz des Erzählens” in his rebuttal of criticisms that his novel fails to acknowledge the Holocaust (Walser 1999: 12). It might thus be inferred that although Walser acknowledges the impossibility of

remembering things ‘as they really were’, he understands the literary narration (and construction) of the past to be a viable alternative, which can provide us with something approximate to the longed-for view of the past as it was when it was the present. This substitution, as it were, of literary narrative for memory seems to me to be somewhat reliant on an association between childhood and authenticity which allows the literary device of the child’s perspective to smooth over the differences between memory and literary narration.<sup>46</sup> I would thus argue that close analysis of focalization and narration in *Ein springender Brunnen* may cast light on Walser’s stylistic and narratological practices, which may in turn provide us with a new critical perspective on the ideology of his constructions of memory and the past. This approach moves away from a prescriptive discussion of what historical contexts Walser’s text ought or ought not to have engaged with, and focuses instead on the mechanics of what the author posits as an unassailable “Urgesetz.” It seeks to identify the structures of agency and responsibility that Walser’s use of focalization creates, particularly with respect to the child focalizer, Johann.

*Ein springender Brunnen* has an ‘adult’ narrating agent. The figure of Johann never functions as a narrator. In the ‘Vergangenheit als Gegenwart’ interchapters, the focalizing and narrating agents coincide. In other words, we have what Bal terms a “narrator-focalizer,” so that an adult perspective dominates these sections which, as I have discussed, problematise questions of memory in the abstract (Bal 2004: 279). Furthermore, the “narrator-focalizer” becomes progressively more self-referential and

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<sup>46</sup> A similar association is described by Maechler in his study of the Wilkomirski scandal, as I have discussed in the thesis introduction. I would not wish to draw any further parallels between Wilkomirski’s and Walser’s narratives, however. See also Heinz-Peter Preusser, ‘Erinnerung, Fiktion und Geschichte. Über die Transformation des Erlebten ins interkulturelle Gedächtnis: Walser - Wilkomirski - Grass’, *German Life and Letters*, 57/4 (October 2004), 488-503. Preusser uses the Wilkomirski scandal as a point of contrast with *Ein springender Brunnen* in a somewhat politicized article which is sympathetic to Walser.

self-assertive as 'his' discourse becomes more politically programmatic, finally slipping into the first person in the last interchapter (SB: 282). However, in the main bulk of the narrative dealing with Johann's childhood and adolescence, focalization takes place through the figure of Johann. We thus have an adult narrating agent, and a child, then adolescent, focalizing agent. Apart from the "narrator-focalizer," Johann is the only other focalizing agent in the text. This contrasts with Forte's narrative, in which focalization is delegated not just to the figure of the boy but also to several other characters and to an apparently collective subject. Here, then, Walser's use of focalization serves to strongly privilege Johann, creating a decisive narratological separation between him and other characters and figures. Furthermore, apart from the 'Vergangenheit als Gegenwart' interchapters, the framing, adult "narrator-focalizer" rarely interrupts the perspective of Johann, but rather tends to "yield the floor" completely to the child focalizer, so that the reader is presented solely with his point of view (Bal 2004: 277). This is the narratological means by which Walser presents his readers with what appears to be a picture of the past 'as it was then', unaltered by subsequent knowledge. An illuminating point of contrast here is with Christa Wolf's focalization strategy in *Kindheitsmuster*, in which the narrator's perspective constantly interrupts, questions and contextualizes the (recollected) perspective of the child (Wolf 1977). Walser seems to define his narrative project in opposition to such interrogative modes of engagement with memory. Elsewhere, as I discussed in the thesis introduction above, he personifies memory itself as a child-like subject, so that the interrogation of it is cast as a pointless act of brutality (Walser 1997: 897).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Precisely the same rhetorical figure is, in fact, used by Grass, who nonetheless takes up a posture of willingness to 'discipline' the 'child' of memory: "Die Erinnerung liebt das Versteckspiel der Kinder. Sie



It hardly needs to be said that memory, and the figure of Johann, are not actually subjects in a position to “uns [entgegenkommen] wie von selbst” but rhetorical and textual constructs (SB: 283). Closely analysing Johann’s role as a focalizer, it becomes evident that although he is the focalizing figure for most of the novel, the nature and purpose of focalization undergo a number of changes as, at different points in the text, different reader responses and modes of engagement with the narrative appear to be elicited. That is to say that as a focalizer, the figure of Johann is a somewhat discontinuous or disjointed construction. Childness provides Walser with the ideal conceptual material for executing this narratological discontinuity without disrupting entirely the narrative’s veneer of continuity. This is because childness is comprised of an array of disparate and contradictory but interrelated tropes and concepts. Yet the notion of the integrity of childhood is so deeply ingrained in Western culture that an author must take drastic steps in order to prompt an adult reader to mistrust a child figure or focalizer. In the configuration of Johann as a textual subject, Walser’s narrative exploits the potential offered by childness to produce negative and positive connotations from tropes of innocence and naivety.

#### **2.4 The ambiguity of innocence: representing the rise of National Socialism**

The first section of the novel is titled ‘der Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei.’ (SB: 9-117) Here, a much more extended focus on the presence of National Socialism within the fabric of life in Wasserburg is presented than is the case in the novel’s two latter

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verkrücht sich. Zum Schönreden neigt sie und schmückt gerne, oft ohne Not.” “Sobald ich mir den Jungen von einst, der ich als Dreizehnjähriger gewesen bin, herbeizitiere, ihn streng ins Verhör nehme und die Verlockung spüre, ihn zu richten, (...) sehe ich einen mittelgroßen Bengel in kurzen Hosen und Kniestrümpfen, der ständig grimassiert.” Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006) at 8, 37.

sections, where the focus is more exclusively on Johann's consciousness, his developing sexuality and his relationship with his peers. After the opening 'Vergangenheit als Gegenwart' chapter, this first section follows a chronological order, representing events between September 1932 and January 1933, when Johann is about five years old. The section ends on 30<sup>th</sup> January, the day on which Hitler was appointed chancellor. In Johann's consciousness, the most important event of this period seems to be having his photo taken by a traveling photographer and foregoing a new pair of boots to cover the cost of the photographs (SB: 72). However, he also mediates to the reader scenes representing the growth in power and popularity of the Nazi party, the straitened economic circumstances of the times, and the centrality of militarism and patriotism to the local social fabric. In the closing chapters of this section, 'Der Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei' (SB: 89-106) and 'Versammlungen' (SB: 107-17), a number of key social and political developments are focalized through Johann, including his mother's taking membership in the Nazi party and the swearing-in of Hitler as chancellor, as broadcast over the radio. As I will argue, a 'Romantic' privileging of the child's vision hardly seems to be at work in these chapters, with Johann constructed as an incurious and gullible kind of 'innocent,' object as well as vehicle of the narrative's satire.

The 'Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei' chapter opens with a conversation between Johann's mother and Herr Minn, the local party 'Ortsgruppenleiter'. Ostensibly visiting to pay for a delivery of fuel that he received, Herr Minn is really there to arrange for Augusta to take out party membership. The first part of the conversation deals with the transaction, and Johann has a part to play as he helped to deliver the fuel. Herr Minn is

impressed by the boy's apparent ability to calculate the cost of fuel and delivery, which is in fact his ability to respond to secret signals from his mother:

Die Mutter schob das Pauspapier in den Rechnungsbuch und fragte zu Johann hin: Wieviel? Neunzweiundfünfzig, sagte Johann. Herr Minn staunte, weil er nicht wußte, daß die Mutter, wenn sie Johann begegnete, gern mit den Fingern der linken Hand eine Zahl signalisierte, die Johann dann mit der Zahl, die die Mutter mit den Fingern der anderen Hand ausdrückte, malnehmen mußte. Sie hatte ihm einmal gesagt: Lernen mußst du's sowieso, warum dann nicht gleich. (SB: 89)

Here the message is that Johann may be able to multiply numbers together when they are fed to him, but does not actually understand the material economics that give meaning to the calculation, despite appearing as though he does. When the conversation turns to political questions, a similar device occurs in the narrative. Herr Minn, assuaging Augusta's anxieties that the party is anti-religious, presents her with a National Socialist Christmas card:

Die schenk ich Ihnen, sagte er. Die Mutter hielt die Karte Johann hin, als sei es wichtiger, daß er sie anschau. Christus am Kreuz, vor ihm einer im Braunhemd mit der Hakenkreuzfahne, ein zweites Braunhemd neben dem hebt die Hand zum Schwur. Kannst du lesen, was da steht, sagte die Mutter. Johann buchstabierte und sagte dann den ganzen Satz: Herr, segne unsern Kampf. Adolf Hitler. Der Herr Minn staunte wieder, die Mutter legte eine Hand auf Johanns Kopf. Geht noch nicht in die Schule, sagte Herr Minn, und kann schon einen Satz des Führers lesen. Bravo. (...) Johann war froh, daß er so wirkte, wie er gern gewesen wäre. (SB: 90-1)

The motif of "Buchstabieren" which appears here is a central aspect of Johann's configuration in this section of the novel. Its connotations are usually positive,

demonstrating Johann's fascination with words and language, and most importantly functioning as the skill which makes possible Johann's linguistic inheritance from his father in the shape of the "Wörterbaum" device. Here, however, the negative potential of the motif is exploited. Johann may be able to spell words, but that doesn't mean he understands them or their wider implications. When the motif is introduced in the opening pages of the text, Johann asks his father what the words he is spelling out mean, and is merely told "Tu's in den Wörterbaum. Zum Anschauen." (SB: 10) Instances in which Johann makes a direct enquiry reflecting curiosity about the world and about language are rare in this narrative. It is quite possible to interpret the 'Wörterbaum' motif as one which represents the failure of Johann's powers of inquiry, and his father's encouragement in him of a fundamentally incurious, exoticist, acquisitory attitude to language and meaning. Given that the father frequently comes across as an ineffectual, effeminate and comic figure in the narrative (for example, in the narrative's contrasting of him with Johann's grandfather (SB: 53, 68), or in the description of his ridiculous money-making plans, including the purchase of a "Magnetisierapparat" (SB: 57)), it seems plausible that Johann's linguistic inheritance from him is cast at least initially in a negative light, despite the positive value the "Wörterbaum" seems to take on later in the novel where the maturation of Johann's poetic sensibility and skill is described.

Only by ignoring the narrative prompts that encourage the reader to see Johann as dwarfed and manipulated by wider social, political and economic contexts would it be possible to read these passages as positive assertions of Johann's innocence or of his poetic sensibility. However, even in this construction of the child as self-centred, incurious and eager to gain the praise of adults, Walser inserts a hint of positive potential.

The ironic statement in the passage from Chapter 6 that “Johann war froh, daß er so wirkte, wie er gern gewesen wäre,” (SB: 91) which highlights the vanity of the protagonist’s sense of achievement, also indicates that he is not as he wishes to be – that is, not possessed of understanding and agency in the social world of which he is a part. Here, perhaps, a subtle invitation to the implied reader may be discerned to read Johann’s lack of agency as a positive attribute in the context of National Socialism’s rising power. This representation is a far cry from the flashes of instinctive moral insight and inner freedom that Pinfold identifies in Wolf’s construction of the child Nelly (Pinfold 2001: 129-32). It could indeed be read as a portrayal of the process of ideological indoctrination, something at which Walser hints in the first third of the novel, as I discuss below. However, it also feeds into two key aspects of *Ein springender Brunnen*’s wider narrative project. As I will show, the construction of Johann as a misguided figure of diminished agency is later transposed onto the Wasserburg community as a whole in the service of Walser’s project of local exculpation. Additionally, the representation of the child’s social initiation as incomplete or only a matter of appearances feeds into the portrayal of Johann in the latter sections of the novel as set apart from and not subject to social influence.

A more ‘Romantic’ construction of Johann as party to privileged moral vision and insight does seem to appear in the second half of the chapter ‘Der Eintritt der Mutter in die Partei.’ However, the negative possibilities carried by the child tropes that are involved in the construction of Johann as fictional subject and as focalizer remain in play, so that the Johann that closes the chapter is an ambiguous, polyvalent figure. Here, the Christmas Eve gift-giving later in the same evening as Herr Minn’s visit is depicted. As

well as Johann's immediate family, the staff of the hotel are present (Niklaus, Elsa, Mina, and 'die Prinzessin') and four local regulars who are still in the hotel bar (Herr Seehahn, who constantly mutters a repetitive litany of obscene and violent phrases, Dulle, Schulze Max and Hanse Luis). These figures are all constructed as eccentric and rather more down-and-out than Herr Minn. Towards the close of the scene, Johann's internal thoughts and feelings about these figures dominate the narrative increasingly.<sup>48</sup> It is clear from Johann's mental observations about the other people in the room that he is drawn to non-conformity. This would seem to cast him in a more positive light than the preceding scene with Herr Minn. If in that scene he was presented as incurious about the social and political machinations in which he, too, played a role, now he is constructed as having a natural attraction to the eccentrics, down-and-outs and alcoholics who seem to exist on the margins of those machinations.<sup>49</sup> This plays on the trope of the child as social outsider and the notion of childhood innocence as a kind of intuitive and inherent moral goodness. His observation of Herr Seehahn clearly implies that he pays more careful attention to this figure than the adults do, drawing on the child trope of keenness of observation and unclouded vision, which seems directly to contradict the passive, unobservant qualities attributed to him elsewhere in the text:

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<sup>48</sup> In Bal's terminology, the focalized becomes increasingly "imperceptible", meaning that its contents pertain to psychological and emotional information rather than information that is "perceptible" by sight, hearing, smell, touch or taste. Mieke Bal, 'Narration and Focalization', in Mieke Bal (ed.), *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Vol. 1; London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 263-96 at 278.

<sup>49</sup> As we will see, Sebald employs a very similar strategy in 'Il ritorno in patria', where the narrator's childhood self is drawn to the village's outsider figures, Romana and Schlag. W.G. Sebald, *Schwindel. Gefühle* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1994b).

Wahrscheinlich wußte Johann mehr von diesem Text als die anderen. Die dachten vielleicht, das sei einfach unverständliches Zeug. Johann fand jedes Seehahn-Wort, das er aufschnappen konnte, interessant. (SB: 102)<sup>50</sup>

In the case of his thoughts about Dulle his perspective could even be interpreted as containing a criticism of the church and a message about the ‘true spirit of Christmas’: “Johann hatte das Gefühl, daß Dulle, den noch nie jemand in der Kirche gesehen hatte, gut zum Weihnachtsbaum paßte. Eigentlich am besten von allem.” (SB: 100) So far, the discussion would seem to indicate that, at least in this chapter, the narrative is relying on a strong distinction between paid-up party members such as the well-to-do, Hochdeutsch-speaking Herr Minn who is not from the parish and is Protestant, and down-and-outs and eccentrics who live in the village, speak various forms of dialect and are either Catholic or not religious. Johann’s configuration as a focalizer seems to rely on the negative potential of the child tropes of naivety (as gullibility) and limitation where Herr Minn is being represented, and on positive versions of the tropes of naivety and instinctive moral vision where the villagers are being represented. If this were the case, it would imply that childness was instrumental in an exculpatory narrative strategy constructing the Nazis as morally bad, bourgeois, Protestant out-of-towners in contrast with the morally good, down-at-heel, eccentric villagers. However, the figure of Schulze Max as focalized through Johann prevents this binary structure, which is certainly latent in the narrative, from being fully realized.

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<sup>50</sup> Regarding Seehahn’s language, see Maurizio Pirro, ‘Beschimpfungsausbrüche als Ausdruck der ambivalenten Beziehung zur Macht in einigen Romanen Martin Walsers’, in Stuart Parkes and Fritz Wefelmeyer (eds.), *Seelenarbeit an Deutschland. Martin Walser in Perspective* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2004), 207-24.

Schulze Max is a down-an-out alcoholic who, like Dulle, works as a 'Fischerknecht', but who used to be a circus performer and still gives occasional displays of his talents in exchange for beer. He would thus appear to be strongly associated with the marginal and the eccentric. However, Schulze Max is also a member of the local SA division, and is a frightening presence in Johann's life because he plays the role of Knecht Ruprecht in the traditional celebrations on St Nicholas's Day:

Der Schulze Max war ja selber aufgetreten. Sowohl als Entfesselungskünstler wie auch als Trompeter. Cheftrompeter beim Zirkus Sarrasani! Und ein-, zweimal im Jahr gab er, wenn einer mehr als zehn Bier im voraus zahlte, Kostproben seiner Kunst. Er sprengte eine Kette und zerbiß einen Strick. Seine Haare waren immer wie auf seinen blanken Kopf gemalt, der Scheitel ein Strich wie mit dem Lineal. Sein Gesicht, ein einziges Knitter- und Runzelmeer. Am Kriegerdenkmal hatte Johann gedacht, daß die SA-Mütze auf dieses Knitter- und Runzelmeer nicht passe. (SB: 102-3)

Sobald die Haustür aufgerissen wurde und beide, der gütige Nikolaus und der grausam grimmige Ruprecht, im Hausgang die Flügeltür durchschritten, sobald beide im breiten Hausgang standen, steigerten sich Schellen und Kettengerassel ins Ungeheure. Man konnte sich nur noch an Mutters Schürze klammern, den Kopf an sie pressen, gleich würden sie die Küchentür aufreißen, dann ... [*sic*] Obwohl er inzwischen also von Josef erfahren hatte, daß der furchtbare Kettenraßler und Stockschwinger mit dem entsetzlichen Bart der Schulze Max sei – und die Kette kennst du von seinen Befreiungskunststücken in der Wirtstube –, Angst hatte er immer noch. Gegen diese furchtbaren Geräusche gab es wohl keinen Schutz. (SB: 103)

Johann's observation that Schulze Max's SA cap doesn't suit his wrinkled face would seem to suggest that the child focalizer is again functioning here in accordance



with positive tropes of childhood innocence and intuitive morality. Furthermore, Johann's fear of Knecht Ruprecht, and his uncertainty about Schulze Max's doubling up as this frightening figure, suggests that the child focalizer is being used to point to the place of intimidation and duplicity in the fabric of village tradition. The description of Johann's fear of Knecht Ruprecht is in fact a very rare occurrence in this text, insofar as it shows focalization being engineered in such a way as to emphasise Johann's smallness, with his face hidden in his mother's apron. In this sense, the reader is directed to empathize or identify with the fear he feels in this passage. Thus far, the focalization of Schulze Max through Johann seems to rely on tropes of the child's intuitive vision, positive naivety, smallness and vulnerability, as he responds to a figure who seems to play a number of different social roles, some of them frightening, and whose social identity is therefore hard to grasp. However, this utilization of positive childhood tropes is accompanied by a more negative underlying message.

When Johann sings a Christmas carol at Schulze Max's request, this is cast as an act of defiance of Knecht Ruprecht and a way of conquering his fear. The description of the singing seems to emphasise the purity and high pitch of the boy soprano voice, which rises above the company. However, the idealistic vision of childhood innocence and purity transcending and conquering a duplicitous and threatening adult world, which seems to be contained in this scene, is drastically undercut and undermined by the construction of Johann's stream of thought. First of all, the description of his voice as pure and transcendent comes from Johann's own consciousness:

Johann sang für den Schulze Max. *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* war Johanns liebstes Weihnachtslied. Da hörte er seine eigene Stimme nicht nur, er sah sie. Etwas Silbernes, etwas hoch droben gleißend Fließendes. So hoch wie seine

Stimme würde er nie kommen. So leicht würde er nie sein. Seine Stimme schwebte über Josefs sich immer anpassender Begleitstimme und über dem alles ausschmückenden Klavier. Danach sagte der Schulze Max: Johann, wenn du kein Sänger wirst, bist du selber schuld. Johann liefen mehrere Schauer nach einander den Rücken hinab. (SB: 102)

If, as I have suggested, the description of the child's singing voice is strongly associated with tropes of innocence and purity, the fact that Johann himself is the one to give his voice this description completely undermines a number of the positive child tropes that seem to have been at work in this scene. Firstly, Johann's awareness of his own innocence both over-accentuates and undercuts the notion of this innocence, and by the same token undermines the trope of the child's intuitive moral vision that has also been employed in the gift-giving scene.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, Johann also seems to be fully aware of the separation between himself and his innocent, pure, child's voice, when he notes that he will never attain the height or the lightness of his voice. He is both aware of the signs of his own innocence, and aware that he is not innocent. It is in fact not the act of singing in itself, but the praise that he gains from Schulze Max for singing that helps Johann to conquer his fear. Despite his own assertion that the singing is an act of defiance ("Jetzt sang Johann also gegen Knecht Ruprecht an", 103), it is clearly more an act of currying praise.

Although Johann's autonomy is increasingly emphasised and valorised towards the end of the novel, in this early section the tropes of childhood innocence, purity, artistic imagination and instinctive moral vision are invoked only to be jettisoned, and we

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<sup>51</sup> As we will see, the image of the child's self-conscious enjoyment of its own 'innocence' also figures in Beyer's *Flughunde* in connection with Karnau's fascination with the Goebbels children. Marcel Beyer, *Flughunde* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995).

are left with a child figure who is vain and self-absorbed, and whose dependence on adults' praise and affirmation totally undermines the notion of his independence from or immunity to National Socialism's social and political machinations. Indeed, in the closing paragraph of this chapter, we see Johann parroting the word 'Kampf' from Herr Minn's Christmas postcard in order to comfort himself and re-inflate his self-confidence after burning a hole in the sleeve of his new Christmas jumper. The effect of this is, of course, to comically diminish and satirize, at Johann's expense, a notorious keyword of National Socialist rhetoric by locating it in a five year-old's fit of self-pitying pique and sibling rivalry. The reader is not prompted to sympathise with Johann here, or to invest in his vision, but rather to view him as what Pinfold describes as a "fallen child," interpellated and duped by National Socialist ideology (Pinfold 2001: 33-90):

Ein Pullover wie aus hellstem Silber, gemustert mit vorstehenden Blaustreifen, die auf der Brust Ringe bilden. Und in diesen Blaustreifen glitzert ja auch noch etwas durch, eine Art Fastsilber. Und jetzt dieses Loch. Er konnte gar nicht richtig zuhören, als Josef erzählte, daß sein Klavierlehrer Jutz aus Kreßbonn heute in der Kirche orgle. (...) Johann dachte: Du hast leicht reden, du hast kein Loch im Ärmel. (...)

Daß die dunklen Gestalten, die sich aus den Häusern lösten und mit dorfabwärts zogen und nichts sagten, und daß der Schnee sowieso jeden Schritt und Laut schluckte, war ihm recht. Die sollten sich nur alle einreihen in seinen Mitternachtszug. Er war der Silberne Ritter. Zog im dichten Schneegestöber durch die finstere Nacht. Das Loch im Ärmel bewies, daß alles ein Kampf war. (SB: 106)

Johann's openness to National Socialist culture and aesthetics is represented in still more explicit terms in the closing chapter of this first section of the novel, 'Versammlungen' (SB: 107-17). This chapter is constructed around two competing

speeches: that of Johann's father, who is holding the founding meeting of a theosophical society, and that of Joseph Goebbels, whose speech on the swearing in of Hitler as chancellor is being broadcast over the radio.<sup>52</sup> The father's speech is given in its entirety, in indirect speech, focalized through Johann but without any indications of Johann's interest in or response to the occasion. The reception of Goebbels's speech is also focalized through Johann, but in this case a great deal of narrative emphasis is given to Johann's response to the speech as well as to the behaviour of the rest of the crowd who have gathered to listen. The speech itself is thus reported fairly cursorily in a paragraph sandwiched between detailed descriptions of Johann's response and the responses of the other people in the hotel bar. It is Johann's individual response that I focus on here:

Sobald Dr Goebbels sprach, spürte Johann, daß ihm Schauer über den Rücken hinabließen wie sonst nur in der Kirche, wenn Herr Grübel das *Benediktus* sang. Auch wenn Johann mit Adolf, Ludwig, Paul, Guido, dem einen Helmut und dem anderen bei einer Feuerwehübung zuschaute und Johanns Vater, als Zugführer und Spritzmeister, das Kommando Wasser marsch! gab, rieselten diese Schauer über Johanns Rücken hinab. Der Vater trug, wenn er Wasser marsch! kommandierte, einen wie das reine Gold glänzenden Messinghelm, der oben auf einer kleinen Messingssäule noch eine gleißende Kugel trug. Als Mina gesagt hatte, Johann stehe auf dem Bild wie ein Königssohn, war ihm sofort der Vater mit dem goldenen Helm und der auf der golden glänzenden Säule golden glänzenden Kugel eingefallen. Kein Feuerwehrhelm außer dem des Vaters hatte diese Kugel. Allerdings mußte Johann diesen Helm, bis er so glänzte, jedesmal mit Sidol putzen und heftig reiben. Aber wenn das Wasser im Schlauch vorwärtsdrängte, den trockenen Schlauch dehnte, zum Rascheln brachte, dann so glatt machte, daß er aussah wie aus Stahl, und dann das Wasser knatternd aus der

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<sup>52</sup> This is the first of two instances discussed in this study of a speech by Goebbels being mediated through a child focalizer, the other involving the figure of Helga Goebbels in Beyer's *Flughunde*. As I will show, however, there are considerable differences in the role played by childness in the two passages.

Mündung schoß, die der Meßmer Tone fest in den Händen hielt, gerichtet auf den Zwiebelturm, der einmal übungshalber bespritzt werden mußte, wenn dann das Wasser auf Zwiebelturm und Kirchendach herabprasselte, dann hörten die Schauer, die Johann den Rücken hinabliefen gar nicht mehr auf. (SB: 112-3)

Johann's feelings about the speech clearly reflect his admiration of public displays of masculine power, as does his earlier desire to see his father marching in military uniform in the 'Fahnenweihe' chapter (SB: 71-2). However, the reader is not invited to share in Johann's transports of delight at this point. Rather, the narrative prompts the reader to respond with affectionate mockery to the child focalizer. The phallic double-entendres with which the passage is laden are inescapable. The comic turn they bring to the passage make it difficult to read Johann's response to the speech as a searing exposure of his seduction into National Socialism. The image of a group of men hosing down the church dome when it is not on fire, complete with official, shiny helmet and the slightly ridiculous order of 'Wasser, marsch!' brings a spirit of harmless bawdiness to the narrative. The reader is invited to laugh at the men, at Johann's rapturous admiration for them, and at the community's rapturous response to Goebbels's speech. This comedic narrative strategy raises the question of whether the representation of the villagers' fascism actually serves to produce a diminished picture of their failings. If the Wasserburg community including Johann are represented as ridiculous and gullible, it is difficult for the reader to view them as fanatical, cruel, or even fully responsible for their own actions. By using child tropes to create a negative image of Johann, the narrative can transfer his childness, as it were, onto the rest of the community, whose moral failure is thus diminished to the status of puerility.

Here a useful connection may be made with Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* ('I Remember') (1973), which narrates the story of a boy growing up in a small town in fascist Italy. According to Bondanella's analysis, although Fellini suggested that the representation of many of the film's characters as comically grotesque and ridiculous constituted a critique of the pathologically immature psychology of Italian fascism, the film's imagery is also highly nostalgic, so that "[w]hile we can see the deleterious effects of the actions of [the] characters, their comic qualities also make us laugh and even forgive them their faults." (2002: 138) If this technique of representation is problematic in a film dealing with Italian fascism, it is far more deeply so in a text engaging with Germany's National Socialist past, and particularly in a text which programmatically avoids acknowledging the perpetration of the Holocaust. Considering the large cast of comically eccentric and physically odd-looking or misshapen people that makes up the population of Wasserburg in the first section of the novel, I would argue that Bondanella's criticism of *Amarcord* is entirely applicable to *Ein springender Brunnen*, and furthermore that childness is instrumental in achieving the effect of comic diminution in Walser's narrative. Johann's response to the speech also reveals a clear link between his perceptions of masculinity, and his experience of aesthetic and physical pleasure. The fact that it is Goebbels's speech that allows these links to emerge suggests that the elements of theatricality and masculine display in fascism can be understood as a formative influence on Johann's aesthetic sensibilities. However, I would argue that the narrative does little to sustain this connection between National Socialist influence and Johann's subjectivity in the later stages of the novel, suggesting that the reader is at some point asked to believe that Johann overcomes or purges himself of this influence. This

turning point is, I would suggest, the 'Wunder von Wasserburg' episode that closes the middle section of the novel (SB: 243-63).

## **2.5 Childness, 'Bildung' and the purging of narrative ambiguity**

Most critical readings of the novel, whether negative or positive in their conclusions, agree that Johann is constructed as a positive protagonist, and that the reader is meant to understand the end of the novel as the achievement of his 'Bildung', the maturation of his poetic sensibility and of his autonomy. If this is the case, how does the narrative maneuver the reader out of an affectionate but critical and condescending attitude to the figure of Johann, and into an attitude of acceptance and admiration? One answer to this question would be that a negative construction of childhood is developed in the first section of the novel in order for Johann to outgrow and overcome it, in which case childness would be a central building block in a narrative of progress through 'Bildung,' which casts a positive value on Johann's mature self, and a negative value on Johann's immature, child self. This would constitute an interesting departure from the strong tendency to valorise and idealise childhood that has been central to German literary discourse about childhood since the late eighteenth century (Ewers 1989), and that, as Pinfold shows, even avant-garde and groundbreaking post-war authors such as Grass do not abandon entirely in their constructions of child figures (Pinfold 2001: 147-58). Another possibility is that Johann's 'Bildung' is not constructed as a wholly positive or successful process. Identification of the failure of 'Bildung', as Kontje points out in his survey of criticism of the genre since Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, has been part of the interpretation of the 'Bildungsroman' since its emergence as a literary category

(Kontje 1993). In assuming that Johann's refusal to acknowledge Wolfgang Landsmann's experience of anti-Semitic persecution in Wasserburg at the end of the novel is intended as a positive reflection of his intellectual autonomy, critics such as Taberner (2000) and Hofmann (2003) may risk overlooking narratological nuances that could prompt the reader to take a more critical or detached view of the figure of Johann. Before examining the possibility of reading *Ein springender Brunnen* as a narrative of failed 'Bildung', though, I discuss the manner in which the 'Wunder von Wasserburg' episode purges Johann of ambiguity, recasting him as a more wholly positive figure.

I would argue that the split that takes place in the 'Wunder von Wasserburg' episode in the second section of the novel serves to separate the 'positive' from the 'negative' Johann, thus purging much of the tension and ambiguity from the text. This interpretation differs from those of Krauß (2006) and Besslich (2006), who read the episode as a moment where the narrative breaks with its convention of realism, suggesting its own unreliability and presenting the reader with a greater than usual degree of interpretive responsibility. During this episode, Johann cycles to a nearby village in pursuit of Anita, a girl a little older than Johann who performs with a traveling circus. He fails to win her over, and stays away from home overnight. Returning the next morning, he discovers that as far as everyone else is concerned, he has been at home the whole time. Not only has this 'other' Johann been exemplary in his behaviour, he has also saved a classmate from a beating at school and challenged the teacher's Nazism. Although Johann seems to be split or doubled, appearing in two places at the same time, focalization in this section is unbroken, and it is always clear that there are not two



Johanns, but a 'real' one, who is a focalizer, and an 'unreal' one, who is not and who is only narrated in hindsight.

Takeda interprets the episode as establishing a contradiction within the narrative that does not allow itself to be resolved, and that represents two irreconcilable versions of the past: "Von nun an existieren diese beiden Ichs unvereinbar nebeneinander, als Träger unvereinbar nebeneinander stehender Vergangenheitsbilder." (2002: 40) While Takeda's emphasis on the importance of contrasting and irreconcilable narrative elements is one which my interpretation shares, I would argue that the 'Wunder von Wasserburg' episode resolves rather than creates narratological contradictions in the construction of Johann. The tensions and discontinuities between conflicting positive and negative child tropes that I have found to play a significant role in his construction in the first section of the novel are dissipated by means of the doubling device in this episode. Through focalization, and also through the device of Johann's dog, the narrative gives very clear indications at this point as to which Johann is to be understood as the 'real' one:

Hat er gestern nichts gefressen, fragte Johann. Sag mal, sagte Mina, leidest du unter Gedächtnisschwund? Gestern hat er doch getan, als seist du ein Fremder. Ja die Viecher haben eben genauso Launen wie wir. Stimmt's? Johann nickte. Dann mit Tell in die Küche zurück, Tell legte den Kopf auf Johanns Füße.

Johann öffnete die Schultasche, holte die Hefte heraus, die er gerade in Gebrauch hatte, Rechnen und Aufsatz und Erdkunde und Geschichte. Er schlug das Aufsatzheft auf und las einen Aufsatz, den er nicht geschrieben hatte: Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch. Das Datum von gestern. Und Johanns Schrift. (SB: 248-9)

The 'other' Johann, with his essay deconstructing the schoolteacher's hegemonic racism, can be read in the light of Walser's statement in 1988 that "Ich müßte mich, um

[von dem Holocaust] zu erzählen, in ein antifaschistisches Kind verwandeln." (Walser 1997: 897) In this sense, the narrative function of this other, anti-fascist Johann is precisely to highlight the impossibility of such a child, and also to displace expectations of 'political correctness' from the 'real' Johann. Walser thus creates a markedly fantastic figure which serves as a satirical projection of what he diagnoses as contemporary desires for a 'politically correct' protagonist reflecting the (as Walser may see it) dominant, left-liberal ideology of the 1990s. From this point on, we might thus say that the 'real' Johann begins to function more clearly as a mouthpiece for Walser's own political philosophy and as such is reconfigured in a more unequivocally positive light.

Following this episode, there are a number of changes in the narrative's construction of Johann. The positive child tropes of poetic imagination and separateness from the social and political worlds, which were undermined by competing negative tropes in the first section of the novel, now come to dominate the picture. Passages establishing ironic or mocking contrasts between Johann's perspective and wider realities become much less frequent. The complexity with which childness operates in the text early on – taking advantage of the polyvalent and contradictory nature of discursive constructions of childhood – apparently disappears in the narrative's later stages, and we are left with a repetition of positive childhood tropes that have been with us since the late eighteenth century at least, and whose incarnation in Nietzsche's writing is relied upon heavily in Walser's text.<sup>53</sup> These are the tropes of childhood separateness from the social

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<sup>53</sup> In suggesting that Nietzsche's construction of ideal childhood is a continuation of Romantic tropes, I am diverging somewhat from Pinfold's analysis. Pinfold is clearly correct in identifying the vitality, carnality and momentous, amoral energy of the ideal child of *Also sprach Zarathustra* as a departure from the nineteenth century's conventions of ideal childhood. However, in another sense Nietzsche's statement about the child bears a strong resemblance to the underlying philosophy of Rousseau's *Émile*. Both suggest that civilisation, society and cultivation in their accepted forms do not improve, but hamper and deform the human individual. Both Rousseau's "homme" and Nietzsche's "Übermensch" are constructed in opposition

and political worlds, and the creative instinct and poetic imagination of the child. They are apparent in Johann's own poetic sensibility and in his reception of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and the narrative frequently suggests that these qualities allow Johann to see through and resist chauvinistic National Socialist rhetoric:

Adolf fing noch einmal an. Noch einmal gegen die Schule in Lindau. Jetzt kamen die Wörter, die sein Vater gegen Studierende benutzte: Tintenschlecker, Hungerleider, Faulenzer, Sesselfurzer, Drückeberger, Schlappschwänze. Adolf konnte nicht wissen, daß Johann diese Wörter schon von Adolfs Vater gehört hatte, und zwar gegen Johanns Vater wie auch gegen Johann und Josef gerichtet. (...) Um an der Linde die Kurve zu kriegen, die ihn Adolfs Blicken entziehen würde, sagte er sich alle Wörter vor, die Adolf von seinem Vater mitbekommen hatte. Männlichkeit, Schuhwerk, Nachspiel, Charaktergröße, Charakterlump, Speichellecker, Lackaffen, Weibewirtschaft, Bewährungsprobe. Johann hatte Adolf immer bewundert, wenn Adolf das Kinn hob und die Sätze mit diesen Wörtern hinaus sprach. Die Wörter, die seinen Baum bewegten, das spürte Johann, konnte er nicht aussprechen: Bangigkeit, Kleinodien, Wißbegierde, Übermut, Schaumkrone, Sommersprossen, Trauerweide, Wiedergeburt, Himmelreich, Siebensachen, Denkmal, Beatrijs, Entsprechung. (SB: 272-3)

Obwohl in dem, was der Scharführer so betonungslos dahinsagte, manchmal Wörter wie aus Zarathustrasätzen vorkämen, spürte Johann, daß das alles andere als Zarathustrasätze waren. Eher Kirchensätze. (SB: 344)

Despite the complexity and sophistication of the narrative's use of childhood tropes early on, as the novel moves towards a conclusion it seems to conform to a

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to societal norms and strictures. This certainly seems to be the sense that Walser takes from Nietzsche in his construction of Johann. Pinfold, *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature: The Eye Among the Blind* at 33-5. For more detailed comparison of ideal childhood in Rousseau and Nietzsche, see Katrin Froese, *Rousseau and Nietzsche: Towards an Aesthetic Morality* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Oxford: Lexington Books, 2001).

traditional literary construction of ideal childhood as a set of attributes whose presence in childhood is of less interest than their cultivation in adulthood. It is only as he matures that Johann becomes an apparently undiluted embodiment of these positive tropes of ideal childhood. The 'Wunder' episode thus functions, I would argue, to purge the narrative of ambiguity by splitting and recasting the figure of Johann without the tension of conflicting positive and negative childhood tropes. This purging of tension feeds into a narrative resolution based on 'Bildung' and progress through which Walser articulates aspects of his political philosophy regarding cultural memory. The new, 'good' Johann who is our focalizer from here on is constructed using positive tropes of ideal or poetic childhood, in particular moral insight and independence, resistance to ideology, and a poetic sensibility towards language. The fact that he is, by now, an adolescent rather than a child need not upset this picture of ideal, poetic childness; an understanding of 'ideal childhood' as a set of defining attributes for an ideal *adult* is key to Romantic thought on the matter, as is evidenced in Schiller's dictum that "sie sind, was wir wieder werden sollen." (*Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* cit. in Pinfold 2001: 12)<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Walser reaches back to pre-Freudian tropes of childhood here, whereas prior to the 'Wunder' episode Johann bears a number of Freudian traces.<sup>55</sup> I would argue that Walser employs these Romantic and pre-Freudian constructions of ideal childhood in order to construct Johann as a privileged artist-in-becoming in the vein of the Bildungs-, or more precisely, the 'Künstlerroman.' In this sense, the expunging of tension and ambiguity from the text serves its modulation into a narrative of progress, which privileges a literary

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<sup>54</sup> On the childhood ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see also Hans-Heino Ewers, *Kindheit als poetische Daseinsform: Studien zur Entstehung der romantischen Kindheitsutopie im 18. Jahrhundert: Herder, Jean Paul, Novalis und Tieck* (Munich: W. Fink, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Johann is attributed bisexual curiosity prior to the 'Wunder' episode (SB: 38-41), as well as violent drives and impulses (SB: 176); these aspects of his construction disappear after the 'Wunder.'

and philosophical canon reflective of the author's political and ideological position.<sup>56</sup> This is where Walser's and Forte's texts begin to resemble each other again, in spite of their considerable structural, stylistic and thematic differences.

A tendency towards simplification after the 'Wunder' episode can also be observed in the larger narratological structures of Walser's text, particularly in the production of the relationship between the narrator and the focalizing figure of Johann. *Ein springender Brunnen's* "performative contradiction" is that the reader must engage with a focalizing protagonist whose consciousness dominates most sections of the narrative, yet who cannot be understood as a textual 'real boy', because the first two 'Vergangenheit als Gegenwart' interchapters remind the reader that Johann is a figure of memory (Zehfuss 2007: 161). Precisely whose memory he is a figure of, however, is never revealed, as the narrator figure is never fully realized as internal or auto-diegetic (as is the case, for example, in Marcel Beyer's *Kaltenburg* (2008)). In this sense, rather than interpreting Johann as an image of the narrator's former self, one could interpret Johann as Pinocchio to the narrator's Gepetto, who desires intensely for his creation to become a 'real' subject, for it to "uns [entgegenkommen] wie von selbst." (SB: 283) After the 'Wunder' episode, though, the seam of ambiguity created by this relationship between the narrator and Johann ceases to be tapped. The reader is reminded less frequently that Johann is a figure of memory, and thus encouraged to invest more fully in the notion of him as a 'real boy'. In terms of the narratological role of childness in the configuration of Johann, and in terms of the relationship between the "narrator-focalizer"

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<sup>56</sup> Lorenz also notes this aspect of Walser's construction of Johann, remarking that "[w]enn Johann die reine Sprache der Literatur aufnimmt (...) is er immun gegen jegliche Propaganda." Matthias N. Lorenz, *"Auschwitz drängt uns auf einen Fleck." Judendarstellung und Auschwitzdiskurs bei Martin Walser* (Stuttgart; Weimar: Metzler, 2005) at 391.

and his focalizing child protagonist, it would thus appear that the trajectory of the novel is towards narrative simplification that encourages the reader's increased positive investment in the figure of Johann.

## **2.6 The refusal of Jewish experience as evidence of failed 'Bildung'?**

This observation would lead me to concur with negative readings of the text, which conclude that the narrative presents Johann's refusal to acknowledge Wolfgang Landsmann's experience of anti-Semitic persecution and terror in Wasserburg as a positive act of poetic self-preservation and self-determination (SB: 396-9). However, there is one aspect of this key scene with Wolfgang which raises questions about such an interpretation of the narrative. After stating that "Johann wehrte sich gegen die Angst, in der Wolfgangs Mutter gelebt hatte" (SB: 400), the narrative goes on to deliver a visual description of Frau Landsmann from Johann's memory of her, and it is through this visual description that a shadow is cast on the positive construction of Johann in this section:

Landsmanns waren keine Kohlenkundschaft. Johann hatte so gut wie nicht hingeschaut zu den beiden, wenn er mit der gefüllten Butte zum Gewächshausanbau oder mit der geleerten Butte zum Wagen zurückging (...) Frau Landsmanns Gesicht. Augen, die aus den Höhlen wollten, aber von Unterlidern daran gehindert wurden. Schwer lagen diese Augen auf den Unterlidern. Und die Lippen, auch schwer. Breit und schwer. Sie wurden vom Kinn gehindert, aus dem Gesicht zu fallen. (SB: 400-1)

This visual description betrays Johann's hostile and objectifying attitude towards Frau Landsmann. It also repeats some of the anti-Semitic visual stereotypes of National

Socialist culture. The passage thus creates a critical and interpretive dilemma for the reader. It is an instance where authorial intention becomes an important issue. It is possible that this passage is included in order to reveal a darker side to what is a predominantly positive construction of Johann in the latter part of the novel. In this case, rather than functioning as a 'Moralkeule' (to borrow Walser's own term) that forces the reader into accepting Johann as a positive figure after the 'Wunder von Wasserburg' section, childness could be said to be functioning here as it does in the early stages of the text, playing positive tropes of autonomy, instinctiveness and poetic imagination off against negative tropes of gullibility and unconscious absorption of ideology. It is, however, also possible that Walser himself was fully invested in Johann's innocence when writing this passage, and that the description of Frau Landsmann betrays a lingering anti-Semitism in Walser's own consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

I would by no means argue that the narrative is presenting the reader with an overt, negative criticism of Johann's subjectivity at this point. If the anti-Semitic imagery is not a symptom of anti-Semitic sentiments in the text's author, it may be functioning as a narrative device which forces the reader into an interpretive dilemma and stalemate in his or her understanding of the figure of Johann. The reader's willingness to invest in Johann as a figure of ideal, poetic childness is brought into collision with his or her willingness to be suspicious and critical of such idealistic representation. Interpreting the narrative in this way, it is hard not to be perturbed by the fact that, while the reader is forced into a situation where the act of reading becomes an act of moral and even ethical decision-making, the text's author effectively avoids taking a stand by evading engagement with the fact of the Holocaust. For in order for the narrative tension between

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<sup>57</sup> For a detailed consideration of anti-Semitism in Walser's work and discourse, see *Ibid.*

Johann's innocence and his anti-Semitic vision to function at all, knowledge of the Holocaust must be excluded from Johann's consciousness and from the narrative as a whole. Vague intimations of its existence, such as Johann's intermittent awareness of the existence of a place called Dachau (SB: 123) are, I would argue, mere compensatory gestures intended to plaster over this narratological crack.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This analysis of *Ein springender Brunnen* has found that childness is a key element of the text's narrative strategy. The inherent polyvalency of childness as a set of tropes (what Bornscheuer describes as "Potentialität" (Bornscheuer, 1976: 98)) allows Walser to create in Johann a focalizing protagonist that juxtaposes positive and negative child tropes (such as instinctive moral vision against gullibility) in such a way that a partially ironic and critical, yet also laudatory narrative attitude towards Johann can be detected. Debbie Pinfold has shown that Wolf and Grass similarly make use of both the negative and positive significance of childhood, indicating a nostalgia for innocence and a partial return to 'Romantic' childhood (Pinfold 2001: 68-72, 125-43, 147-58). Pinfold's analysis suggests that this nostalgia reflects a desire on the parts of the authors for a message of hope or progress in the wake of National Socialism, even if this desire is expressed *sotto voce* as it were, or undermined elsewhere in their narratives. My analysis suggests that *Ein springender Brunnen* can be read as continuing in this mode of combining positive and negative tropes of childhood, in spite of the fact that Walser appears to construct his political philosophy of memory in polemical opposition to figures such as Wolf and Grass. However, I would also argue that, in contrast to the work



of Wolf and Grass, Walser's juxtaposition of positive and negative tropes of childhood is not linked to an overt critical engagement with the text's historical context; his narrative project seems firmly fixed against such an undertaking. Rather, this juxtaposition is carried out in the service of local exculpation, ultimately allowing Johann's flaws to be projected onto the Wasserburg community, which is thus represented as a group of roguish, puerile and comic figures with diminished responsibility for their actions. This done, the narrative to a large degree jettisons ironic and critical modes, and the positive child tropes of separateness from the adult world, instinctive morality and poetic imagination become the mainstays of Johann's configuration as focalizer and as textual subject. Although it could potentially be construed as overshadowing and undermining the seemingly positive and exculpatory construction of a poetically child-like and innocent Johann, in this context the repetition of National Socialist anti-Semitic visual stereotyping in Johann's vision of Frau Landsmann exposes the narrative's reliance on its exclusion of the Holocaust from its frame of reference for the maintenance of its structural integrity.

So far, I have argued that both Forte and Walser reach back to pre-Freudian tropes of childhood in their projects of local exculpation and their visions of progress through culture and 'Bildung'. I will return to the ideas of 'Heimat' and of progress in relation to the narrative functions of childness in the work of W.G. Sebald. My analyses of *Ein springender Brunnen* and *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* also suggest that, although both authors reach back to pre-Freudian tropes and ideals of childhood, neither invests wholesale in the ideal of the child as a figure of privileged vision and intuitive morality. Forte's tabula rasa construction has the boy's innocence tied to family, community and

culture, while Walser's construction of Johann exploits both the positive and negative potential of the notion of childhood innocence. By contrast, Marcel Beyer does seem to return wholesale to the positive ideal of moral childhood in *Flughunde*'s figure of Helga Goebbels, as I explore next. This takes place within a very different kind of narrative structure to those of Forte's and Walser's texts, however. Whereas both of those narratives combined a more or less extradiegetic adult narrator with a focalizing child protagonist, *Flughunde* has two primary "narrator-focalizers," both of them homodiegetic: the acoustic technician Hermann Karnau, and Helga Goebbels, the daughter of the propaganda minister. Helga's innocence is thus communicated to the reader not just through her focalizing and narrating perspective, but also through the fascinated gaze of Karnau. If Walser's and Forte's texts reflect authorial desire for the exculpation of 'Heimat' and the rehabilitation of their respective cultural canons, Beyer's novel affords us an opportunity to examine the textual dramatisation of innocence as "a portion of adult desire." (Rose 1994: xii) In studying the dynamics of fascination and desire that mark Helga as object of Karnau's narration and focalization, we are confronted with questions of erotic voyeurism, kitsch and violence that pertain not just to the gaze of Karnau, but also to the position of the novel's implied reader.

## Part II

### The Fascination of Innocence: Desire, Death and the Adult Gaze

#### 1. “Die Brutalität der Kinder ist mir weniger unheimlich als die Sentimentalität der Erwachsenen.” Childness and the objectifying gaze in Marcel Beyer’s *Flughunde* <sup>58</sup>

##### 1.1 Introduction

The previous discussions of Walser and Forte focused on the child focalizer as a vehicle by which forms of innocence were transposed from the child protagonist to the wider, adult community. In this chapter, the terms of the discussion broaden in two interrelated ways, opening up a line of enquiry that is further developed in the subsequent discussions of Sebald’s work. Firstly, I expand the narratological focus to contrast the construction of the child as *agent* of focalization and narration with the construction of the child as *object* of (adult) focalization and narration. Secondly, I move towards a more complex engagement with the myth of childhood innocence, following Rose and Kincaid in emphasising its nature as product of and vessel for various forms of adult desire (Kincaid 1992; Rose 1994). This engagement leads me to question closely the manner in which *Flughunde*’s implied reader is produced and positioned in relation to the figure of the child.

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<sup>58</sup> Jan Bürger and Sigrid Löffler, ‘«guten abend, meine Damundhern»». Das Schreiben und die frühen Jahre - Marcel Beyer, Kathrin Schmidt und Malin Schwerdtfeger im Literaturen-Gespräch’, *Literaturen*, 2001/2 (2001), 16-19 at 17.

Even a cursory glance at Marcel Beyer's prose fiction publications to date would suggest that childness plays a prominent role in his narrative structures and techniques. *Flughunde*, (1995) *Spione* (2002) and *Kaltenburg* (2008) feature child protagonists, focalizers and narrators. These figures are central to the texts' respective engagements with the German past and with questions of memory, history and narration. Joseph Goebbels's eldest daughter, aged between eight and twelve, is one of *Flughunde*'s two narrating protagonists, through whom a picture of family life at the heart of the National Socialist apparatus is constructed, and the last days in the 'Führerbunker' focalized. In *Kaltenburg*, the effect of the child's perspective is incorporated into the elderly Hermann Funk's narration of his wartime childhood memories, including the experience of flight and of the Dresden firebombing as well as of his inculcation with Nazi ideology. *Spione*, which centers on a group of children growing up in the 1970s, dramatizes German memory work itself in a startling manner, as four cousins seek to fill in the blank spaces in their inherited family story and, rather than discovering any hidden truths, become entangled in destructive processes of speculation, fantasy and fabrication.

All of these texts would thus appear to construct child figures as implicated in and interpellated by ideology and by the cultural legacies of National Socialism, in contrast to the more exculpatory impulses identified in the analyses of Forte and Walser. The children of *Spione* earn their pocket money by clearing away the creeping fungal growth that affects their neighbourhood, constructed in the nineteen fifties atop a heap of landfill waste and postwar rubble (S: 99-100). Helga Goebbels and her siblings play at "spontane Aktion" and "Winterhilfswerk", while the child-self of Hermann Funk experiences an ugly moment of anti-Semitic triumphalism on Dresden's Brühlsche Terrasse (F: 60, 144,

K: 29). Interwoven with these narrative constructions of child figures as ideologically and historically implicated and interpellated, though, are various manifestations of tropes of childhood innocence, of the child as ‘other,’ separate from the adult world. These tropes have the strongest narrative presence in *Flughunde*, the text that attempts the most explicit confrontation with the discursive and physical violence of National Socialism. *Flughunde* therefore stands at the centre of my analysis, which reads childhood innocence and the ‘othering’ of the child as structuring narratological concepts for Beyer’s texts. In contrast to *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* and *Ein springender Brunnen*, *Flughunde* does not have a framing, heterodiegetic “narrator-focalizer.” Rather, it has two principle homodiegetic “narrator-focalizers” which are also the text’s protagonists: the adult Karnau and the child Helga (Bal 2004). The plot of *Flughunde* might be said to revolve around the relationship between these two figures, which, the text heavily implies, culminates in Karnau’s assistance in the murder of the children. The device of the dual “narrator-focalizers” means that each protagonist, watched by the other, functions not only as an agent but also as an object of focalization. My examination of the dynamics of innocence, fascination and violence in *Flughunde* focuses on the construction of Helga as an object of desire and voyeuristic fascination, and on her construction as an agent of focalization and narration. By comparison, although it repeats many of *Flughunde*’s thematic and structural elements, *Kaltenburg* represents a move away from this problematic and complex nexus of innocence and brutality and towards a mode of narration in which the child’s perspective plays a more marginal role, and therefore this novel is less central to my discussion. I conclude with a wider discussion of the centrality of the adult/child binary in *Flughunde*, *Spione* and

*Kaltenburg*. Beyer's first novel, *Das Menschenfleisch* (1991), is not included in the analysis, as it does not make use of child figures or focalizers to any significant extent.

One feature in particular of Beyer's texts that contrasts with the other works examined in this thesis is the prevalence of female child figures and focalizers. In both *Flughunde*'s Helga and *Kaltenburg*'s Klara, the focalizing perspective of a female child operates in counterpoint to the perspective of a male protagonist. In *Spione*, as I will discuss, matters of focalization and narration are somewhat difficult to determine due to the narratological structuring of the text, but here, too, a female child, Paulina, is placed in close contrapuntal relationship to the male narrator. In several of the texts included in this study, questionable aspects of the construction of femininity in relation to childness might be identified, particularly in relation to the connections that are drawn between innocence, death and sexuality by means of the figure of the female child. As I argue in the discussion of Sebald below, the child focalizer Luisa Aurach could be said to function principally to produce an ironic lacuna which provides *Die Ausgewanderten*'s 'Max Aurach' with its affective power and the narrating persona with his editorial duties. Marija, the little sister of Forte's "Junge," is a beautiful corpse, an icon of loss which marks the protagonist as melancholy and close to death from early on in the text. The figure of the circus child Anita in Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen*, clearly a play on Goethe's Mignon, is a foil by which Johann's heterosexuality, separation from his friend Adolf and growth into independent self-determination are demonstrated, after his rather more sexually ambiguous, indeterminate early childhood.<sup>59</sup> The relative prevalence of

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<sup>59</sup> For detailed discussions of the cultural and literary afterlife of Mignon, see Rainer Hagen, *Kinder, wie sie im Buche stehen* (Munich: List, 1967), Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London: Virago Press, 1995), Wetzel, *Mignon. Die Kindsbraut als Phantasma der Goethezeit*.

female child figures in Beyer's work affords me an opportunity to explore in greater depth the construction of feminine childness by a male author engaged with the National Socialist past. As I will show, Helga in particular functions as a deeply problematic foil to *Flughunde's* adult, male narrator insofar as she is constructed both as a naïve subject of narration and as an eroticized object of a sentimental and violent gaze.

## **1.2 Innocence, mediation and propaganda: Beyer's representation of the Goebbels children**

By centering *Flughunde* around the figures of the Goebbels children and casting Helga Goebbels as one of the text's main narrators, Beyer is accessing the history of a group of children whose lives were, in a sense, a media creation, and whose images functioned as propagandistic icons for National Socialist ideals of childhood and family. Postwar, too, the photographs of the children's corpses were of iconic significance, representing the insanity of a fanatical ideology that caused parents to murder their own children. This iconicity has been further added to by filmic representations such as that in Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (2004). Given the level of critical attention that has been paid to matters of mediation, representation and dissemination in Beyer's work regarding his thematisations of sound recording and photography, it is surprising that I have found only one critical study of *Flughunde* that makes mention of the fact that, in the Goebbels children, Beyer is invoking another media phenomenon, one which demonstrates just how deeply implicated images of children and of childhood innocence can become in political ideology and propaganda (Parkes 1998). Even Parkes's fleeting reference to the instrumentalization of the Goebbels children for propaganda purposes fails to make a

connection to Beyer's wider narrative concerns with questions of mediation and representation. It is my argument that Beyer's narrative takes the mediated and implicated nature of the Goebbels children into account to a greater extent than has thus far been acknowledged in criticism. However, as I discuss below, the fact that the figure of Karnau is the chief vehicle for this engagement complicates matters, as the brutal duplicity of this figure reinforces, by way of contrast, the role of Helga as a figure of authenticity, innocence and intuitive morality. In this sense, Beyer's narrative risks reproducing the myth of innocence that the Goebbels children embodied as propagandistic living icons of NS ideology.<sup>60</sup>

The critical reception of *Flughunde* returns again and again to the innocence of Helga, frequently reading her as a foil or counterpoint to the corrupt unreliability of Karnau, the novel's other narrating protagonist (an acoustic technician with an obsessive interest in the human voice who conducts pseudo-scientific experiments on concentration camp prisoners, and conducts a friendly relationship with the Goebbels children). Even the small number of readings that subject the figure of Helga to more sustained critical analysis continue to understand her as a cipher of innocence (Braese 2005; Uecker 2006), and only Blasberg's gender-focused critique hints at the possibility of Helga having a fundamental narrative function other than that of foil to Karnau (Blasberg 2006). A sustained close reading of Beyer's construction of Helga Goebbels, taking into account her roles as a focalizing subject of narration and as an object of Karnau's gaze, is thus necessary to determine whether existing criticism has accurately judged her narrative function, and, if this is the case, to tease out the implications of this for Beyer's wider

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<sup>60</sup> Such repetition of representational tendencies present within National Socialist discourse in postwar cultural production is the subject of Saul Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod. Der Widerschein des Nazismus*, trans. Michael Grendacher (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1984).



narrative project of engagement with the legacy of National Socialism. Given that his subsequent two novels also engage with this legacy by means of child focalizers and protagonists, this study of *Flughunde* will, I hope, open up some wider questions about Beyer's literary projects and his narratological methods.

Thus far, existing criticism of *Flughunde* has focused chiefly on the figure of Karnau, and on the questions of mediation, authenticity and ideology that Beyer's construction of his profession and his obsessive, private project of mapping all the sounds produced by the human voice seem to point to. The novel's other narrating protagonist, Helga, is usually accounted for as a foil or counterpoint to Karnau's perspective. She is generally taken to be a voice of innocence, whose naïve perspective supplies the text with the critical and deconstructive view of National Socialist ideology of which Karnau loses sight as his career progresses. Several critics also associate Helga's perspective with the portrayal of domestic life and 'Kriegsalltag'; in this sense the child protagonist also functions contrapuntally to the narrative representations of Karnau's obsession and his gruesome 'experiments' (Besslich 2006; Blasberg 2006; Schmidt 2000). General consensus would appear to cast Helga in the role of a reassuring narrative presence, counterbalancing Karnau's brutality, and providing the reader with a safe haven of identification and moral reliability. Thomas Schmidt goes so far as to remark that Helga's perspective "nimmt der Handlung den Charakter einer Schauergeschichte" (Schmidt 2000: 50), while for Ulrich Schonherr it represents the "strongest moral authority in the text" (Schonherr 1998: 331).

However, some critics have raised questions about Beyer's construction of Helga's perspective. Stephan Braese suggests that her construction as innocent child-

victim distracts from the historical specificity of highly privileged National Socialist childhood, allowing the reader to bypass this context and to invest emotionally instead in a universalized, decontextualized model of innocent victimhood. Here, Braese sees the reception of Beyer's Helga figure as to some extent analogous to the German popular reception of the figure of Anne Frank, representing a "Tradition einer Einfühlungsästhetik" which "[zieht] eigentümlich Interesse ab von der – historisch informierter – Frage nach dem Wer, Wie und Warum." (Braese 2005: 102-3) Improbable and problematic though Braese's parallel with the Anne Frank phenomenon may seem, it does perhaps suggest why Ulrich Schonherr assumes that Helga's narrative is in the form of a written diary, even though this is indicated nowhere in Beyer's text (Schonherr 1998: 331). Braese's persuasive critique of the role of the Helga figure is, nonetheless, based more strongly on his reading of *Flughunde's* journalistic and critical reception than on analysis of the text itself. It therefore points to some disturbingly perennial blind spots in scholarship and in the German feuilletons relating to matters of innocence, victimhood and sentimentality. However, again, it seems improbable, though by no means impossible, that Beyer's construction of Helga would actually conform to the sentimental model of victimhood apparently projected onto it by critics and reviewers, given the acute awareness of problems of mediation and authenticity that is reflected elsewhere in his work.

The most considered critique of Beyer's construction of the Goebbels children is made by Matthias Uecker, who also notes a general critical tendency towards unquestioning acceptance of the notion of the children's innocence or authenticity (Uecker 2006). Uecker argues that Beyer attributes improbable innocence to the

Goebbels children, constructing them as barely aware of National Socialism's racial ideology and as instinctively critical of the regime. I would broadly agree with Uecker's assessment. The requirement to construct Helga in particular as innocent of racism and anti-Semitism, instinctively attuned to lies, incredulous of NS rhetoric and ideology, and profoundly compassionate appears to vastly outweigh the requirement to construct the Goebbels children as permeated by and, in a sense, iconic media-projections of this ideology:

Obwohl die Kinder tatsächlich in Goebbels' Ideologieproduktion einbezogen sind, schildert Beyer ihre Lebenswelt und ihre Weltsicht als betont "normal" und unpolitisch. Vor allem die zentralen Konzepte und Begriffe der Rassenideologie kommen kaum vor. (Uecker 2006: 58)

This reading would suggest that those moments which do reveal the children as ideologically implicated in National Socialism, such as their "spontane Aktion" game and their invention of brutal "Werwolf" stories in contribution to their father's last propaganda drive, are to be understood as compensatory narrative gestures whose function is partially to allow the children's more fundamental innocence to function as a literary construct without irritating the reader's sense of the text's historical probability or credibility. Helga's blunt dismissal as "Unsinn" of the racist physiognomy that a friend learns at school, but that does not seem to be on the curriculum of her own home-schooling, would certainly seem to confirm Uecker's reading (F: 163). In this sense, Beyer's novel seems to rely for its narrative efficacy on the sentimentality of its adult implied reader, that is on the reader's readiness to imagine the Goebbels children as not only victims of the National Socialist apparatus but also as innocent of and effectively

immune to its racist ideology. Several of Beyer's own statements about the novel certainly seem to suggest that this is the case; he describes Helga, for example, as "ein ernstzunehmendes Gegengewicht zu Karnau", "ein Kind ohne Illusionen, während alle Erwachsenen von Illusionen besessen sind." (Deckert 2005: 80) Other comments made in interviews, however, seem to suggest that the implied reader's credulity towards the children's innocence need not lead to identification with the figure of Helga:

Durch die Figur des Kindes wird Komplexität reduziert (...). Aber beim Schreiben denke ich auch immer an einen erwachsenen Leser und hoffe auf dessen Wissen und Imagination, auf seine Ergänzungen. Es geht mir Überhaupt nicht darum, dass sich der Leser mit einer Schwundstufe von Komplexität identifiziert. (Bürger and Löffler 2001: 18)

Beyer's narrative may open up spaces for a more complex reading of Helga than the merely sentimental and identificatory mode which has thus far been discussed in the critical reception of the novel. An alternative model for Helga's narrative role is suggested by Cornelia Blasberg, who argues that the contrapuntal model is not adequate to fully describe the narratological relationship between Helga and Karnau:

Mag Helga auch feminin, Karnau maskulin konnotiert sein, ist doch nicht zu übersehen, dass die Liminalität der Kindfrau Helga im Grenzgängertum des durch starke Kindheits-Ängste und entsprechend regressive narzisstische Strebungen geprägten Karnau ein direktes Pendant hat. (Blasberg 2006: 31)

The model suggested here, of shared liminality between a precocious "Kindfrau" and a childish, regressive man, would complicate considerably Helga's perceived surface function as innocent "Lügendetektor" (Blasberg) and locus of sentimental reader-

identification, not least because of the erotic subtext it appears to imply.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, as I will argue, Beyer's text does at numerous points eroticize the figure of Helga, suggesting a narrative strategy in which voyeuristic and erotic desire are placed in palpable proximity to tropes of sentimental innocence. With this in mind, the following analysis of Beyer's construction of Helga focuses on an aspect that has thus far gone almost fully unexamined, that is of Helga as an object of address, desire and fascination for the adults that surround her, and particularly for the figure of Karnau. I explore the possibility that Karnau sustains a 'sentimental' attitude to the children and especially to Helga that is analogous to the sentimental response of the implied reader, creating a troubling proximity between adult protagonist and reader whose locus is the alluring myth of childhood innocence.

### **1.3 "Und die Kinder wissen nichts davon": Helga as object of Karnau's narration and fascination**

Uecker points out the potential for the innocent child victim-figure of Helga to feed into 1990s discourses of German victimhood in a text in which "die Goebbels-Kinder als die einzigen Opfer des NS-Systems [auftreten], die eine eigene, unbeschädigte Stimme und damit auch personale Identität haben." (Uecker 2006: 59) Ultimately, though, Uecker sees the narrative as disturbing and irritating rather than reinforcing this discourse, because of the fact that it casts the National Socialist family, rather than the Allied forces, as the murderous agent of destruction. This reasoning is, I would argue, somewhat problematic. The text's referencing of the Grimms' 'Juniper Tree' tale invokes

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<sup>61</sup> Schonherr also discusses Karnau's childishness in his psychoanalytic reading of the figure. Ulrich Schonherr, 'Topophony of Fascism: On Marcel Beyer's *The Karnau Tapes*', *Germanic Review*, 73/4 (1998), 328-48 at 335.

a myth of victimhood - in the form of murder and devourment – at the hand's of one's parents which is arguably of greater and more compelling psychological power than tropes of victimization at the unseen hands of enemy forces (F: 276, 283-4).<sup>62</sup> All that prevents *Flughunde* from becoming a narrative of generational victimhood, it would seem, are the text's occasional nods to the children's partial ideological indoctrination, which as we have already seen are hardly sufficient to this purpose.

It is the figure of Karnau that complicates the reader's position in relation to the compelling child victim/adult perpetrator binary that is a powerful driving force in Beyer's narrative. Not only is Karnau constructed as understanding himself as child-like in his aversion to the world of National Socialist "Herrenstimmen" (F: 232), as Blasberg has pointed out, but a close examination of the nature of his responses to and fascination with the Goebbels children also unmasks the forces of appropriative and identificatory desire that give the myth of childhood innocence a great deal of its power.<sup>63</sup> Whether this apparent deconstruction of innocence through the figure of Karnau combines in any meaningful way with the innocence of Helga-as-focalizer, or whether the two contrasting elements merely form a 'marriage of convenience' allowing the text to carry out both deconstructive and reiterative engagements with this powerful myth, however, remains to be seen.

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<sup>62</sup> See also Maria Tatar, "Telling differences: Parents vs. children in 'The Juniper Tree'", in Ann Fehn, Ingeborg Hoesterey, and Maria Tatar (eds.), *Neverending Stories: Towards a Critical Narratology* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1992), 199-215.

<sup>63</sup> The construction of Karnau as a regressively child-like as well as morally unreliable narrator suggests, perhaps, an inheritance from the figure of Oskar Matzerath. Whereas Oskar exaggerates his guilt by spuriously claiming responsibility for murder, though, Karnau omits to claim responsibility for murders which, the text heavily implies, he has committed, making his villainy less complex and less ambiguous than that of Oskar. In this sense, the "nostalgia for innocence" that Pinfold identifies in Grass's construction of Oskar might be said to be located, in Beyer's text, in the morally reliable child figure of Helga and not in the occasionally child-like Karnau.

As I show below, Karnau's gaze on the Goebbels children and on Helga in particular is marked by sentimentality, voyeurism, identificatory projection, appropriative desire, fantasies of invasion and incorporation, and discursive objectification. All of these elements carry the traces of an objectifying, violent erotic fascination, and all of them are closely linked to notions of innocence and purity. In spite of Karnau's clearly marked unreliability as a narrator, it is my argument that his gaze on Helga plays a significant role in her textual production as a narrative figure, and that indeed Karnau's gaze is at least as active in the production of the reader's response to the figure of Helga as the focalizing perspective of Helga herself. The progression of Karnau's gaze on the children over the course of the novel, from the sentimental to the macabre, can be seen in his somewhat fetishistic fixation on the girls' hair:

Die Mädchen waren alle sauber gescheitelt, so daß auf ihren Köpfen ein Streifen Kopfhaut durchschien, und an den Seiten hatten sie Zöpfe gebunden. Wer soll ihnen, wenn sie am späten Morgen mit Heimweh erwachen, das ausgelassene Haar erneut zu Zöpfen flechten? (F: 39)

Ihre Frisuren sind bereits völlig verwildert, obwohl sie erst zwei Nächte hier sind. Weder der Haushilfe noch mir ist es gelungen, die Zöpfe akkurat zu flechten. (F: 68)

Vom Haaransatz hinauf wird der dunkle Schopf unnatürlich straff gezogen, das Gewicht des gesamten Körpers hängt gewissermaßen an den Haaren, in die eine behandschuhte Hand gekrallt ist, welche dem im Leichenschauhaus arbeitenden Soldaten gehört, der den Kopf der toten Zwölfjährigen, dem Photographen zugewandt, vor seine dunkle Schürze hält, so daß sich auf dem Bild das bleiche Gesicht vor dem dunklen Hintergrund um so kontrastreicher abhebt. (...) Die Akte spricht von Zöpfen, doch auf dem Totenphoto trägt Helga das Haar offen. Wer hat

der Leiche die Zöpfe entflochten? War es die Pathologenhand im Gummihandschuh? (F: 297-9)

Plaited pigtails are, of course, a common visual trope of girlhood which can appear in any number of different contexts, from L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* to Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* to contemporary Japanese Manga narratives, and I would not venture to propose a blanket definition of its significance. Here, though, I would suggest that Karnau's fascination with the girls' plaited hair betokens a fascination with matters of physical control and orderliness, with the subjection of the child to adult authority. Given the historical context of Beyer's novel, this adult authority can also be understood as National Socialist authority. In this context, the girls' plaited hair is inseparable from National Socialism's adaptation of notions of innocent female childhood, virginity and purity in the service of a racist and murderous ideology which sought to control and define gender, sexuality and sexual reproduction. Karnau's fascination with the coming-undone or unbinding of the girls' hair could thus be read as a desire for escape from "Herrenstimmen," that is from the controlling influence of NS ideology and policy (F: 232). Equally, though, it could be read as an erotic fascination with childhood and innocence which might be described as paedophilic. This ambiguity is reflected in Karnau's engagement with the children, as he repeatedly imagines them as sharing his own avowed discomfort with National Socialism's authoritarian orderliness, whilst also clearly investing in the notion of their innocence and purity. The brutal eroticism of his visualization of the male, gloved hand unbinding the dead girl's hair bespeaks, I would suggest, a desire to be the unbinding subject as strongly as it does a desire to see her plaits and all their significance preserved. I will



return to this tension between destructive and sympathetic impulses towards the figure of the child in *Flughunde*'s narrative structures presently.

Karnau's objectifying and erotic fascination with Helga is eminently clear elsewhere in the section focusing on her autopsy report and mortuary photograph (F: 297-9). The documentary materials upon which Karnau reflects in this passage can be found in Lev Bezymenski's *The Death of Adolf Hitler* (1968). At this point I must express some scruples about reproducing the passages in question from Beyer's text here, as I am aware of the risk of replicating the violent objectification of the female child's body that *Flughunde* performs. However, I find it necessary to include the relevant quotations in support of my arguments, and in order to draw critical attention to a key passage in the narrative that has thus far been overlooked in critical readings. Beyer reproduces sections from the autopsy report and describes the photograph with a high degree of faithfulness, yet in such a manner as to dramatize the action of Karnau's fantasy and imaginative gaze. The erotic voyeurism of this gaze is made abundantly clear at the outset of this passage:

Das Mädchen ist am ganzen Körper nackt. Das ist ganz offensichtlich, auch wenn es nur von den entblößten schmalen Schultern angedeutet wird. (F 297)

Karnau goes on to project colour onto the black and white photograph, turning it into a tableau of purity and decay:

Makellos, wie überhaupt die Haut ebemäßig strahlt, ein gesunder Teint, wären da nicht die bläulichen Flecken, der leicht grünliche Schimmer im ganzen Gesicht, der um so deutlicher hervorsticht, da das Haar aus der Stirn gestrichen ist. (F 297)

While the imaginative projection of colour onto what is otherwise clearly marked by the text as a black and white image represents an act of fantasy readily recognizable as

such to the reader, Karnau's reflections on the autopsy report must be compared to the source document in order to identify what has been modified. This literary referencing of historical documents makes for extremely unsettling reading here, as the source document is adapted in such a manner as to violently sexualize the child's body. The original report's description of her abdominal organs is severely curtailed, creating an almost seamless transition from her genitals to her internal sexual organs. In this way, Beyer's text abandons the medical discursive context of the autopsy report and constructs instead a necrophilic fantasy of penetration:

Bei der Obduktion von Helgas Leiche wird folgende Akte abgefaßt. (...) Brustkorb normal ausgebildet, Brustwarzen klein, in den Achselhöhlen keine Behaarung festgestellt. Bauch flach. Äußere Geschlechtsorgane normal entwickelt. Große Schamlippen und Venusberg bis zum oberen Rand der Symphyse behaart. Hymen ringförmig. Innere Untersuchung: Schleimhaut hat etwas bläuliche Färbung. Darminhalt wie üblich. Gebärmutter fest, vier Zentimeter lang, in der Höhe der Eileiter drei Zentimeter breit, zwei Zentimeter dick. Äußerer Gebärmuttermund schlitzförmig, geschlossen. (F: 298-9)

Here, the thorny question arises of the precise nature of the distances and proximities between Karnau as "narrator-focalizer", the implied reader, and possibly Beyer as (implied) author and adapter of the source document.<sup>64</sup> Without attempting to answer this question definitively, I would suggest that, at this point in the text, it is not possible to draw a safe, limiting boundary between these narratological perspectives; implied reader and – possibly - author stand in some degree of complicity with the gaze

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<sup>64</sup> In naming Beyer as the "implied author" of the text I diverge from Booth's definition. My use of the term is intended to point to the presence of an agent of the narrative who is not Karnau, and who is the adapter of the documentary source material from Bezymenski. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1961) at 71-6.

of the focalizer. This is a matter to which I will return. Karnau's meditation on the child's corpse is also the culmination of a series of passages in which his gaze on the "Kindfrau" Helga is marked by erotic fascination (Blasberg 2006). These earlier intimations of Karnau's yearning and appropriative desire are frequently formulated in the terms of the pseudo-scientific discourse of his other obsession, and are focused accordingly on another corporeal marker of the children's 'otherness' and 'innocence': their voices.

#### **1.4 "Ans Innerste des Menschen greifen": Innocence, desire and appropriative violence**

The relationship between the motif of the child's voice and the myth of innocence is remarked upon by Baer, in connection, though, with Karnau's own childhood perception of authoritarian "Herrenstimmen" rather than his obsession with the Goebbels children. Baer's reference to "the vocal cords as the tabula rasa of childhood innocence, which for Beyer is also a period before the German "fall" during the Third Reich," fails to take into account the fact that almost all of Karnau's reflections on the differences between children's and adults' voices revolve around the Goebbels children (Baer 2003: 254). Reading the Goebbels children's voices as the text's primary location for the motif of the "tabula rasa of childhood innocence," my analysis uncovers a rather more complex relationship between innocence, ideology, desire and violence.

In contrast to the mutilations he carries out on adult prisoners in cooperation with 'Dr Stumpfegger', probably at Ravensbrück, the process by which Karnau initially resists, and finally gives way to the desire to record the children's voices is constructed as one of acute anxiety and confessional self-searching. From this rhetoric of self-

interrogation, though, a pattern emerges by which the nature of Karnau's fascination shifts from identificatory projection, whereby the children serve to reflect his own 'childhood innocence' and his continuing distaste for the adult, patriarchal world, to a more invasive form of appropriative desire, where his responses to the children are transposed into the pseudo-scientific discourse of his obsession with mapping the full range of human vocal expression. Throughout this trajectory of desire, from narcissistic protectionism to invasive and appropriative violence, tropes and images of innocence abound. It is the perceived innocence of the children's voices that fascinates Karnau; he refers to their "Unbefangenheit" (F: 74, 90) and "Natürlichkeit" (F: 74) and describes them as "geschmiedig" and "ungetrübt" (F: 160-1). He insists, too, on the absence of self-consciousness from the children's voices and subjectivities, and it seems to be the collapse of this fantasy of innocence that so enrages him when he hears the children in a propagandistic radio broadcast:

Wie lächerlich naiv ich war, als ich entschied, die Stimmen der sechs Kinder auf meiner Karte nicht zu verzeichnen, indem ich mir verbot, die Kinder vor mein Mikrophon zu setzen: Um sie nur wenig später dann im Rundfunk sprechen zu hören, wo sie ihren Vater tatkräftig unterstützten (...). Naiv meine Bedenken, da sich die Kinder hier ganz unbefangen und selbstbewußt an die Zuhörer wandten. Und während ich die Sendung hörte, lauschten die Kinder ihr selber zu Hause, hörten die eigenen Worte, welche zuvor auf Platte geschnitten worden waren. Wie kindisch und verlogen: der weiße Fleck auf der Stimmfärbungskarte, wo diese Kinder doch im täglichen Umgang mit allen erdenklichen Geräten aufwachsen (...). (F: 90)

Here, Karnau's positive ideal of innocence collapses into an image of the children's self-conscious performativity in collaboration with their father's propaganda.<sup>65</sup> The erotic dimension of Karnau's fascination with innocence, if it has not been clear before, is clearly visible at this moment of collapse. He goes on to fantasise elaborate images of the children's media-promiscuity, as it were, and their self-conscious pleasure at their own mediation:

(...) Ebenso ist der Filmsaal ein vertrauter Ort, wo sich die Kinder an manchen Abenden aus Anlaß eines Festes von den Eltern und den Gästen bewundern lassen, wenn ein Tonfilm geschaut wird, in dem die Mädchen selber zu sehen und zu hören sind, beim Spiel im Park, beim Streicheln eines Rehkitzes abgefilmt. (F: 91)

Und so erweisen sich meine Skrupel am Ende als bloßer Neid: Die schönen Stimmen der sechs Kinder wollte ich nicht auf Platte bannen, ich wollte ihnen nicht die Freude gönnen, bereitwillig in mein Mikrophon hineinzusprechen, aufgeregt und stolz (...). So aufgeregt vielleicht, daß ihre Stimmen sich überschlagen beim Erzählen, von Lachen, Maulen unterbrochen, wenn die Geschwister einander halb im Spaß vom Mikrophon wegstoßen, weil jedes seine eigene Stimme nachher am deutlichsten hören möchte. (F: 92)

Here, again, the relationship between the figure of Karnau and the implied reader becomes significant. Clearly, the reader is not prompted to fully identify or sympathize with Karnau here. The violence and narcissism of his soliloquy are unlikely to prompt

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<sup>65</sup> Karnau's discomfort at the thought of the children's familiarity with the cutting edge of media technology is, of course, also reflective of contemporary adult anxieties about children and new media around the turn of the twenty-first century. Indeed this is the clearest invocation of specifically contemporary dilemmas of childhood and innocence to be found in the texts examined in this thesis. Grass's *Im Krebsgang* also thematises an anxiety about young people and new media; here, though, the anxiety is undercut somewhat by the fact that Konrad's Apple Mac is a gift from his grandmother. Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang: Eine Novelle* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002b).

sympathetic reading. However, this passage also serves to remind the reader of the immersion of the children in NS ideology and propaganda, and the implied reference to their father's wealth and position reminds us of their particular, elite status. In this sense, the monologue serves to puncture the reader's credulousness towards the children's 'innocence' in a similar manner to the collapse of Karnau's ideal. The implied reader thus occupies a position of uncomfortable proximity to Karnau at this point in the narrative. As the monologue continues, Karnau appears to begin to reconfigure and recreate his exploded fantasy of innocence, ceasing to project the image of his own, reclusive childhood self onto the children and beginning instead to regard their 'innocence' as something desirable and available to adults, incorporating the notion of the children consentingly 'giving' of themselves to an admiring adult audience. The monologue ends in an image of acquisition which sets the tone for Karnau's subsequent, increasingly violent and appropriative reflections on the children's voices:

Zeugen [meine Skrupel] von der Furcht, mit jedem Aufzeichnungsvorgang, mit jeder modulierten Rille könnte etwas von der Kinderstimme verlorengehen, als wäre Abhören nicht gleichbedeutend mit Mithören: Ist eine Stimmaufnahme, entgegen meiner Vorstellung, nicht allein dazu in der Lage, ans Innerste des Menschen zu greifen, sondern nimmt davon zwangsläufig auch etwas weg, so daß das Abgehörte, nachdem es auf Platte geschnitten ist, fortan als Klang, als Tonfärbung allein noch auf dieser schwarzen Lackfolie existiert? (F: 93)

Kann man das, was man den anderen Stimmen wegnimmt, der eigenen Stimme hinzufügen, als Prägung, als Volumen, so wie ein Kannibale überzeugt ist, er stärke seinen Leib, indem er das Fleisch anderer Menschen genießt? Kann man sich die junge, ungetrübte Stimme eines Kindes verschaffen, indem man einem Kind die Stimme nimmt? Niemand weiß das. (F: 160-1)

Die Stimmen der sechs Kinder sind in meinem Besitz übergegangen, sie erklingen in der Dunkelheit, ihr Klang erfüllt die Küche, niemand hört sie außer mir, niemand, alles schläft, ich bin ihr einziger Zuhörer. Und die Kinder wissen nichts davon. (F: 285)

In Karnau's reflections on "Kinderstimmen," as in his monologue on Helga's corpse, the closeness to death of the innocence myth as "a portion of adult desire" is evident (Rose 1994). When Karnau's fantasy of sheltered unselfconsciousness is exploded by the apparent fact of the children's knowing mediation, he replaces it with one of appropriating and possessing innocence by way of death. The language in which this reconfiguration takes place is marked far more clearly by violence than by sentimentality, with images of penetration, destruction, incorporation and possession abounding. In this sense, Beyer constructs Karnau's voice and persona in such a way as to point to a set of connections between myths of childhood innocence and purity, murderously appropriative adult desire, and National Socialist discourse.

### **1.5 The position of the implied reader**

Thus far, it would seem that the myth of childhood innocence is to some extent deconstructed, its elements of violence and desire exposed through the narrative construction of Karnau as a dubious and duplicitous subject of narration, whose voyeuristic gaze might be said to be more likely to alienate the reader than to create a sense of sympathy or proximity. Having observed those sections of his monologue that

are marked by appropriative violence, narcissism and erotic fascination with regard to the children, I now turn to those passages in which a less openly troublesome sentimentality, or alternatively at times a socially critical perspective, reigns, so that points of agreement are established where the reader can more easily share in or identify with Karnau's gaze:

Ich werfe einen Blick ins Wohnzimmer: Die Kinder sind noch tief in ihrer Nachtwelt. Die trockene, verbrauchte Luft. Im Halbdunkel erkenne ich, daß alle Betten ganz zerwühlt sind: vom Schlafsofa ist die Decke zu Boden geglitten, Helga hält nur noch einen Zipfel davon fest im Arm, neben ihr liegt die kleine Hedda mit verrutschtem Nachthemd, und aus Helmut's Faltbett vor dem Fenster hängt ein nacktes Bein. Ich schließe die Tür leise. (F: 40)

Sie fangen an zu kichern. Die Kinder haben sich hereingeschlichen und sitzen bei mir auf dem Bett. Ein fünffaches Guten Morgen. Hellwach sind sie schon alle, sie schütteln ihre kleinen Köpfe wie ein Hund, wenn er geschlafen hat. (...) Ich lasse Holde unter meine Decke krabbeln, und sie beginnt gleich, mir das Haar zu kämmen, mit ihrem Puppenkamm: Damit du nicht mehr ganz so struppig bist. (F: 68)

Und auch die anderen werden aus dem Spiel gerissen, eins nach dem anderen gibt die rechte Hand. Aber das genügt der Sängerin noch nicht, sie nimmt, während der Vater zusieht, die kleine Hedda in den Arm, sie drückt sie an sich, Hedda zieht den Kopf zurück und schaut zur Seite weg, man sieht ganz deutlich, daß sie sich unwohl fühlt, aber der Vater greift nicht ein, er steht nur da und lächelt. So sehen die frühen Übungen der Formung aus, so wird der unbefangene Kinderkörper dem Zugriff der Erwachsenen ausgesetzt, und er erstarrt. Übungen, die so lange wiederholt werden, bis der gesamte Leib von allein in dieser Starre verbleibt: Das langsame Absinken vom Kind zum Erwachsenen, von einem Tier, das sich frei in der Luft bewegt, zu einem, das am Boden klebt. (F: 149)



These instances of a less apparently sinister gaze on the children, which nonetheless retains a sentimentally voyeuristic appeal, open up points in the narrative for the implied reader to identify with Karnau's perspective rather than to resist it. Beyer's work notes on *Spione* suggest a high degree of planning regarding the text's positioning of and address to the implied reader, and in interview he has also indicated that Karnau, rather than Helga, was conceived of as *Flughunde*'s main point of identification or proximity for the reader (Beyer 2000b):

Jetzt ist es eigentlich so, daß der Leser im Alter eher in der Nähe von Karnau ist, auch wenn er mit dessen Taten eigentlich möglichst wenig zu tun haben will. (...) Man sieht diesen Karnau als einen Voyeur, und zugleich ist man als Leser natürlich immer dabei (...). Man kann das auch gar nicht auf den Karnau abschieben. (Biendarra and Wilke 1998: 8)

Because of these points of agreement and proximity between the implied reader and the perspective of Karnau, the reader's own participation in a sentimentally voyeuristic gaze on the child figures draws him or her into the matrix of innocence, sentimentality, and violence which is carried in the narrative primarily by the figure of Karnau. It is here, in its suggestion of the violence that accompanies the innocence myth, and of the implied reader's proximity to a perpetrator figure, that the text's distance from the discourse of German victimhood might be said to be demonstrated.

This reading of *Flughunde*, however, whereby the figure of Karnau functions as a locus for the unmasking and deconstruction of the myth of innocence and the disruption of readerly investment in this myth is not posited here as a comprehensive interpretation of the text as a whole; the need remains to take into account the function of Helga as an agent of narration and focalization in the light of my reading of Karnau's perspective. A

myth whose complexity and violence is apparently exposed through the figure of Karnau may be further deconstructed, or may in fact be restated and raised up again in the figure of the child narrator. It is my suggestion that the latter is the case here. The narrative's requirement to construct Helga as counterweight and opposite to Karnau outweighs its need to construct the figures as Peter-Pan-like partners in liminality, the womanly child and the childish man of Blasberg's analysis (2006). Chief evidence of this is the narratological transparency of the focalizer Helga in contrast to the focalizer Karnau. The uncertainties as to time, place and context of narration, the evasions, omissions, and lies that the implied reader is to pick up on in Karnau's narrative are wholly absent in the narrative construction of Helga's voice. Although her syntax and vocabulary are not significantly less complex than those of Karnau, Helga thus represents a much more simple narratological construction, a fact which is reflected in the emphasis on her innocence in the existing criticism of *Flughunde*.

If the focalizing perspective of Karnau facilitates a voyeuristic readerly gaze on the figures of the children, Helga's sections of narrative do little to irritate or counter this gaze. Rather, the voyeuristic gaze can be maintained, as we are allowed apparently unimpeded access to her stream of consciousness. This stream of consciousness reinstates the myth of innocence; as Uecker has pointed out, it is remarkably free of racist ideology, instinctively honest and compassionate, and artlessly clear-sighted regarding Helga's father's discursive violence and hypocrisy (Uecker 2006). Furthermore, given that she ages from eight to twelve over the course of the narrative, and given the manner in which the historical autopsy documents are adapted in Beyer's text so as to emphasise her relative physical maturity, Helga's stream-of-consciousness narrative is remarkably void

of all reference to her own development. Indeed, her awareness of sexuality seems completely tied in with her function as “Lügendetektor” (Blasberg 2006: 30), allowing her to recognize her father’s adultery (F: 134) and to be suitably disgusted by pornographic graffiti drawn by SS officers on a toilet wall in the bunker (F: 268). All the representations of Helga as a precocious ‘Kindfrau’ occupying a position of liminality between childhood and maturity originate, in fact, not from her narrative perspective but from the perspectives of adult figures. Karnau is the central vehicle for such representations, which are also produced through the telephonist who reports that Goebbels’s adjutant Schwägermann “einmal entrüstet gewesen sei, weil Helga ihm angeblich unsittliche Anträge gemacht habe,” (F 295) and the pathologist’s report itself, which estimates her age as fifteen rather than twelve. Helga’s consciousness, by contrast, is constructed as innocent of sexual self-consciousness and sharply aware of the hypocrisy concealed in adults’ constructions of her as part-child, part-adult:

Helmut ist noch so klein, er weiß nicht, was er anstellt, er ist dazu noch viel zu klein, und Hilde ist zu klein, Holde, Hedda auch, und Heide sowieso. Alle sind noch so klein, sie dürfen sich alles erlauben. Bestrafen dürfen nur die Eltern, und nicht die Älteste, dafür ist sie auch noch zu klein. Aber schon groß genug, um diese Kletten zu ertragen, so groß, daß sie auf alle aufpaßt, wenn Mama ihre Kopfschmerzen hat und im Bett liegt, wenn alle leise sein müssen im Haus. Wenn Mama zur Erholung ist und Papa fort, wenn er in Lanke übernachtet, wenn er tagelang nicht nach Hause kommt. Trotzdem darf die Größte niemals mit den Kleinen schimpfen. (F: 78)

Beyer’s claim to be more interested in the brutality of children than in their innocence is borne out here to the extent that Helga’s frustration stems from being prevented from physically punishing her siblings (Bürger and Löffler 2001: 17). This

suggestion of the child's desire for the power to discipline is, however, clearly superseded by Helga's function as clear-sighted critic of her parents' hypocritical disfunctionality. Despite the potential that Helga as focalizer seems to hold for a continuation of the narrative's deconstructive engagement with the myth of childhood innocence, I would suggest that the text's apparent need for a narratological "eye among the blind" at the domestic centre of National Socialism outweighs and overrules this complex and challenging deconstructive impulse (Pinfold 2001). In other words, in order to produce Helga's naïve and clear-eyed deconstruction of Goebbels's post-Stalingrad 'Sportpalastrede', the narrative must to some extent abandon its unmasking of relationships between the myth of innocence and unsettling, adult desires and impulses within and beyond the purity-obsessed National Socialist imagination (F: 157-70).<sup>66</sup>

One further significant aspect of the narratological role of Beyer's Helga figure requires discussion here: her death, along with her siblings, at the hands of her mother and, the narrative implies, Karnau. The reader's historical knowledge of the Goebbels children's deaths creates a frame of dark and sentimental irony for the narrative. As in the case of Luisa Aurach's narrative of childhood in Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*, which I discuss in this regard below, the reader knows that the child is going to die, so that an element of pathos is created by means of the structural affinity between innocence and death. In the case of Luisa Aurach's narrative, this ironic frame creates a lacuna between

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<sup>66</sup> Indeed, this need would appear to be more intense in Beyer's text than in the texts by Walser and Forte, in spite of those authors' personal, biographical ties to the Nazi era and their affiliation to the "heimliche erste Generation." Sigrid Weigel, 'Die 'Generation' als symbolische Form. Zum genealogischen Diskurs im Gedächtnis nach 1945', *Figurationen. Gender, Literatur, Kultur*, No. 0 (1999), 158-73. Helga's focalization of the 'Sportpalastrede' (F: 157-70), which is widely referred to in critical discussions of the text, is a case in point. The child's naïve deconstruction of NS ideology here contrasts sharply with Johann's equally naïve acceptance of this ideology where he focalizes one of Goebbels's speeches in *Ein springender Brunnen* (see above). Beyer exploits the notion of the innocent child as possessing an intuitive moral vision, where Walser emphasises the child's gullibility.

the figure of the child and the implied reader, which according to Fuchs functions as a space for acknowledgement of the catastrophe of the Holocaust and for mourning the death of Luisa and the destruction of her community (Fuchs 2004: 126-38). In the case of Beyer's text, though, the irony established by the reader's foreknowledge of the child's death does not translate into a melancholy lacuna. Instead of a space for mourning, the reader is left with the narrative gaps created by Karnau's duplicity. In this sense, the figure of Karnau functions as a control mechanism in relation to Helga; his perspective forms a kind of buffer preventing the pathetic irony of the 'child who is going to die' from opening up into a lacuna of mourning that might be considered inappropriate for a child figure so iconically associated with National Socialist family ideology and propaganda.

In this sense, it could be argued that the voyeuristic and violent aspect of Karnau's gaze on Helga, rather than implicating the reader in a deconstructive unmasking of the innocence myth, allows the reader to exercise a violently erotic gaze on 'the National Socialist child.' By this reading, the eroticization of Helga's corpse that is effected by the adaptation of the historical autopsy documentation becomes a kind of ritual exorcism, which banishes readerly mourning for and sympathy with the figure of Helga, replacing them with quasi-pornographic objectification, horror and fascination.<sup>67</sup> The indeterminate proximity between focalizing agent, implied reader and implied author at this point in the narrative, which I have discussed earlier, means that this interpretation cannot be ruled out. From this point of view, Karnau's description of the soldier's hand entangled in Helga's hair can be read as descriptive of a narrative technique that exploits

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<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of exorcistic practices in writing about National Socialism, see Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod. Der Widerschein des Nazismus*.

the macabre and the sentimental in equal measure in its fascination with the white face of innocence against the black background of National Socialism:

(...)[Die Hand gehört dem Soldat], der den Kopf der toten Zwölfjährigen, dem Photographen zugewandt, vor seine dunkle Schürze hält, so daß sich auf dem Bild das bleiche Gesicht vor dem dunklen Hintergrund um so kontrastreicher abhebt. (F: 297)

Childness and the myth of innocence thus play complex and contradictory roles in the deconstructive practice and generation of reader response of a narrative that seems to self-consciously stage its own unreliability. The suggestion that Helga constitutes a “moral authority” (Schonherr 1998) or counterbalance to the figure of Karnau holds water only to the extent that the narrative prompts the reader to buy into the construction of the girl’s clear-eyed innocence. As I have shown, the focalizing figure of Karnau prompts the reader in quite a different manner, implicating him or her in an objectifying, adult gaze that is by turns sentimental, voyeuristic, identificatory, appropriative and invasive. The implication of the reader in Karnau’s gaze could be read as carrying out a critique of innocence which reveals the myth’s ideological and psychological implications as well as the persistence of its power in the German cultural imagination from the National Socialist period into the 1990s. It could, however, equally well be interpreted as a narrative strategy for dealing with Helga Goebbels’s iconic status as a privileged child of National Socialism, by preventing a space for mourning for opening up around her fictional incarnation in Beyer’s text. In this sense, I would argue that childness is a load-bearing narratological element in the labyrinthine, unreliable and shifting text that is *Flughunde*, ensuring the reader’s ready emotional investment in the text whilst also opening up spaces for voyeuristic fascination, sentimentality and violence

in the service of the narrative's dealings with guilt, victimhood and punishment in relation to the National Socialist past.

### **1.6 The innocence myth and the adult/child binary in *Flughunde*, *Spione* and *Kaltenburg***

Beyer's fourth prose fiction publication, *Kaltenburg* (2008) shares a number of thematic and structural similarities with *Flughunde*. The focus is again on German experience under National Socialism and the echo of this period into the post-Wende era. Again, scientific discourse plays a key role, here zoology and ornithology rather than bioacoustics. Again, the experience of civilian warfare is depicted by way of a child focalizer, as the bombing of Dresden is narrated through the perspective of Hermann Funk's childhood self. Funk shares his first name with the male protagonist of *Flughunde*. However, the gruesome violence represented by Karnau in *Flughunde* is not associated with Funk in *Kaltenburg*, but rather with the title figure, his mentor, whose biography Beyer bases closely on that of Konrad Lorenz. Again, too, the effect of the child's perspective is used in the narrativisation of the National Socialist period, although *Kaltenburg* also deals extensively with the post-war period and the GDR and post-Wende years. However, there are significant differences between the two texts regarding the form of narration and the proximity of the narrating personae to the National Socialist regime.

Hermann Funk is the only narrator in *Kaltenburg*, and the scene of his narration is very clearly marked in the text as a series of conversations with an interpreter named Katharina Fischer in the early 2000s. The effect of the child's perspective thus occurs

when he narrates his childhood memories, and does not pertain to a child narrator. In contrast to the intimate ties of family and brutality that bind the figures of Helga and Karnau respectively to the NS apparatus, Funk, the child of a humanistic academic family in Posen, aged about twelve at the end of the war, is constructed as less deeply implicated in matters of guilt and perpetration. Despite the repetition of structural and thematic elements between *Flughunde* and *Kaltenburg*, then, childness does not supply the later narrative with structuring myths or with a locus of narratological tension and ambiguity. In other words, *Flughunde*'s engagement with the Nazi past seems, according to my analysis, to be linked more strongly to the myth of childhood innocence than is the case in *Kaltenburg*.

Matters of unreliability also come into interaction with constructions of childhood in Beyer's third novel, *Spione*. Set primarily in the late 1970s, this text engages far more intensively with the notion of (post-)memory work, of creating a picture of a past one has not witnessed.<sup>68</sup> The four cousins at the centre of the narrative thus set about constructing a narrative of the past lives of their grandparents in the absence of any direct information, their grandmother having died young and their grandfather's second wife apparently having imposed a total ban on contact between him and his children and grandchildren. The children's investigations and fabrications thus look back to the 1930s and '40s, while their entanglement in this memory-work continues into their adult years. *Spione* covers the same historical span as Beyer's other novels, but through the perspectives of the four cousins establishes a different, arguably more self-reflexive orientation towards this timescape. According to Beyer's working notes, *Spione* borrows its fundamentals from

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<sup>68</sup> My use of the term postmemory follows Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1997).



“[d]em Kinder-/Jugendroman, wo eine Gruppe von Kindern einem Geheimnis nachgeht und mit der Erwachsenenwelt nur insofern in Kontakt kommt, als daß sie die Verbrecher, die Geheimnisträger zur Verfügung stellt (also Enid Blytons »Fünf Freunde« (...))” (Beyer 2000b: 27). That is to say that the text’s basic structure stems from a genre within children’s literature which works from the principle that the child’s clear vision will help to uphold law and order by successfully exposing adult artifice and wrongdoing. In this case, though, Beyer does not import these tropes of clear sight and moral goodness into his narrative, as the children’s investigations lead only to fabrication, entanglement and enduring delusion.

Existing critical studies of *Spione* tend to focus on its thematisation of photography and memory; the children’s curiosity is first sparked when they find an old family album from which pictures of their grandmother appear to have been removed. Connections have thus been drawn between Beyer’s text and theories of family photography, postmemory and mediation, and between the use of photography in his text and in texts by W.G. Sebald, Monika Maron, Ulla Hahn and others (Harris 2005; Sicks 2010; Wasmeier 2007). A very clear narratological analysis of the text is provided by Meike Herrmann, focusing on tense, perspective and reliability of narration in relation to postmemory. Herrmann’s reading indicates that the unreliability of the cousins’ perspectives in this text is of a markedly different order to the naïve transparency of Helga’s point of view in *Flughunde*; in *Spione*, the narrator „[lässt] die Grenze zwischen subjektiven Erinnerung und gedächtnismediengestützten Imagination ins Unkenntliche verschwimmen” and “[verschleierte] den überprüfbaren Wahrheitsgehalt seiner Aussagen.” (Herrmann 2008: 264) Indeed, most problematically for the purposes of my

discussion, the scenes and times of narration are also left uncertain and obscure by Beyer's text. Some scenes clearly show the narrator and his cousins as adults, still grappling with their fabrications from childhood. Other scenes show the cousins as children and adolescents in 1977 and are not marked by any indication of retrospection, so that a child narrator might easily be assumed. The text's refusal to clearly mark off a distinguishing boundary between a child's and an adult's perspective is a further indication that childness is operating here in a radically different manner than in Beyer's other novels. The myth of innocence, which sets up the child as idealized and objectified 'other,' would not appear to have a presence in a text in which the implied reader is so thoroughly and confusingly immersed in the subjectivities of the cousins, which seem to shift subtly and frequently between childhood and adulthood.

Where an external view of the children is implied, furthermore, they are presented not as innocents but as sinister, unsettling, and delinquent:

Im Supermarkt hat sie gehört, wie die Kassiererinnen sich unterhielten, auf dem gegenüberliegenden Hügel soll es eine Kinderbande geben, sie treiben ihr Unwesen in der ganzen Gegend, manchmal sollen sie bis zur Schanze kommen. Die Leute auf der Straße umklammern ihre Handtaschen, wenn sie ein Mofa hören, von hinten nähert sich ein Knattern, die Einkaufsbeutel fallen auf den Boden. Nachts gibt es Feuerschein am Hügel oben, plötzliches Jalousienklappern, Schreie, Jaulen, möglicherweise nur ein Hund. Auch Schüsse hat man schon gehört. (S: 96)

Here again, perhaps, Beyer touches on contemporary, fearful visions of the child as 'other,' engaged in violent and 'anti-social' behaviour. It might be argued though, that these more unsettling representations of the children, with their piercing "Italieneraugen"

which seem “alle Dinge, jeden Menschen unter Beobachtung zu halten” (S: 19) are simply an inversion of the transparent innocence Beyer attributes to Helga’s perspective in *Flughunde*. This is indicative, I would argue, of the structural importance to Beyer’s work of the binary opposition adult/child, something which is also suggested by his narrators’ predilections for definitive statements about what it means to grow up (F: 232, S: 66, 252). Within this binary pair, the child is always ‘other’ to the adult self and subject. In this sense, both texts’ representations of dual or in-between states regarding childhood and maturity gain significance. This play with the poles of the adult-child binary might be assumed to unpick or deconstruct it, and to a limited extent, this does take place. Karnau’s liminality between childhood and adulthood – his suggestion that his voice never broke (F: 76), his aversion to the “Herrenstimmen” that he sees as “Inbegriff des Erwachsenenseins” (F: 232) and his preference for the company and conversation of children – has its counterpart in *Spione* in the cousins’ ages, which span either side of the transition from childhood into adolescence, and in the fluid indeterminacy of the narrating perspective, which seems to move unmarked between adult and child as described above. The fascination that *Flughunde* creates around Helga’s duality as innocent naïf and precocious “Kindfrau” also belongs to this matrix. However, as my analysis of *Flughunde* has sought to demonstrate, where the cultural myth of innocence is concerned, even apparently deconstructive representations of duality or liminality ultimately feed back in to the adult/child binary and the structures of adult desire and anxiety that it supports.

Without forcing these two very different narratives into a single interpretative mould, it is clear that the construction of the child as ‘other,’ and the concept of a state of

liminality or duality with regard to the binary of childhood and adulthood, are central elements of Beyer's narratological arsenal, which function to regulate the emotional responses of the reader, and to position and reposition the implied reader's proximity to the narrating or focalizing perspective. In this regard, the study of Beyer's narratives has revealed how the structures of innocence can implicate reader and text in currents of violence, desire and guilt. Indeed, the nexus of voyeurism, brutality, sentimentality, death and irony created by the narrative construction of Helga would seem to fit rather well – perhaps better than the exculpatory narratives of Forte and Walser - the model of kitsch suggested by Saul Friedländer (1984).

From this analysis has also emerged a wider picture of the complexity with which the innocence myth operates in the literary field. An analytic model which seeks to identify deconstructive and reiterative narrative engagements with this myth does not seem to be adequate, as even apparently deconstructive approaches to innocence seem ultimately to feed back into the myth. The next part of the thesis seeks to address this issue of the complexity and tenacity of innocence as a structuring myth in literary narrative, and in discourses of memory. Here, the analysis moves away from a focus on child protagonists, focalizers and narrators, seeking instead to examine the structuring roles played by innocence itself as a myth of modernity. The prose oeuvre of W.G. Sebald provides me with ample material for this exploration.

## 2. Deconstructing innocence? Desire, death and the limits of W.G. Sebald's critique of progress

### 2.1 Introduction

Although childness was found to play a role in the valorisation of notions of progress and culture in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* and *Ein springender Brunnen*, the same could not be said for Beyer's *Flughunde*. As I have argued, the figure of Helga functions as a locus for deeply conflicting impulses and messages. Her tragic innocence operates as a foil to Karnau's brutality and, in this narrative, it is brutality rather than innocence that survives. However, Helga does not function solely as a figure of tragedy, but also as an object of desire, voyeurism and punishment. This construction seems to reveal the currents of desire and appropriation that underlie the myth of childhood innocence, a myth which my reading of Beyer would suggest is peculiarly resistant to debunking or deconstruction. At this point in the thesis, it could be argued that where a valorisation of social and cultural progress no longer informs the narrative, the myth of innocence takes on a more complex and conflicted, but nonetheless robust form. Analysis of the narrative functions of childness in W.G. Sebald's prose fiction further confirms and develops this hypothesis, as I show next. The first part of this discussion explores Sebald's constructions of innocence and desire in the context of his narratives' dialectical critiques of Western modernity and the notions of progress and improvement that it entails.<sup>69</sup> Here, the focus is on child figures as objects of narration

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<sup>69</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the centrality of the dialectical model to Sebald's work, see Ben Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald. Die dialektische Imagination* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2009a). See also Anne Fuchs, "'Ein Hauptkapitel der Geschichte der Unterwerfung': Representations of Nature in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*", in Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long (eds.), *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*

and focalization. I argue that the structural robustness of innocence, as well as its profound implication in modern ideals of progress, mean that it fits in well with Sebald's project of dialectical critique. However, the second part of the discussion goes on to argue that childness also operates 'below the radar' of this project of critique, as it were, surreptitiously reinserting notions of innocence, whole subjectivity, authentic memory and intuitive vision into Sebald's narratives. This aspect of the functioning of childness in Sebald relates to his constructions of loss, mourning and memory, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. Here, the primary focus is on the narration of childhood memory and child agents of focalization. I argue that, at times, Sebald's narratives overburden these child focalizers with instinctive knowledge about the Holocaust, risking what Iris Radisch describes as "schwarze[r] Kitsch" in a rather caustic early review of *Austerlitz* (Radisch 2001; Sebald 2003).

### **Sebald scholarship**

Before embarking on these analyses, however, it is necessary to address the matter of Sebald criticism, which, in the years since his untimely death, has burgeoned in Anglophone and German-language scholarship. The BDSL database currently lists over six hundred articles and studies pertaining to W.G. Sebald's work, and the MLA international bibliography lists four hundred and thirty eight (BDSL 2010; MLA 2010). It would not have been possible to attempt a comprehensive overview of this corpus of secondary literature within the confines of the current project. Instead, I position myself in relation to those studies which offer the greatest relevance and insight for my project,

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(Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 121-38, Ben Hutchinson, "'Egg boxes stacked in a crate': Narrative status and its implications', in Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds.), *W.G. Sebald: History - Memory - Trauma* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 171-82.

either in terms of their thematic areas of investigation or their theoretical approaches and methodology. Given the extent of critical interest in Sebald, it is hardly surprising that the secondary literature tends, at times, to repeat itself and to give rise to and perpetuate clichés, as recent bibliographic essays have pointed out (Long 2007b; Sheppard 2009). In engaging with Sebald's work, I set myself the daunting task of adding something new to 'Sebald studies' and avoiding the critical pitfalls so clearly identified by Sheppard.

I have been unable to locate any studies focusing specifically on Sebald's constructions of childhood, so in this sense my research does constitute a new contribution, which is nonetheless informed by a number of existing studies and approaches.<sup>70</sup> My emphasis on close reading aligns my analysis with the methodologies of Hutchinson, Schedel, Fuchs and Long in particular (Fuchs 2004; Hutchinson 2009a; Long 2007a; Schedel 2004). In my focus on Sebald's writing of modernity I am indebted to Long's monograph, whilst Hutchinson's study informs my understanding of the dialectics of Sebald's narratives (Hutchinson 2009a; Long 2007a). Finch's and Santner's considerations of his constructions of sexuality have informed my own examination of innocence and desire in his works (Finch 2007, 2008; Santner 2006), while Barzilai's relatively early article on femininity in Sebald was also a formative influence for my reading, suggestive as it is of the dominance of male-centred and homosocial patterns and structures within his texts (Barzilai 2004). Fuchs's monograph has also been a valuable resource, particularly in her extensive discussion of Sebald's discourse of 'Heimat'

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<sup>70</sup> Neil Pages's discussion of Sebald's reception of Handke highlights Sebald's use of images of children in one of his essays (see below). Pages's central focus is, however, on Sebald's valorisation of "pathological vision" in Handke and Herbeck. Neil Pages, 'Crossing borders: Sebald, Handke and the pathological vision', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 40/4 (2008), 61-92.

(Fuchs 2004: 109-63). These and other studies of Sebald's work will be further referred to and discussed where relevant over the course of my analysis.

Regarding narratological issues, considerable critical attention has been paid to Sebald's structures of narration, which are similar across his prose oeuvre. A primary "narrator-focalizer," named "Sebald" and sharing many details of the author's biography, reports his encounters with other figures, who often report encounters and conversations with others in turn. In Bal's terms, this primary narrating agent, which corresponds to the narrative persona or character of "Sebald" and is thus homodiegetic, frequently "yields the floor" to other figures (Bal 2004: 275). That such a narrative structure can have an impact on reader response is clear in Bal's theoretical discussion:

When such a change of level occurs, the reader becomes aware, if not of the presence, at least of the activity (and thus of the existence) of the narrator within the narrative. The declarative verb, or whatever other form the yielding of the floor by the narrator to the character can take, functions to *connote the transfer*, the handing over, like a sign indicating that the object of speech will in turn become its subject. (Bal 2004: 276. Emphasis Bal's)

In contrast to some texts which use this technique of framed narration, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for example, Sebald's primary narrator does not appear to absent himself from the scene of narration when he "yields the floor" to others (Conrad 2007). Rather, all sources of narration are scrupulously acknowledged at periodic intervals throughout the narratives. Many scholars, and Sebald himself, have ascribed an ethical dimension to this form of self-reflexive, framed narration (Doerry et al. 2001). The argument here is that persistent acknowledgement of narrative frames or layers means that the text keeps sight of, and encourages the reader to keep sight of, the



temporal and subjective distances between the primary narrator and that which is narrated. In this way, the narrating persona neither 'hides' himself outside of the diegesis, nor projects himself into the stories he reports. Anne Fuchs argues that this strategy reflects a resistance to identificatory impulses on the part of the narrating persona, which would risk usurping "den geschichtlichen Ort des Anderen." (Fuchs 2004: 31) For Fuchs, Sebald's narrative structures allow for a form of empathic engagement with the experience of the Other which does not neglect to recognise the incommensurability of others' historical suffering (Fuchs 2004: 38). Cosgrove and Long understand Sebald's structures of narration in similar terms to Fuchs, although Cosgrove suggests that Jewish figures are "positively overdetermined" in his work. (Cosgrove 2006: 243; Long 2007a: 118) While Fuchs highlights Sebald's inheritance from Thomas Bernhard, Hutchinson demonstrates the significance of Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Bassani for his structures of narration. (Fuchs 2004: 32; Hutchinson 2009a: 35-40, 57-76)

In contrast to the critical emphasis on self-reflexive distance, Aliaga-Buchenau's close reading highlights moments in *Die Ausgewanderten* in which the voice of the narrator appears to be absent, suggesting that, between Sebald's periodic signalings of the text's layers of narration, passages emerge which produce effects of "immediacy and (...) authenticity." (Aliaga-Buchenau 2006: 152) Aliaga-Buchenau seeks to segue her findings in with the prevailing mode of understanding Sebald's structures of narration as pursuing an ethics of non-appropriative empathy. Zilcosky, on the other hand, cautions against "[granting] ethical status to a literary device" in his argument that *Austerlitz* contains melodramatic impulses. (Zilcosky 2006) Finch seems to work directly against the notion of Sebald's ethical narration when she suggests that *Austerlitz's* narrator to

some extent arrogates to himself Austerlitz's voice and history in a valorisation of poetic, textual narrative. (Finch 2007) The ethical model put forward by Fuchs and others, highly persuasive and attractive though it is, does not seem to fully describe the complex dynamics of intimacy and distance, empathy and identification, and arrogation and rescue that seem to be produced by Sebald's structures of narration. The following analyses of childness in Sebald's texts point to the occasional presence of appropriative desire and yearning for whole subjectivity and 'authentic' memory on the part of the narrating persona. The findings of my analyses would thus seem to point to narrative strategies and impulses that do not fit the critical model of ethically scrupulous narration. That is not to suggest that Sebald's narratives are in some way 'unethical.' Like Zilcosky, I would be hesitant in ascribing ethical status to literary and narratological devices, although my discussions of texts by Forte, Walser and Beyer have shown that the structures of narration and focalization can serve wider strategies of representation that might be deemed questionable in ethical terms. Rather, my analyses suggest that alongside Sebald's strategies of careful distancing and scrupulous acknowledgement are narrative strategies that bring the emotional traction of childness into play in a manner which evokes pathos and allows for the collapse of critical and empathic distance.

Neil Pages's article on Sebald's reading of Handke touches on the terms of my own analysis (Pages 2008). Examining the essay 'Unterm Spiegel des Wassers,' first published in 1983, Pages focuses on Sebald's understanding of "pathological vision" as a means of breaking down boundaries between literary-critical and other forms of reading and writing, suggesting that Sebald "read Handke as part of the development of his own poetics." (Pages 2008: 62; BU: 115-30) He suggests that, in this essay, Sebald invokes

the notion of the child's vision as another alternative, alongside the "pathological," to the normalizing gaze of modernity:

Like the prohibition against the (auto)biographical and subjective in scholarly criticism, the social exclusion of art and illness from what are considered acceptable representations of "real life" repeat those processes through which the child's way of seeing the world is eliminated through socialization, education and regimentation. (Pages, 2008: 81)

However, Pages's main discussion of the imagery of childhood in this essay suggests another way of reading Sebald. The images of children in 'Unterm Spiegel des Wassers' that dominate Pages's analysis are not suggestive of the "child's way of seeing the world" at all, because they are images of dead children: the dead boy from a novella of 1876 by Theodor Storm with which Sebald prefaces his essay, and the corpse of the schoolboy found in a stream by Bloch in Handke's *Tormann* narrative (Handke 1970; Storm 1987). Pages seems to suggest that these images of dead children perform an important rhetorical function in Sebald's argument, operating as a kind of instrument by which "pathological" connections are forged between apparently unrelated things. (Pages, 2008: 79-80) Although Pages does not develop this insight into a discrete line of argument, I would suggest that it highlights another important aspect of Sebald's discourse: the role of pathos as a means of persuading or eliciting particular responses from the reader. These two strands to Pages's observations on child figures in an essay of Sebald's anticipate the two strands of my own analysis. First, I examine the function of childness, particularly of notions of innocence, within Sebald's dialectical critiques of modernity, patriarchy and bourgeois normativity. I follow this with an analysis of the role of childness in Sebald's emotive narratological structures of mourning and pathos. To

Pages's consideration of images of childhood in Sebald's reception of Handke, I add an analysis of childhood in Sebald's essays on Stifter and Nabokov. Pages suggests that the notion of the child's vision feeds into a relatively straightforward critical discourse on Sebald's part, which pits "liminal" and "pathological" figures against a normative cultural and critical mainstream. This would suggest that the child's vision might perform a defamiliarising role in Sebald's texts, thus aiding a project of radical social criticism. However, I follow Hutchinson in arguing that a more complex, dialectically structured discourse is going on in Sebald's prose fiction (Hutchinson 2009a). This dialectical structure sees a tendency to deconstruct and debunk innocence as a myth of modern patriarchy met by instances of erotic yearning for innocence and wholeness. At the crux of this tension lies not the notion of the child's vision, but rather the matter of the paedophilic – by which I mean erotic investment in and appropriative desire for a child figure rather than the representation of acts of paedophilia.<sup>71</sup> It is to this aspect of Sebald's texts, in particular *Schwindel. Gefühle* and *Die Ausgewanderten*'s 'Cosmo Solomon' that I turn next. My discussion begins with a closer consideration of the myth of innocence as a product of modernity that is deeply implicated in matters of sexuality and desire.

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<sup>71</sup> As is discussed below, my reading of paedophilic motifs in Sebald is informed by Kincaid's work, although for the sake of clarity I do not make use of his term, "child-loving." Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*.

## 2.2 Childhood innocence and the desires of modernity

Childhood innocence has, of course, existed as an imaginative construct for a very long time. Aleida Assmann, for example, finds evidence of it in ancient Greek and early Christian sources (Assmann 1978). However, the understanding of childhood innocence that is now current in Western cultural and social discourses has been identified as a product of late modernity – that is, the period of profound change undergone by Western social, cultural, political, economic and industrial structures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Philippe Ariès's groundbreaking history of childhood identifies a profound shift in social constructions of childhood from the late seventeenth century on, with children becoming increasingly defined and represented in terms of difference from adults as the modern period progresses (Ariès 1996). Anne Higonnet's research on childhood innocence in visual art identifies the late eighteenth century as the moment at which visual representations of children changed from being primarily indicative of social class to representing the child as existing outside of the class system and thus separate from adult society (Higonnet 1998: 15-21). She shows how the image of the innocent child proliferated with the development of print technology which facilitated mass reproduction and circulation, so that innocence became a ubiquitous and popular trope. Hans-Heino Ewers's study of ideal childhood in German philosophical and literary discourse identifies Rousseau's *Émile* and Herder's anthropology of the Sturm und Drang era as seminal texts in the development of the concept of childhood as an ideal "poetische Daseinsform." (Ewers 1989) All three of these studies point to the late modern period as a point of origin for the rise of idealized notions of childhood innocence.

If the innocent child is a product of modernity, it might be argued that this is because the changes precipitated by modernity in terms of people's economic, social, sexual, religious, artistic and imaginative desires, fears and expectations created a new kind of adult need for the notion of childhood. Higonnet defines this need as a nostalgic one, linked to experiences and sentiments of loss brought about by manifold upheavals.<sup>72</sup>

She writes:

The modern child is always the sign of a bygone era, of a past which is necessarily the past of adults, yet which, being so distinct, so sheltered, so innocent, is also inevitably a lost past (...).(Higonnet 1998: 27)

James Kincaid also identifies an adult desire to arrest or undo loss as central to the imaginative and cultural attitude which he terms "child-loving", whose presence he examines in Victorian and contemporary culture (Kincaid 1992). He argues that such desire to freeze and thus master the moment of loss is an erotic one, in accordance with his somewhat polemical central thesis that paedophilic, or "child-loving" impulses covertly define most contemporary discourse about childhood and children (Kincaid 1992: 67). The link between modernity and loss is drawn without reference to childhood, but with reference to Sebald, by Jonathan Long (Long 2007a). He writes:

The continual production of the new in capitalism has as its concomitant the continual destruction of the old, and the acceleration of obsolescence itself. In this light, modernity was, from quite an early stage, understood as something that perpetually generated loss. (Long 2007a: 3-4)

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<sup>72</sup> Valerie Krips argues in a similar vein in relation to post-1945 culture, when she suggests that texts of childhood from the "Golden Age" of English children's literature, particularly *Alice in Wonderland*, can be understood as functioning as nostalgic 'lieux de mémoire' in post-World War 2 Britain. Valerie Krips, *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage and Childhood in Postwar Britain* (New York; London: Garland, 2000).

Long identifies the archive and the photograph as cultural and technological responses to this perception of continual and escalating loss. As a concept, the archive would appear to be so unlike that of the innocent child as to be its opposite – an exhaustive, labyrinthine and alienating storage-house of scripts and texts in contrast to an image of blankness, simplicity and desirability, of ‘*tabula rasa*.’ Yet the images of the blank slate and of the massive accumulation of texts perform similar tasks in relation to loss and modernity. As imaginative constructs, both ideas have to do with the desire to freeze and preserve something of what is lost, in order to find a way of mastering the experience of loss. The trope of the innocent child can thus be understood as one of a number of constructs that sprang up, as it were, in response to the experience of loss associated with the advent of modernity.

This, however, is not its only function as a modern invention. It also functions as reassuring affirmation of the wholeness of western subjectivity and of the pure and good roots of the project of ‘western civilization’, and as a defining and controlling trope in relation to the sexual and social roles of women as well as in relation to normative bourgeois reproductive sexuality in general. It is this aspect of the trope that Kevin Ohi takes to task through his queer theory-informed analyses of the eroticisation of childhood in texts by Pater, Wilde, James and Nabokov (Ohi 2005). Ohi emphasises the role of childhood innocence in the construction and preservation of a bourgeois myth of autonomous and whole subjectivity, while suggesting that the aesthetic eroticisation of this trope contests the normative standards which it entails:

Made to embody an improbable innocence, the child allows us to tell ourselves of an origin uncontaminated by the vicissitudes of language and desire, a pure beginning of autonomy uncorrupted by commerce with outside. (...) The

queerness of childhood names, among other things, the simple fact that because subjects have origins outside of themselves, they cannot represent themselves in any simple sense. The queerness of the child names the discomfiting consequences of this constitutive permeability. (...) "Innocence," by positing an autonomy to be breached only by violence, seeks to contain that permeability (...) for the representation of a self. Childhood is therefore the ground on which homophobia and other forms of sexual normativity take shape, and not merely because children offer to the dominant culture's fantasy of social hygiene the promise of sexual conformity at last achieved. Childhood also locates the promise of that culture's own representation and reduplication (...)." (Ohi 2005: 6, 8)

Here, Ohi clearly articulates the connection between childhood innocence and normative, repressive social and sexual codes. His argument that the figure of the innocent child supplies us with an ideal myth of "uncorrupted" autonomy also speaks to Walser's construction of Johann's self-reliance, and his wider construction of memory as autonomous and unaltered by subsequent knowledge and experience, in *Ein springender Brunnen*. I would not, however, fully agree with Ohi's argument that eroticisation of innocence constitutes a contestation or deconstruction of patriarchal structures. As I have already argued in relation to Beyer's *Flughunde*, the eroticisation of innocence facilitates at best only a partial undoing of the myth of innocence, and ultimately can feed back into it.

Taking Higonnet's, Kincaid's and Ohi's analyses together, an image of the cultural role of childhood innocence in modernity emerges which casts it as clearly and profoundly conservative. The figure of the innocent child is one which allows the experience of change and loss to become crystallized, objectified and thus mastered, and it is also one which allows the experience of subjectivity to appear reassuringly bounded



and self-contained. Even when utilized in projects of social criticism this trope of innocence maintains the ideal of the pristine western subject. What these analyses make clear is that the modern trope of childhood innocence is intimately bound up with adult desire, be it desire for children, for a lost past or ideal future, or for validation of bourgeois social and sexual identities. Where adult desire finds its expression in a gaze on an image of childhood innocence, that desire takes on some murkier dimensions, due to the nature of the innocence construct. As Higonnet so clearly articulates, the innocent child of modernity “is desirable precisely to the extent that it does not understand desire.” (Higonnet 1998: 28) The image of the innocent child is thus an image of a human that is voided of the human attributes of desire and awareness. Kincaid sees an act of violence in this hollowing out of the image of the child in order to accommodate adult desire. Kincaid may be overstating his case when he suggests that an act of violence can be perpetrated against an abstract image or ideal. In the realm of visual representation the issue can be somewhat clearer than in the realm of verbal, textual narrative. Many modern images of innocent children created in the service of adult desire have involved child sitters and models, from the pioneering works of Joshua Reynolds in the late eighteenth century to Lewis Carroll’s photographs of Alice Liddell, and on down to contemporary visual consumer culture. In these cases, questions of representational ethics have clear and concrete relevance, as the bodies of real children are enlisted in the service of an adult demand for consumable objects of innocence. Unlike a photograph or a painting based on a model or sitter, though, a verbal text does not entail a body. Nonetheless, textual constructions of childhood innocence do entail a similar ethical murkiness regarding the projection of desires, which are fundamentally desires for

affirmation of subjective wholeness, onto an ideal construction of childhood as lacking in consciousness and desire. Without anthropomorphizing the trope of childhood innocence, we can question the desires and requirements that give rise to it and cluster around it.

The potential significance of the modern trope of childhood innocence for Sebald's critique of modernity is clear. The trope's multiple functions in the service of negotiating loss, of affirming the western model of subjectivity, and of facilitating social criticism are strikingly congruent with the central thematic preoccupations and anxieties of Sebald's prose fiction texts. The concept of "child-loving" which Kincaid draws on to construct a generalized model of contemporary western culture as paedophilic can, I would suggest, be adapted usefully for analysis of the functioning of childness in Sebald's prose fiction texts. This is not to suggest that I intend to read paedophilia onto the narratives in any literal or sensationalist way. Nor do I intend to apply the term to the texts in the generalized way in which Kincaid uses the term "child-loving." Rather, I employ the term 'paedophilic' in relation to moments in Sebald's writings which allude to paedophilia or which describe encounters with child figures in erotic terms. I argue that, in such moments, dialectical tension can clearly be observed between the impulse to contest or deconstruct innocence as a trope of modern patriarchy, and the utopian desire to reinstate innocence as an ideal, pre-lapsarian 'golden age.'

As well as his own literary texts, Sebald's critical readings of literary representations of childhood are also informative for this exploration. In discussing these, I expand and build on Pages's discussion of Sebald's Handke reception (Pages 2008). Sebald's essay on Stifter of 1985, 'Bis an den Rand der Natur. Versuch über Stifter', published in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (BU: 15-37), constructs Stifter as a

paedophilic writer on the basis of his representations of children, while his short piece on Nabokov of 1996, 'Traumtexturen. Kleine Anmerkung zu Nabokov', subsequently published in *Campo Santo* (CS: 184-92), celebrates the author's reconstruction of childhood in *Speak, Memory*. These pieces indicate an engagement with the idea of childhood and with the relationship between childhood and adult desire which took place throughout the course of Sebald's critical and creative careers. Sebald's constructions of Nabokov and Stifter also reveal the blind spots that were necessarily part of that engagement.

### 2.3 Childhood in Sebald's literary criticism

#### **"Enchanted Hunters": Sebald's Nabokov**

A nostalgic reception of literary childhood can be seen in Sebald's short essay 'Traumtexturen', first published in 1996 and reproduced in *Campo Santo*, which constructs Vladimir Nabokov as a magician figure whose prose can re-conjure a lost "Kindheitskosmos", and can actually function as a "Buchstabenbrücke" between the present and the past of childhood (CS 189). Focusing primarily on *Speak, Memory*, the essay also refers to *Pnim* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Amongst the novels not mentioned in Sebald's piece is *Lolita* – a text that certainly does not fit with Sebald's characterization of Nabokov and his work (Nabokov 2006). *Lolita* is a tale of misappropriation, paedophilia and probable rape, whose narrator frames it as a love story and a confession. There is no attempt by the narrator to allow the girl's voice to be heard through his, as Sebald's narrators so painstakingly strive to achieve; rather, snatches of Dolores's subjectivity escape at times through the bars of Humbert's narrative.

Humbert's claim that "I am no poet. I am only a very conscientious recorder" (*Lolita*: 80) would seem rather less disingenuous were it made by one of Sebald's narrators. The narrative form of *Lolita* can be seen as antithetical to what might be called the Sebaldian ethics of narration, yet its narrator bears some family resemblance to Sebald's narrators and protagonists.<sup>73</sup> Humbert Humbert is a European emigrant with a partial academic career, who suffers from insomnia and bouts of melancholy and has had a number of spells in sanatoria. He is multilingual and highly literate, and is a believer in fate and coincidence. Doubtless, if one were to attempt to draw up a literary family tree for the Sebaldian narrator one would find countless such "enchanted hunters" (*Lolita*: 132), yearning, melancholy, male figures roaming the borderlands of bourgeois normativity. Furthermore, the fact that Sebald excludes *Lolita* from his sympathetic and affiliative appraisal of Nabokov's work suggests that the kinship between Humbert and Sebald's narrators is more likely to be unwished for than elective. In including *Lolita* in my discussion, I wish to set it up as an anti-text rather than an explicit intertext in relation to Sebald's work. I wish to do this in order to explore the ways in which Sebald invokes tropes of childhood innocence and the paedophilic in his narratives' performances of mourning, loss, yearning and critique.

To return to Sebald's reading of Nabokov in 'Traumtexturen', here Nabokov is constructed as a conjurer, a medium and a ghost – as someone who is capable of conjuring a perfect image of the past (CS: 189), or of looking at the world of the living from the perspective of the dead (CS: 185). The image of the magician is used where

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<sup>73</sup> For a range of approaches to the ethical dimension of Sebald's style and narrative structures, see for example Cosgrove, 'Narrating German suffering in the shadow of Holocaust victimology: W.G. Sebald, contemporary trauma theory and Dieter Forte's air raids epic', Anne Fuchs, "*Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*": Zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W.G. Sebalds Prosa (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004) at 21-40, Hutchinson, W.G. Sebald. *Die dialektische Imagination* at 35-76.

Nabokov's evocation of childhood is described, so that at this point it is not the presence of death or of the ghostly that is foregrounded, but the experience of wonder. In one extended sentence, Sebald reproduces Nabokov's image of himself as a boy gazing into a cloud of steam, implicitly constructing Nabokov's reader *as* that child, and then as a child enthralled by a magic show:

Das Muster auf dem Boden des Badezimmers von Wyrna, der weiße Dampf über der Wanne, in den der Knabe von seinem Sitz in dem dämmrigen Klosett traumverloren hineinsieht, die Wölbung des Türrahmens, gegen den er seine Stirne anlehnt, plötzlich, mit ein paar wenigen richtig gesetzten Worten, wird der ganze Kindheitskosmos vor unseren Augen hervorgezaubert wie aus dem Inneren eines schwarzen Zylinders. (CS: 189)

Sebald's construction of Nabokov in this piece avoids taking into account the violence, uncovered by *Lolita*, that can dwell in adult narration, writing and reading of childhood. Instead, Sebald romanticizes Nabokov as a conjurer of a whole "Kindheitskosmos", whose magical reconstructions are beautiful and authentic to the degree that their author suffers in bringing them forth (CS: 186, 189). This would suggest that, in this instance at least, Sebald's reading of childhood is more in keeping with the trope's function of mastering loss than with any deconstructive approach to the trope itself.

### **Pathological innocence: Sebald's Stifter**

In Sebald's earlier and longer essay on Adalbert Stifter, a less romantic reading of the literary construction of childhood is evident. Here, Sebald understands Stifter's representations of child figures as a product of his own, adult desire, which Sebald

specifies as being paedophilic (BU: 28-9). This reading clearly entails a degree of critical distance in relation to the trope of childhood innocence, and Sebald's construction of Stifter's paedophilia comes close to touching upon the role of this trope in reinforcing and imposing normative bourgeois social codes. Sebald foregrounds Stifter's role as a domestic teacher, arguing that his paedophilic representations enabled Stifter to invest the social divide that lay between him and his pupils with erotic significance, thus allowing him to accommodate his own sense of self to his low social and economic status. This interpretation not only identifies Stifter as a paedophile, but apportions the blame for his paedophilia to bourgeois society at large. Paedophilia itself is constructed in the last instance as a pathological response to otherwise unbearable social pressures. By eroticising the untouchability of his charges, Stifter can endure his own failure to feel at home or to progress in bourgeois society:

Stifter hat die Grenzlilien, die seine inferiore Stellung markierten, dem eigenen Selbstbewußtsein kommensurabel gemacht, indem er die Jungfräulichkeit, ja Kindlichkeit der für ihn unberührbaren jungen Damen zum Leitstern seiner undecklierten Erotik erhob, was allerdings die libidinöse Bindung an die tabuisierten Wesen nur noch verstärkte. (BU: 28-9)

The paedophile is thus constructed as victim of oppressive forms of social organization. Sebald goes on to state that: "Es ist bekannt, daß ein prononciertes pädagogisches Talent zumeist Hand in Hand geht mit unangelebten pädophilen Wünschen." (BU: 28-9) This rather mischievous aside, which is not supported by reference to any source text or study, shows Sebald drawing a direct connection between socially condoned didactic practice, and a form of desire that is socially reviled. Although after *Schwindel. Gefühle*, his texts cease to make explicit reference to the paedophilic,

pedagogy remains a leitmotif in his narratives, and the tension inherent in this connection between permitted practice and forbidden desire is one which informs all of his prose works, and the construction of their narrators, protagonists and implied readers.

These two articles, on Stifter and on Nabokov, written eleven years apart, point to many of the tensions that inform Sebald's utilization of childhood tropes in his literary works. The earlier and more extended piece on Stifter reveals a perception of a relationship between oppressive bourgeois social codes, the paedophilic, and tropes of innocence, and shows an awareness of the transferability of these tropes onto adult figures. It also indicates a fascination with the dynamics of pedagogic and pastoral relationships which is continued throughout Sebald's prose fiction oeuvre, where his narrators play pastoral roles in relation to their subjects' oral and written narratives and photographic material, shepherding these testimonies into textual narrative form in order to acknowledge and record them. The shorter piece on Nabokov, published at a point when Sebald had already become established as a literary author, functions more as a statement of his own literary affiliations and identity than as a sustained analysis of Nabokov's work. Here, we see evidence of a more conventional adherence to the role of childhood innocence as an expression of and antidote to loss. The omission of *Lolita* from the piece suggests a move away from a critical awareness of childhood innocence as complicit in the oppressive social structures of modernity.

What emerges from my reading of these two articles is a complex set of tensions and relationships around childness, which retains a presence throughout Sebald's prose fiction works. What follows is an exploration of the functions of childness in Sebald's narrative constructions of loss, innocence and forbidden desire. The question at the centre

of this exploration is whether child tropes can be said to function as “sites of resistance” within Sebald’s critique of modernity, as Long argues other tropes of modernity such as the archive and the photograph do (Long 2007a). My argument is that the complex structures of the innocence myth and its resistance to deconstruction mean that it operates in a rather more ambiguous manner than Long’s model might suggest.

## 2.4 “[Sie] wußten nicht, wie sie herauskommen sollten aus ihrer Unschuld”:

### Innocence, desire and paedophilic motifs in *Schwindel. Gefühle*

*Schwindel. Gefühle* is the starting point for this exploration of Sebald’s literary oeuvre because it is the only one of his prose fiction texts to explicitly thematise paedophilia, which it does at a number of points in the ‘All’estero’ section (SG: 39-153). Here, I carry out close analysis of these instances, and focus particularly on two passages in which matters of guilt, innocence and desire are concentrated around a child object of desire.

### Pathological innocence II: Reading Casanova in Venice

‘All’estero’ centres around two periods of travel undertaken by the narrator, one to Vienna, Venice and Verona in 1980, and the other to these cities and Limone sul Garda and Milan in 1987.<sup>74</sup> While in Venice on the earlier journey, the narrator reflects on

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<sup>74</sup> *Schwindel. Gefühle*’s play on Thomas Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* has been remarked upon by Sheppard, Zilcosky, Atze and Rovagnati, who also identifies an intertextual connection between ‘All’estero’ and Visconti’s films. This intertextual relationship further supports my argument that Sebald undertakes a thematic engagement with the paedophilic in this text. Marcel Atze, ‘Koinzidenz und Intertextualität. Der Einsatz von Prätexten in W.G. Sebalds Erzählung »All’estero«’, in Franz Loquai (ed.), *W.G. Sebald* (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 1997), 151-75, Gabriella Rovagnati, ‘Das unrettbare Venedig des W.G. Sebald’, in Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (eds.), *Sebald. Lektüren* (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 143-56, Richard Sheppard, ‘Woods, trees and the spaces in between’: A report on work published on W.G. Sebald 2005-2008’, *Journal of European Studies*, 39/1 (March 2009), 79-128 at 83, John Zilcosky, ‘Lost and found:



Casanova's account of his imprisonment in and escape from the prison of the Doges Palace there. He describes Casanova's discovery of old court reports in the garret of the prison, which seem to be primarily concerned with abuses committed by male adults against minors and those under their care. In the text of Casanova's own memoir, this reading is not described as anything more than a source of diversion from the exigencies of prison life:

I saw strange answers to suggestive interrogations regarding seductions of virgins, attentions carried too far by men employed in girls' orphanages, facts about confessors who had abused their female penitents, schoolmasters convicted of pederasty, and guardians who had cheated their wards; some of them dated back two or three centuries, the style and the customs of which gave me a few hours of pleasure. (Casanova 2006: 495)

While Casanova's text indicates no engagement beyond momentary amusement with these histories, Sebald's narrator is spurred on to empathize with the prisoners, and draw a parallel between the justice system of that time and of later times:

Zweifellos war die Rechtsprechung damals, wie später nicht anders, zum Großteil mit der Regulierung des Liebestriebs befaßt, und bei nicht wenigen der unter den Bleidächern langsam verdämmernden Arrestanten dürfte es sich um jene Unstillbaren gehandelt haben, deren Sehnsucht sie einmal ums andere auf denselben Punkt hintreibt. (SG: 67)

Furthermore, Sebald's narrative does some editing work on Casanova's text, excluding the reference Casanova's makes to "guardians cheating their wards", and suggesting a particular emphasis on the seduction of virgin orphans, so that the passage

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Disorientation, nostalgia and Holocaust melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, *MLN*, 121/3 (April 2006), 679-700.

appears to be focused solely on sexual transgression, particularly paedophilic transgression. The vagueness of the temporal referents here (does “damals” refer to Casanova’s time or the preceding centuries from which the court reports originate, and does “später” indicate contemporary times?) creates a sense of general referentiality which turns the “verdämmernde[] Arrestanten” into perpetual rather than historically specific figures. The last clause constructs their desire very much along the same lines as Sebald’s construction of Stifter’s pathological paedophilia, as a compulsive, repeated return to a particular point (of Stifter Sebald writes “Es liegt in der Natur dieser Problematik, daß Stifter sie explizit nicht gestalten konnte. Und doch steuert er immer wieder auf sie zu.” (BU: 29)). Sebald’s reading and rewriting of Casanova thus presents us with the image of a group of individuals whose traumatisation by repressive social structures leads them into pathological sexualities which are then punished. These figures are constructed as victims of cruel social codes and structures, and the narrator expresses compassion, even a sense of fellowship, for their vulnerable position. Sebald’s invocation of the paedophilic thus contributes to a project of social critique aimed at the normative and repressive structures of modern patriarchy.

### **“Enchanted Hunters” II: Appropriative desire and the Sicilian boys**

The narrator undergoes a more gruelling encounter with the notion of paedophilia later in ‘All’estero’ when, during his second journey, on the trail of Kafka, he attempts to take a bus to Riva. His humiliating exchanges with a set of twin boys who, to him, bear an uncanny resemblance to the young Kafka, and with their parents, cause him to get off the bus early, ending up in Limone sul Garda where he will have his passport lost by

another Italian boy. The Sicilian boys episode is worth quoting at length as an example of Sebald's comedy (which, as Long remarks, has not received due critical attention (Long 2007a: 76)), as well as in support of the current analysis:

Kurz vor der Abfahrt um fünf vor halb zwei stieg ein Junge von etwa fünfzehn Jahren ein, der auf die unheimlichste Weise, die man sich denken kann, den Bildern glich, die Kafka als heranwachsender Schüler zeigen. Und als ob es damit nicht genug gewesen wäre, hatte er zudem einen Zwillingbruder, der sich von ihm, soweit ich in meinem Entsetzen feststellen konnte, nicht im geringsten unterschied. (...) Mein Herz klopfte, und ein Schwindelgefühl ergriff mich wie früher in der Kindheit, wo es mir bei jeder Autofahrt schlecht geworden ist. (...) Als ich etwas später unter Aufwendung allen Mutes ein Gespräch mit ihnen anzuknüpfen versuchte, reagierten sie nur mit einem blöden gegenseitigen Sich-Angrinsen. Und auch als ich mich dem mir als ›die Herren Eltern‹ in Erinnerung gebliebenen, äußerst reservierten Ehepaar zuwandte, das meine seltsamen Bemühungen um seine Söhne bereits mit wachsender Besorgnis verfolgt hatte, gelang es mir nicht annähernd, ihnen klarzumachen, welcher Art mein Interesse an den beiden unablässig vor sich hin kichernden Knaben war. (...) Als ich zuletzt zur Zerstreung jeden Verdachts, den sie, meine Person betreffend, hegen mochten, sagte, es würde mir schon reichen, wenn sie, sobald sie aus den Ferien wieder zu Hause in Sizilien seien, mir, ohne Angabe ihres Namens oder ihrer Anschrift, ein Bild ihrer Söhne nach England schicken würden, war es ihnen, wie ich genau merkte, vollends klar, daß es sich bei mir um nichts anderes als um einen zu seinem sogenannten Vergnügen in Italien herumreisenden englischen Päderasten handeln konnte. (SG: 101-3)

Here again, as in Beyer's *Flughunde*, we are met with an adult, male protagonist whose obsession leads him to a stance of objectifying and appropriative desire in relation to child figures. Although the narrator is clearly not what he believes himself to be mistaken for – an English paedophile sex tourist – his response to the sight of the boys is

strongly marked by desire, confusion and involuntary physical sensation, so that it bears a close resemblance to a state of romantic turmoil. The nature of his yearning, sparked by an uncanny coincidence, is at least partially erotic, even if the object of desire is not truly the set of twins but the figure of Kafka – the object of the narrator’s travels and writing in ‘All’estero’ and the following narrative section, ‘Dr K.s Badereise nach Riva’. This passage has the function of casting the narrator as a social outsider, unable to communicate or prove the legitimacy of his desire to a nuclear family unit, the images of whose sons he wishes to possess. In this sense, Sebald’s construction of the narrator in this scene bears a resemblance to his construction of Stifter in ‘Bis an den Rand der Natur’. Both figures are outsiders, unable to successfully negotiate the behavioural and communicative codes of bourgeois culture.

I would argue that this scene from ‘All’estero’ prompts both readerly sympathy for and suspicion towards the narrating persona. This could be said to mirror Beyer’s construction of Karnau as childlike in his distaste for the National Socialist regime (and thus worthy of sympathy), yet brutally appropriative in his fascination with the Goebbels children (and thus worthy of suspicion). Sebald’s narrator’s reference to the “Herren Eltern”, like Karnau’s “Herrenstimmen,” emphasises his ‘otherness’ or marginality in relation to patriarchal norms.<sup>75</sup> In this sense his fascination with the boys works in line with Ohi’s model of contesting patriarchy by “queering” innocence.<sup>76</sup> However, the

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<sup>75</sup> In making this comparison between Beyer and Sebald, I am not overlooking the fact that, although both authors produce representations of patriarchal society, there are important differences between their texts in terms of historical context. Namely, Beyer’s ‘patriarchal society’ is that of National Socialist Germany, while Sebald’s is 1980s Italy here, and elsewhere more generally ‘modernity’ as a whole, as my discussion of the Casanova section of ‘All’estero’ indicates (see above).

<sup>76</sup> For other readings of Sebald that focus on the politics of sexuality in his work, see Helen Finch, ‘Meine mir unbekannte Herkunft: German Identity and History in the Works of W. G. Sebald, Botho Strauss and Peter Handke’, Ph.D. (Trinity College Dublin, 2008), Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

narrator's appropriative desire to possess an image of the boys – like Karnau's desire to possess a recording of the children's voices – draws attention to a possessive, even predatory aspect of his hunt for meaning.

Sebald's representation of the boys themselves continues this process of constructing an image of compromised innocence. As the boys are described as appearing to be about fifteen years old, it could be argued that they would be more appropriately be termed 'adolescents' or 'youths' than 'children'. However, Sebald's representation of them does not adhere to the categorical distinction between 'childhood' and 'youth' that Oesterle identifies as having developed in the late eighteenth century (Oesterle 1997: 11).<sup>77</sup> Instead, the representation of the two boys is based on the elision of this distinction. The narrator refers to them as "Knaben" and "Buben", terms for male children which both contain considerable flexibility as indicators of age or developmental stage.<sup>78</sup> The portrayal of them as under the supervision of their parents also indicates child status. This concerted blurring of the lines which conventionally keep ideas of childhood and youth distinct from one another adds to the sense of unease and confusion which dominates this scene, preventing the reader from consigning the boys to either category. In particular, the reader is prevented from attributing childhood innocence to the boys, who snigger knowingly and mockingly at the narrator's ineptitude. This contrasts strongly with Beyer's construction of Helga as a profoundly innocent agent of narration and focalization. However, the response of Sebald's adult "narrator-focalizer"

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<sup>77</sup> This blurring of the semantic boundaries between 'childhood' and 'youth' is continued by Sebald when, at the hotel in Limone, the narrator witnesses an argument between the proprietors over whether their son, who has just lost the narrator's passport, is still a child or not (SG: 115).

<sup>78</sup> On Sebald's use of the word 'Buben' and other forms of dialect or non-standard German, see Matthias Zucchi, 'Zur Kunstsprache W.G. Sebalds', in Sigurd Martin and Ingo Wintermeyer (eds.), *Verschiebebahnhöfe der Erinnerung. Zum Werk W.G. Sebalds* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 163-81.

does bear some resemblance to Karnau's response to hearing the children's voices on the radio (F: 90; see my discussion above). In both cases, a desiring outsider-figure is enraged by the insider-status of the children who are the objects of his desire. In both cases, too, mass media is invoked in order to suggest the children's absorption into normative social and consumer structures: radio and cinema in *Flughunde* and the newspaper in *Schwindel. Gefühle*.<sup>79</sup>

This scene thus presents us with a fragmented representation of innocence which works against the notions of wholeness and purity, exposing the myth's undercurrents of desire and projection. However, as I will show, this fragmented picture is not part of any radical deconstruction of innocence within 'All'estero'; rather, it segues into a conventional narratological pattern based on the concept of the Fall.

### **Restoring innocence? - Salvatore and Abel**

So far, the analysis has suggested that *Schwindel. Gefühle* utilizes the motif of paedophilia in order to construct desire, innocence and childhood as compromised and fractured phenomena. However, this narrative technique does not entail a radical deconstruction of tropes of childhood innocence. Rather, a counter-image is produced in the closing pages of 'All'estero,' which returns to a more conventional construction of the innocence of youth and childhood, and, through the figure of Salvatore, rehabilitates the yearning gaze of an adult on the figure of a boy. Salvatore is an acquaintance or friend of the narrator, whom he meets in a bar in Verona seven years after his initial trip to Italy, in order to learn from him the full story of the 'Gruppe Ludwig' murders. After

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<sup>79</sup> For a brief discussion of the significance of newspapers in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, see Jonathan Long, *W.G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007a) at 92-3.

relating the crimes, arrest and sentencing of Abel and Furlan, the two young men who formed this group, and describing their familial and educational backgrounds, Salvatore finishes his report to the narrator with the following reflection:

Ich glaube, sie waren zueinander wie Brüder und wußten nicht, wie sie herauskommen sollten aus ihrer Unschuld. Ich habe Abel, der ein hervorragender Gitarrist gewesen ist, einmal in einer Fernsehsendung gesehen. Ich glaube, es war Mitte der siebziger Jahre. Er war damals vielleicht fünfzehn oder sechzehn. Und ich erinnere mich, sehr bewegt gewesen zu sein von seiner Erscheinung und seinem wundervollen Spiel. (SG: 148)

The obvious contrast created by this passage is between Abel's moving, youthful self and the violence he is later to perpetrate. Salvatore is thus calling up from memory an image of prelapsarian innocence. It is Abel's physical appearance and musical expression that move Salvatore, both non-linguistic phenomena suggesting an immediacy not yet disrupted by "the vicissitudes of language" (Ohi 2005: 6). In contrast to the narrator's appropriative and inappropriate desire for a photograph of the Sicilian boys, the image of the young Abel is proffered to Salvatore in the form of a broadcast television image, the consumption and enjoyment of which is a fully sanctioned social norm.

The yearning underpinning Salvatore's statement is to be able to retrieve this romantic moment of response to an innocent boy.<sup>80</sup> This is analogous to the dilemma with which Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* aligns itself, in its stated intention to escape the burden of subsequent knowledge in its encounters with memories from childhood. Both Sebald and Walser thus stage a yearning for forgetting by means of

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<sup>80</sup> Given Abel's later connection with violence and death, Salvatore's yearning can also be linked to that of Aschenbach. Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig und andere Erzählungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1954) at 7-98.

childness.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to *Ein springender Brunnen* however, Sebald's text leans towards the conclusion that consciousness belonging to a past time, prior to a violent or traumatic change, cannot or ought not be revisited, but can only be viewed through the lens of one's subsequent knowledge and experience. Salvatore's yearning is thus impossible, as the knowledge of Abel's subsequent crimes has now altered the way in which that past moment can be remembered.

Sebald's narrative thus seems to end up utilizing the notion of innocence in a very conventional manner, as the last word on loss and violent change. Although Salvatore cannot return to his experience of innocent rapture, it is this experience that the text positions as a prelapsarian point of origin from which all of the figures connected with paedophilic desire in 'All'estero' are outcasts. However, the richly ambiguous sentence that precedes Salvatore's recollection of seeing the young Abel complicates this picture to some extent.<sup>82</sup> Did Abel and Furlan fail altogether to 'come out of innocence', so that their violence was somehow perpetrated from within innocence? Or did they fail to find the right way out of innocence, turning to violence instead of acknowledging an erotic love for each other? The first interpretation points to a connection between the western ideal of innocence and the violent and rigid Christian fundamentalism that causes the pair to murder those "die Gott verraten hätten." (SG 146-7) The second suggests that the 'Gruppe Ludwig' can be read as a pathology caused by repression of sexuality, which would seem to draw a connecting line between innocence and repressive heterosexual normativity.

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<sup>81</sup> See in this regard Hutchinson's discussion of Nietzschean forgetting in Sebald. Ben Hutchinson, "'Ein Penelopewerk des Vergessens'": W.G. Sebald's Nietzschean poetics of forgetting', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 45/3 (July 2009), 325-36.

<sup>82</sup> "Ich glaube, sie waren zueinander wie Brüder und wußten nicht, wie sie herauskommen sollten aus ihrer Unschuld." (SG: 148)



In either case, it seems that the narrative is still pointing critically to the interrelatedness of patriarchy and the innocence myth at this point, even as it invokes innocence in its reflection on time and loss. With this in mind, Salvatore's innocent rapture of the mid-1970s also takes on a darker nuance. His gaze on Abel is not, after all, an unmediated experience of the boy's physical beauty and musical sensitivity. Mediated and sanctioned by the institution of television, it occurs securely within the bounds of conventional spectatorship and consumption. Although it does appear as a site of innocence, Salvatore's gaze on the young Abel is not constructed as a site of immediate relationship between adult and boy. Rather, this site of innocence is constructed in such a way as to show that the distancing processes of mediation and representation are (always) already present, despite the promises of ordinary immediacy and pre-social freedom that innocence makes. If anything is truly salvaged, it is not 'innocence' but Salvatore himself, as a desiring adult subject whose gaze on the boy is not tainted by appropriative violence. Sebald thus works both with and against the grain of innocence in this scene, describing a yearning for an irrevocably lost moment of innocence, whilst at the same time constructing this moment as having itself been a highly mediated technological and social product.

## **Conclusion**

The above analysis of paedophilic motifs in 'All'estero' is not intended as a suggestion that paedophilia is a major thematic preoccupation of Sebald's works. Rather, this analysis has been undertaken in order to demonstrate that the paedophilic complex of desire, affinity, appropriative violence, loss and childhood innocence is of central

relevance to a consideration of the role of childness in Sebald's narrative strategies. It has also identified connections in this regard between *Schwindel. Gefühle* and Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* – two texts that otherwise share very little in terms of stylistic and formal structures and thematic concerns. I have argued that Sebald's 'All'estero' carries out an intense and concerted engagement with notions of childhood, innocence and desire, making use of the association of the modern trope of childhood innocence with the idea of loss, whilst also including the notion of innocence in its criticism of the repressive qualities of modern, western bourgeois social structures. In this sense, innocence can be seen to fit well with Sebald's wider dialectical structures of forgetting and remembering, distance and proximity, critique and yearning (Hutchinson 2009a). In Sebald's prose works published after *Schwindel. Gefühle* the paedophilic is no longer directly thematised. However, traces of the paedophilic can be read in the story 'Ambros Adelwarth' in *Die Ausgewanderten*, where Cosmo and Ambros take a photograph of a boy in Istanbul, an image of which is reproduced in Sebald's text. Here, as I discuss next, Sebald's impulses towards radical critique of patriarchy appear to be supplanted by an orientalist vision of innocence.

## 2.5 “[D]er außerordentlich schöne Knabe”: Orientalism and and the paedophilic gaze in ‘Ambros Adelwarth’



**Fig. 1** (DA: 199)

The photograph of the Turkish boy in Dervish costume appears in the context of the Sebaldian narrator’s reporting on his great-uncle Ambros’s travel diary (Fig. 1); Ambros travels East as far as Jerusalem in 1913 as manservant, companion and, the narrative implies, lover of Cosmo Solomon. The pair encounter the boy in Istanbul and, struck by his beauty, return the next day to have a photo taken of him (DA: 199-200). The ‘reproduction’ of this image in the text of *Die Ausgewanderten* creates the suggestion that the photograph was retained in the pages of Ambros’s diary and has thus come into the possession of the narrator. It is my argument that the inclusion of this visual image of childness in the text invites the reader to share in the protagonists’

orientalist and erotic gaze at this point in Sebald's narrative. In this sense, an orientalist gaze supplants the radically critical engagement with Western patriarchal structures I have observed elsewhere in Sebald's dialectical narrative engagements with childhood and innocence. As has been noted by Finch and Long, Ambros's and Cosmo's admiration of the boy is tantamount to a paedophilic gaze, which the narrative associates troublingly with their homosexuality, and which is also entangled with the structures of orientalist desire (Finch 2008: 160-1; Long 2007a: 55).<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to my interpretation of this passage, Long's reading of this image and its embedding in the verbal narrative suggests that it be understood as prompting readerly distrust in the text, thus serving a didactic purpose. He identifies a number of visual features within the photograph that seem to work against the verbal text's apparently permissive attitude to the men's appropriative behaviour (Long 2007a: 53). This would suggest that, in the case of this image, the implied reader is asked to resist and even suspect the narrator's and Ambros's version of the encounter with the boy, so that the narrative exposes and undermines "colonial," or rather orientalist desire, rather than affirming it (Long 2007a: 55).<sup>84</sup> Long argues that, in the photograph, the boy's posture appears stiff and defensive, and that his face is not clearly visible, so that the beauty described by Ambros is not evident to the reader (Long 2007a: 53). Thus the visual image

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<sup>83</sup> Finch also points out that the association of paedophilia with homosexuality sees Sebald repeating a twentieth century social and cultural cliché.

<sup>84</sup> By describing a "colonial" rather than orientalist impulse behind Ambros's and Cosmo's appropriative desire for the image of the Turkish boy, as well as their leisure activities in Palestine, Long sacrifices a degree of terminological precision in favour of contrasting these passages with the critique of colonialism Sebald carries out elsewhere in his work. Correcting this imprecision here is not an act of pedantry but rather an adjustment of critical focus that allows me to bring into view the manner in which orientalism combines with images of childness in this story. As I will show, this combination produces pictures of innocence that function as tantalizing 'other' to the melancholy Eurocentrism of Sebald's narrative, a function which is partially suppressed by the irony of the narrative structure, but which nonetheless retains its power.

points to discontinuity and distance between the fictional gazes of Ambros and Cosmo, and the gaze of the reader. Long's reading would appear to be further supported by the elements of narrative irony and over-determination that surround this episode. The verbal narrative's preamble to the men's encounter with the boy is heavily laden with Oedipal and erotic imagery.<sup>85</sup> Oedipally blinded, and led by an overgrown, wobbly pigeon the size of a cockerel, the pair traverse a harbour square and enter a side street – both rather resonant symbolic sites in relation to illicit or taboo sexuality:

Wir wandten uns zum Gehen, aus dem Halbdunkel der Moschee in die sandweiße Helligkeit des Hafenplatzes. Als wir ihn überquerten, beide wie Wüstenwanderer mit der Hand die geblendeten Augen beschattend, wankte eine graue Taube von der Größe eines ausgewachsenen Hahns unbeholfen vor uns her und wies uns den Weg in eine Gasse, in der wir auf einen etwa zwölfjährigen Derwisch trafen. (DA: 199)

Here again, the text seems to demand sceptical and distanced reading. The passage's gesticulation, by way of irony and over-determination, towards the erotic dimension of the pair's encounter with the child also points to the presence of the paedophilic gaze: something which is more or less guaranteed to provoke suspicion and anxiety in a reader whose cultural context is late twentieth or early twenty-first century Europe or North America, where there is intense social and cultural anxiety about paedophilia and paedophiles.

If we follow Long in accepting that the image works against the verbal text in this instance, we can argue that an ironic gap emerges between visual and verbal fields which encourages the reader to read against the apparent grain of the verbal narrative, that is, to

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<sup>85</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Jürgen Barkhoff for his keen observation on this point.

read Ambros's travel narrative as retold by the narrator with suspicion. However, I would argue that this is not the only way in which the episode may be read. If we do not accept that the image works against the verbal text, or if we argue that it is possible to read the image as supporting the verbal text to some extent, then the ironic gap diminishes and it seems that the text permits the implied reader to read credulously with the grain of the verbal narrative, sharing in the orientalist and paedophilic gaze of the protagonists. In this sense, it may be possible for the reader to read the image of the Dervish boy 'with the grain' of Ambros's and the narrator's report to a large extent, and thus to identify imaginatively at least to some extent with the figures of Ambros and Cosmo. Self-consciously reading with the grain, it becomes possible to identify a network of desire, suppressed as it were by the ironic and self-reflexive aspects of Sebald's narrative structure, that combines orientalism, innocence and erotic sensuality in a child object of desire. In making this argument, I draw from Laura Mulvey's work on "visual pleasure" (Mulvey 1989).<sup>86</sup> Mulvey's work is useful here because it draws attention to the role of the viewer or 'reader' of cinematic narrative. This effect of this passage in 'Ambros Adelwarth' hinges completely on reader response, and on how the text generates and positions its implied reader. Although the self-conscious and ironic elements in the passage discussed above suggest that a sceptical and distanced reader is being called for at this point, I now follow on from Mulvey's focus on the credulous and willing viewer, in order to explore what is going on beyond and beneath the passage's ironic signalling.

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<sup>86</sup> Other theories of visual signification and photography are more usually invoked in readings of Sebald, particularly those of Barthes and Hirsch, whose work is of clear relevance to Sebald's constructions of memory and loss. However, Mulvey's work allows for a more reader response-oriented approach to the visual dimension of Sebald's texts, which is why I refer to it here. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*.

Although Long's visual analysis of the Dervish boy photograph, which suggests that the image does not allow the reader to perceive the beauty of the boy as described in Ambros's diary, is extremely convincing, I would suggest that there are also some compositional aspects to this image that do convey beauty to the reader, and that to some extent the photograph does permit the reader to identify with the perspectives of the fictional spectators. The lighting of the image in particular is of an attractive, dappled luminosity, with many irregularly distributed gradations of light and shade between the pure white of the boy's costume and the black of the deep shade in parts of the background. The image also contains many organic forms and textures, with grass in the foreground and a climbing plant in the background, as well as soft, irregular lines and patterns, such as the cobblestones on the ground, the uneven door- and window-frames, and the flaking patterns on the wall of the building. The expression and stance of the boy himself, which Long perceives as stiff and uncomfortable, is entirely open to subjective interpretation; another reader might see earnest dignity or enigmatic neutrality here.<sup>87</sup> Although the 'beautiful' face of the boy, ostensibly the subject of the image, is not clearly discernible, I would argue that the image nonetheless offers the reader a considerable degree of "visual pleasure."

If the image of the child offers Sebald's reader "visual pleasure," the complete absence from the narrative of any acknowledgement of his historical and cultural context further facilitates an objectifying, orientalist gaze. The verbal narrative refers only to the boy's physical beauty, so that his religious dress functions in that narrative as little more than an attractive "ethnic" costume. The complex history of Dervishism is not given

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<sup>87</sup> On the figure of the 'enigmatic child' see Reinhard Kuhn, *Corruption in Paradise: The Child in Western Literature* (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 1982).

room to resonate in Sebald's text, and in this sense the image offers an ahistorical perspective on Turkey, Islam, and Dervishism, so that there is little to prevent the orientalist gaze of Cosmo and Ambros from being replicated by the reader. The child's costume does not create a divide between the fictional spectators (Cosmo and Ambros) and the implied reader, and instead Sebald's implied reader can be seen to be constructed as Western European. Even though there is a certain degree of distancing irony attached to the image, then, there is also a sense in which the pristine blankness of the attractively lit Turkish boy, devoid of context, grants a license to an orientalist gaze. Thus decontextualized, his broad white skirt becomes a 'tabula rasa' of sorts, a white sheet onto which the viewer may project an eroticized and orientalist vision of childhood innocence very much in harmony with the fictional gazes of Cosmo and Ambros.

What, then, lies behind this partially and surreptitiously shared orientalist and erotic gaze on the image of a Turkish child in terms of the wider economies of the narrative? I would argue that this constitutes more than the ethical *faux-pas* or temporary failure of critical distance suggested by Long. There can be seen here, concealed or suppressed by the irony, a yearning uncharacteristic for Sebald's narrative concerns: a fascination with corporeality, sensuality and possession. In contrast to many of the photographic images embedded in Sebald's texts, this image is not primarily a *memento mori* (Sontag 1977). Although, as Barthes states, the anticipation and remembrance of death is present in all photographic images, it is not of primary significance in the case of the Dervish boy photograph, where the child is so thoroughly detached from temporal and historical contexts that he approaches the mythic (Barthes 2000). Here, the narrative appears to be invoking childness in an effort to reach towards something other than loss,



to acknowledge perhaps corporeality and sensuous experience, possession and pleasure – elements that are otherwise conspicuously absent in what is widely read as Cosmo and Ambros's relationship as lovers. However, this realm of experience is rendered multiply remote and 'other', mythical and exotic, because of the roles played by childness and orientalism in its narrative construction.

Having read both 'against' and 'with' the grain of the Dervish boy passage in 'Ambros Adelwarth,' the analysis has identified orientalist and eroticizing impulses that stand in uneasy relationship to the distancing strategies employed in the narrative at this point. An image of a Turkish, Muslim boy is appropriated and decontextualized here as an icon of pristine innocence, neither lost nor tainted, and fully available to the desiring, appropriative gaze of the text's Western, male protagonists, and by extension to Sebald's profoundly Western- and Eurocentric literary project. The image of the child is doubly objectified, through the cultural myth of innocence and through the discourse of orientalism. I would argue that this reveals a limit of Sebald's narrative project and strategy, where a preoccupation with European and Western loss is momentarily configured in binary relationship with an eroticised, orientalist vision of childhood innocence as pristine and possessed. In this sense, the paedophilic and orientalist gaze that is problematically present in the image of the Dervish boy hints at the persistence in Sebald's texts of the Western, patriarchal structures that he often seeks to critique.<sup>88</sup> At this point in the text, childness and the myth of innocence seem to be operating 'below

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<sup>88</sup> See also Maya Barzilai, 'Facing the past and the female specter in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*', in J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 203-16, Finch, 'Meine mir unbekannte Herkunft: German Identity and History in the Works of W. G. Sebald, Botho Strauss and Peter Handke.' I would add that the absence of women's writing from the vast array of Sebald's intertextual allusions and from his literary criticism further suggests the persistence of male-centred ways of seeing in his work.

the radar' of Sebald's dialectical structures of critique. In order to further explore this aspect of the role of childness in Sebald's narratives, and to consider in more depth how it affects his engagement with the legacy of the Holocaust in particular, I now move away from the topic of the paedophilic, to consider the relationship between the structures of innocence and of mourning in *Die Ausgewanderten*.

### **3. Innocence, death and the structures of mourning in *Die Ausgewanderten***

#### **3.1 Childhood innocence, death and Sebald's melodrama**

If, as I have suggested above, the modern myth of childhood innocence is bound up with notions of loss, it also stands in close relationship to death.<sup>89</sup> Death can act as a kind of ultimate guarantor of innocence. Higonnet writes that the image of the dead child "is one morbidly logical conclusion of the Romantic child image," which "allows adults to project the full measure of their longing." (Higonnet 1998: 29-30) Kincaid makes a similar argument in his discussion of childhood death in Dickens, suggesting that the figure of the dead child, of innocence frozen, holds greater aesthetic appeal than the figure of the adolescent grown out of innocence (Kincaid 1992: 82-3). Rose, too, points to a crucial interrelationship between childhood innocence and death in J.M. Barrie's *The Little White Bird*, the text that gave rise to the figure of Peter Pan. (Rose 1994: 25) Of course, what applies to Victorian and Edwardian English literature can by no means be

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<sup>89</sup> For a more general study of childhood death and its representation, see Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds, *Representations of Childhood Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). For a brief typology of nineteenth-century literary child deaths, see Judith Plotz, 'Literary ways of killing a child: The 19th Century practice', in Maria Nikolajeva (ed.), *Aspects and Issues in the History of Children's Literature* (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1-24.

assumed to apply to representations of childhood and adolescence from other periods and cultural contexts.<sup>90</sup> However, I would suggest that Sebald's narratives do invoke this nexus of innocence and death in their engagements with loss, mourning and the legacy of the Holocaust. Pages's discussion of Sebald's reception of Handke highlights his referencing of Storm's novella *Aquis Submersus*, a text centred around the image of a drowned boy, and alludes to the continued relevance of this image in Sebald's prose fiction, particularly *Austerlitz* (Pages 2008). Indeed, the melodramatic pathos of the 'drowned boy' has a sustained presence in *Austerlitz*, so that the protagonist's displacement and loss of identity in early childhood is configured as a kind of death (A: 81-2, 324-5). Austerlitz's response to a photograph of himself as a child, furthermore, echoes the appeal for help Storm's narrator perceives in the image of the dead boy:

Aus dem zarten Antlitz sprach neben dem Grauen des Todes, wie hilfeflehend, noch eine letzte holde Spur des Lebens; ein unwiderstehliches Mitleid befiel mich, wenn ich vor diesem Bilde stand. (cited in BU: 115)

Und immer fühlte ich mich dabei durchdrungen von dem forschenden Blick des Pagen, der gekommen war, sein Teil zurückzufordern und der nun im Morgengrauen auf dem leeren Feld darauf wartete, daß ich den Handschuh aufheben und das ihm bevorstehende Unglück abwenden würde. (A: 268)

The photographic image of his childhood self that Austerlitz is confronted with in Prague, and that is used in the cover design of most editions of the text, might itself be said to be further testament to the operation of deathly innocence in the narrative. The child stands, dressed in a white costume, in the foreground, with a dark and barren

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<sup>90</sup> See in this regard, Grotzer, *Die zweite Geburt. Figuren des Jugendlichen in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Günter Oesterle, *Jugend, ein romantisches Konzept?* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997).

landscape looming behind him. The small portion of the top of his head that breaks the line of the horizon has been given a dark halo of what appear to be pencil scribbles. Higonnet's description of Reynolds's 'Age of Innocence' painting as "haunted by death," with "a lowering vastness [looming] behind it" could thus be aptly applied to this image. (Higonnet 1998: 30) (Fig. 2, below)



**Fig. 2 (A: 266)**

The narrative function of this photograph, and the presence of the melodramatic figure of the dead child in *Austerlitz* are discussed further in the next part of the thesis. The presence of this figure certainly appears to support Zilcosky's argument that, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald engages in forms of melodramatic narration (Zilcosky 2006). However, while Zilcosky suggests that *Austerlitz* represents a new departure in this regard with respect to the rest of Sebald's oeuvre, I would argue that the interrelatedness of innocence and death also structures *Die Ausgewanderten's* engagements with loss and mourning oblique to the Holocaust, particularly in relation to the figures of Paul Bereyter and Luisa

Aurach. Although the image of the dead child is not invoked here as it is in *Austerlitz*, the myth of childhood innocence is nonetheless located at the centre of Sebald's narrative structures of mourning. These structures could be described in terms of a temporality of "anterior future of which death is the stake," which for Barthes is the mournful temporality of the photograph, but which equally well describes that of the myth of childhood innocence (Barthes 2000: 96). Here again, we see childness operating in Sebald's narratives outside of his project of self-reflexive critique, instead functioning to create emotive moments of pathos and tragic irony that articulate mourning, and that also help to configure the role of the narrating persona.

### **3.2 From the failure of post-Rousseauian ideals to the embodiment of innocence: 'Paul Bereyter'**

At first, 'Paul Bereyter' seems to continue Sebald's critique of the notion of childhood innocence, emphatically drawing attention to the discursive, even illusory nature of this concept, and to the potential it offers for whitewashing the past. Most obviously, the narrator remarks that everyone in S. refers to Bereyter by his first name, as though "er sei in den Augen seiner Zeitgenossen nie richtig erwachsen gewesen," (DA: 43) and that even as schoolchildren he and his classmates had viewed Bereyter as an older brother figure rather than as an adult, "als gehöre er zu uns oder wir zu ihm" (DA: 43). It is made clear by the narrator that this communal view of Bereyter as child-like is to be understood as false, "eine Einbildung" (DA 43). The reader can infer that, for the community of S., perceiving Bereyter as himself innocent and child-like is a way of denying him authority and side-stepping the uncomfortable truth of his and his family's

persecution in S. during the National Socialist period. At a broader level, 'Paul Bereyter' sees post-Rousseauian tropes of innocence tied very clearly into their discursive and cultural contexts. In this way, notions of innocence are denaturalized and identified as cultural constructs by the narrative. In his post as a primary school teacher, Bereyter is constructed as employing a pedagogic model related to the Pestalozzi method. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was an inheritor of Rousseau's educational philosophy, and attempted to develop a pedagogic practice based on it. As McCulloh notes, Pestalozzi's most successful school was located at Yverdon, where Bereyter lives in later years with Mme. Landau, and when he loses his sight Landau reads the works of Pestalozzi to him (McCulloh 2003: 36-7). The narrator's description of Bereyter's teaching methods, particularly his references to "Anschauung" (DA: 57, 58), are also to be understood as clear invocations of the Pestalozzi method. (Bowen 1981)

This invocation of Pestalozzi has a greater significance than is suggested by McCulloh, who emphasises the failure of the pedagogue's methods during his lifetime, thus interpreting him as a melancholy companion-figure to Bereyter. The working of Pestalozzi into the narrative in 'Paul Bereyter' locates post-Rousseauian idealism about childhood with the figure of Bereyter in a manner which highlights its discursive contexts. Indeed, the failure of this idealism is also indicated. Bereyter's teaching career ends with disillusionment concerning innocence, as he grows to suspect and dislike his pupils, seeing them as "verächtliche und hassenswerte Kreaturen", and as his faith in the new page in the copybook – the tabula rasa image Mme. Landau uses to describe his way of coping with the past – fails him (DA: 65). Here again we see Sebald's representation of the failure of progressive ideals and of the principle of 'Bildung,' with post-

Rousseauian ideals of childhood and education involved in a critique of the notion of progress and of German post-war society. There is a dramatic contrast between Forte's valorisation of progress and culture, which is reliant, in his narrative, on the trope of the *tabula rasa* (see Part I of the thesis above), and Sebald's depiction of the failure of these ideals (Forte 1995).

However, this is not the whole story. It is my argument that what is ultimately going on in the Bereyter story is not a distancing from or deconstruction of ideal innocence. In *Schwindel. Gefühle's* 'All'estero' we saw innocence finally located in the non-appropriative gaze of the adult Salvatore on the image of a boy. Here, in 'Paul Bereyter', innocence is unmasked as an illusory and fallible discursive phenomenon, only to be reinstated in the figure of Bereyter himself. That is to say that the dead Paul Bereyter is constructed as an embodiment of the principles that fail the living man. Rather than a further destabilization of innocence, this represents a covert re-importation of innocence into the text, the function of which is to govern reader response by creating an aura of pathos around the teacher which, in turn, validates the role of the narrating persona.

### **A 'Golden Age' of childhood? The reinstatement of pathos**

Given the quality of artificiality that is attributed to Paul – he is described as a kind of tin-man or automaton (DA: 52) and throughout the story is ostensibly depicted in photographs that are arguably of at least two different men – any representation of him as authentically child-like and innocent would have to be viewed as somewhat contingent or partial. I would argue that it is in the narrative's descriptions of Bereyter as a child that

innocence begins to be invoked without critique, and these descriptions feed into the representation of his death, as I will show. The narrative constructs Paul's childhood as a pre-lapsarian, pre-National Socialism 'golden age,' through which, however, his death is anticipated. The first suggestion that the myth of innocence is being re-imported back into the narrative lies in the ephrastic description of a series of photographs of Bereyter as a child. Here, the child is situated in proximity to images of nature, in harmonious companionship with animals:

Die ersten Fotografien erzählten von einer glücklichen Kindheit in dem in unmittelbarer Nachbarschaft zur Gärtnerei Lerchenmüller in der Blumenstraße gelegenen Wohnhaus der Bereyters und zeigten Paul mehrfach mit seiner Katze und einem offensichtlich völlig zahmen Gockelhahn. (DA: 69)

In his discussion of 'family photographs' in *Die Ausgewanderten*, Long emphasises the fact that these images are not reproduced in the text, and that no photographs of Bereyter as a child are shown, although subsequent stages of his life are given photographic representation. Long reads this omission as evidence of the narrator exercising censorship upon his source material, denying the reader the possibility of interpreting the photo in a way that might conflict with his objective of constructing "his own fantasy narrative of Paul's childhood." (Long 2007a: 121) For Long, this element of fantasy is indicative of the narrator's 'postmemorial' status, in line with Marianne Hirsch's theory, and his overall argument suggests that the narrator's self-reflexivity compensates in ethical terms for occasional acts of suppression or slips in critical distance.



I would offer a slightly different explanation for the presence of this ecphrastic image in 'Paul Bereyter.' I would suggest the construction of Paul's idyllic childhood serves to invoke the notion of a pre-National Socialism 'golden age,' creating a tragic and ironic contrast with Bereyter's adult life during and after the Nazi regime. As I will show, a similar technique is employed by Sebald in the construction of Luisa Aurach's German-Jewish childhood. In this moment, in which the narrator exerts control by suppressing (or spuriously fabricating) some of his source material,<sup>91</sup> a prelapsarian 'golden age' of childhood innocence is invoked. This might be seen as evidence in support of Cosgrove's contention that Sebald's texts entail "a fundamental narrative position that wishes to retrieve a golden past of German-Jewish relations." (Cosgrove 2006: 243) However, as Long's interpretation indicates, this representation creaks so audibly under its own weight that it becomes difficult to credit it as reflecting a "fundamental narrative position" in Cosgrove's terms. Beyond the fact of the absent photograph, the description is oversaturated with invocations of natural harmony to the extent that it verges on the fantastical. There is, for example, the doubling of botanical imagery effected by the "Gärtnerei" in "Blumenstraße", neither of which, furthermore, actually evoke 'Nature' as separate from or other to human industry, but rather signify urban, residential and commercial spaces. There is also the miraculous companionship of cat and cockerel, which is evocative of a number of fables and fairy tales. In this sense, the narrative evocation of a 'golden age' of childhood innocence seems here to point up its own unreality to some extent. I would argue that although it may be read as deconstructing innocence, this over-determination of Bereyter's happy, German-Jewish childhood also

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<sup>91</sup> Of course, Long's suggestion of narratorial censorship in this instance cannot be seen as conclusive; one can think of many possible reasons for an image not appearing in a text. Long's argument is, nevertheless, convincing.

anticipates his suffering under German anti-Semitism. The passage could thus be understood as an intimation, in Barthes's "anterior future" mode, of the fate that is going to befall the child. (Barthes 2000: 96) This manner of intimation, which relies on the interconnectedness of the myth of innocence and the idea of death, takes on a more explicit form in the narrative's construction of Bereyter's relationship with the railway.

### **Childness, death and the railway**

Bereyter's fascination with the railway, which, we are to believe, is ultimately a fascination with death, is illustrated in an extended passage towards the end of the story where both Landau and the narrator describe their memories of him. Childness has a clear and strong presence in these reminiscences:

Die Eisenbahn hatte für Paul eine tiefere Bedeutung. Wahrscheinlich schien es ihm immer, als führe sie in den Tod. Fahrpläne, Kursbücher, die Logistik des ganzen Eisenbahnwesens, das alles war für ihn, wie die Wohnung in S. gleich erkennen ließ, zeitweise zu einer Obsession geworden. Die in dem leeren Nordzimmer auf einem Brettertisch aufgebaute Märklinanlage steht mir heute noch vor Augen als das Sinn- und Abbild von Pauls deutschem Unglück. Mir fielen bei diesen Worten Mme. Landaus die Bahnhöfe, Stellwerke, Güterhallen und Signale ein, die Paul so oft an die Tafel gemalt hatte und die wir mit möglicher Genauigkeit in unsere Schulhefte übertragen mußten. (...) Paul erzählte mir damals, sagte Mme. Landau, daß er als Kind in der Sommervakanz einmal in Lindau gewesen sei und dort vom Seeufer aus jeden Tag zugesehen habe, wie die Züge vom Festland auf die Insel und von der Insel aufs Festland hinüberrollten. Die weißen Dampfwolken in der blauen Luft, die aus den offenen Fenstern herauswinkenden Reisenden, das Spiegelbild drunten im Wasser - dieses in gewissen Abständen sich wiederholende Schauspiel habe eine solche Faszination auf ihn ausgeübt, daß er die ganze Vakanz hindurch nie rechtzeitig

zum Mittagessen gekommen sei, was die Tante mit immer resignierterem Kopfschütteln und der Onkel mit der Bemerkung quittiert habe, er werde noch einmal bei der Eisenbahn enden. (DA: 91-2)

Childness has a threefold presence in this passage: the adult Bereyter keeps a toy train set in his apartment in S. in the time of his companionship with Landau, has his pupils draw out plans of the railway system in the time when he is the narrator's teacher – one of which drawings is reproduced on page 91 – and identifies a childhood experience as the origin of his fascination. The image of a toy train set is also invoked by Landau when she describes her memory of the view from the summit of Montrond (DA 67-8). Given the silent presence of the Holocaust at the centre of 'Paul Bereyter,' the symbolic – and literal - connections drawn by the narrative between death and the railway are clear, but the persistent invocation of childness in its illustrations of these connections seems to demand some further illumination. The narrative appears to utilize childness in order to hammer home its interpretation of Bereyter's life and death. The toy train set is posited by Landau as 'both symbol and image' of his tragedy – a closed circle of representation which leaves no space for ambiguity or divergence, like the children's precise copies of the schemes of the railway system (DA: 91).

Childness can thus be said to be operating here in order to close down possibilities for interpretive flexibility. It is central to the irony-effect that is created in this passage, which is based on the contrast between the child-like 'innocence' of Bereyter's life and the violence of his death. The product of this contrast is a sentimental and tragic irony that the narrative does not allow the reader to resist. All of the narrative's play with illusion, artifice, and over-determination in relation to childness boils down, I would

argue, to this closing moment of sentimental irony, which harnesses Bereyter's despair to his childness, making it possible for his suicide to be understood as the inevitable endpoint of a pathological and tragic obsession rather than as a reasoned, intellectual choice. The care with which the narrative emphasised Bereyter's intellectual cultivation in the description of his pedagogic practice turns out to have been in the service of this ironic close. In spite of the narrative's early highlighting of the constructed, discursive nature of notions of childhood, in the end childness is utilized non-reflexively in a representation of Bereyter's death as irrational and irresistible, in a manner which removes agency from the Bereyter figure and creates in place of this agency a scene of pathos and tragic irony. That is to say that the narrative economy requires Bereyter to be "hollowed out" in much the same way as the figure of the innocent child is hollowed out in Kincaid's account (Kincaid 1992). The effect of this 'hollowing out', whereby childness is employed to create tragic irony which removes agency from the figure of Bereyter, is, I would argue, to solidify the role of the narrating persona as a curator of his former teacher's effects and memory. That is to suggest that, in spite of the text's highlighting of the discursively constructed and even illusory nature of notions of childhood innocence, the most central role played by childness in the narrative is to reduce the agency of Bereyter, thus creating a pastoral, caring role for the narrator which, furthermore, is structurally dependent on the teacher's death.

### **3.3 A 'Golden Age' framed by death: Luisa Aurach's memoir**

The narrative process whereby the narrator's role is configured by means of childness and death is also evident in 'Max Aurach', in terms of the presence and

function of the memoir of Luisa Aurach, née Lanzberg, Aurach's mother, a victim of the Holocaust (DA: 290-327). Childness dominates the form and function of Lanzberg's narrative. Rather than a child-like and vulnerable adult, the narrator presents us with an adult's narrative of childhood, employing a child-like perspective, written in the present indicative. In this sense, Lanzberg's memoir could be said to provide *Die Ausgewanderten* with another pre-lapsarian 'golden age' of pre-Holocaust, German-Jewish childhood. The prose style of Lanzberg's narrative – which I examine in more detail in the next section of the thesis - certainly allows for a sense of immersion in the past and in childhood which is not to be found elsewhere in Sebald's text. This style, in strong contrast to the narrator's usual prose, creates the effect of temporal distances and layers of mediation appearing to be dissolved. There is, as Kilbourn has suggested, a sense that, in her memoir writing, Luisa is granted an almost redemptive level of access to the past through memory (Kilbourn 2006).<sup>92</sup> The "almost" must, of course, obtain because of the tragic irony that overshadows the memoir: the reader's knowledge of Luisa's death.

Indeed, Gasseleder's analysis of the relationship between the Lanzberg memoir and its pre-text, a memoir written by one Thea G. (née Frank), further indicates the centrality of death to the narrative economy of *Die Ausgewanderten* (Gasseleder 2005). Gasseleder shows that, while Sebald retained the source text's main stylistic features, including its use of a "kindliche Perspektive" (Gasseleder 2005: 170), the biographies of the fictional author, Luisa Lanzberg, and the author of the source text, Thea G., diverge on one significant point. Thea G. survived the Holocaust by emigrating to Switzerland

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<sup>92</sup> Fuchs also reads Luisa's memoir as elegiacally redemptive, as I discuss in detail in the next chapter. Fuchs, "Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte": Zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W.G. Sebalds Prosa at 126-38.

and wrote her memoir in the post-war years, between 1947 and 1964 (Gasseleder 2005, 161). Lanzberg writes her memoir from within National Socialist Germany, in anticipation of her deportation and murder. By assigning the memoir to a murdered author, rather than an author who survived by emigrating, and to an author writing in anticipation of her own destruction rather than an author writing after the end of the war, Sebald determines the mode in which the reader is to engage with the narrative. Biographical continuity between pre- and post-Holocaust timeframes is excised, so that the Holocaust appears as a caesura. A narrative structure is developed in which the pre-Holocaust past is constructed as radically 'other' and as pre-lapsarian. Lanzberg's memoir serves as a lost landscape of childhood innocence and of authentic, recuperative memory which stands in stark contrast to the crippling uncertainties that seem to dog the figures of the narrator and Max Aurach in their endeavours at textual and visual representation.

Childness thus can be said to have a double presence in and around Lanzberg's narrative; it governs many aspects of the narrative style, including focalization techniques, tense and mood, and level of visual detail, but also helps define the role played by the memoir in the wider narrative economy of 'Max Aurach': a *memento mori* which is testament to the existence of a world of authentic innocence and miraculous memory, and testament to the total extinction of this world. The memoir of Luisa Lanzberg has the role of defining by negation the roles and work of both the Sebaldian narrator and Lanzberg's son, the artist Max Aurach, in terms that revolve around the concept of a loss of innocence. In order to explore in more depth the issues of authentic memory, subjective wholeness, innocence and loss that this brief consideration of Luisa's

memoir has raised, I now turn to a more extensive consideration of childhood memory in Sebald's works. Here, I return to the questions of focalization which were the concern of the opening chapters of the thesis, and find further evidence of Sebald's re-importation of the myth of childhood innocence into his narratives.

## Part III

### Childness and the Literary Construction of Memory:

#### W.G. Sebald's Child Focalizers

#### 1. Intimations of Mortality: Childhood memory, the child's perspective, and models of subjectivity in 'Il ritorno in patria', 'Max Aurach' and *Austerlitz*

##### 1.1 Introduction

The discussion of Sebald has thus far traced the roles played by childness in his narratives' discourses of critique, and in their engagements with European loss and mourning, particularly in relation to the legacy of the Holocaust. Examining the presence of paedophilic motifs in *Schwindel. Gefühle* and *Die Ausgewanderten*, I identified moments in which a deconstructive critique of childhood innocence as a patriarchal myth transmutes into intense yearning for innocence itself. This 'opening up' of critique to reveal yearning suggests a dialectical structure of "Verschachtelungen" similar to that identified by Hutchinson in Sebald's prose style and narrative structures (Hutchinson 2009a). I have argued that the complex structures of the myth of childhood innocence can thus be said to be involved in Sebald's dialectical critiques of notions of progress and advancement. However, I have also identified moments where childness appears to be operating 'below the radar' of Sebald's narrative project of dialectical critique, performing instead a persuasive function in relation to the implied reader and, I have suggested, revealing the continued presence of patriarchal myths and structures in the



narratives below the level of critical discourse. I have suggested that *Die Ausgewanderten* in particular relies upon deeply ingrained, Western cultural associations between childhood, innocence, authenticity, vulnerability and loss in its engagements with post-Holocaust mourning, and in its construction of the role of the narrating persona.

In the following examination of childness and Sebald's models of subjectivity and memory, the focus on the author's engagements with loss and death and with ideals of authenticity and subjective wholeness is sustained. The analysis also continues to highlight the presence of pathos, melodrama and persuasion in these engagements. I return to what was the focus of my attention at the beginning of the thesis: the narratological role of the child focalizer. I analyse the presence of tropes of privileged vision and intuition in the child focalizers of 'Il ritorno in patria' and 'Max Aurach,' before considering the models of memory and subjectivity imported into the text of *Austerlitz* by way of childness. First, though, some brief consideration is given to the broader connections between childhood and memory in the modern, Western cultural imagination. I could not hope to give a full account of these connections here, of course; the focal points of my consideration are the notions of subjective wholeness and 'authentic' memory, and I approach these concepts by way of the theoretical work of Aleida Assmann.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Studies on childhood autobiography would also be of clear relevance to a wider discussion of childhood and memory in the Western cultural imagination, but are of less significance to the present analysis of the narratological roles of childness in Sebald's constructions of memory and subjectivity. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*, Lange, *Selbstfragmente. Autobiographien der Kindheit*.

## 1.2 Childness, memory and the modern Subject

Assmann's study of changing cultural constructions of memory focuses on different kinds of spatial and temporal memory-metaphors (Assmann 1999). However, a great many of her examples and discussions touch on childhood, indicating that childness and memory may have significant links with each other in the Western cultural imagination. Her discussion of Locke and Wordsworth, in particular, opens up the potential connections between Enlightenment and Romantic constructions of memory, the Subject, and childhood (Assmann 1999: 89-113). The comparison Assmann makes between Locke and Wordsworth indicates that, although the fundamentals of their understanding of the nature of memory are to some extent similar, their theories lead in radically different directions. Both thinkers understood memory as a syncretising force of continuity in the otherwise fragmented and contingent field of human experience and identity. Whereas Locke's construction of memory serves to emphasise the primacy and power of individual consciousness in terms of the creation of the self and of identity, thus supporting the primacy of the individual in bourgeois society and thought, Assmann shows that Wordsworth's model of "Recollection" carries very different philosophical and political implications. In particular, what Assmann refers to as Wordsworth's conception of "Anamnesis" or "Shechinah" contradicts Locke's conception of the Subject. This concerns those descriptions in Wordsworth's poetry of moments where individual consciousness is inhabited momentarily by a higher, divine presence, so that individual subjectivity and memory are temporarily dissolved in an experience of unity with a greater power. This trope within Wordsworth's poetry is suggestive of forms of

consciousness and memory that precede, encompass and supersede individual subjectivity, contradicting Locke's 'tabula rasa' model of human consciousness.

At several points, Assmann's discussion hints at the significance of notions of childhood in relation to these models of memory, consciousness and the Subject. She notes that Wordsworth frequently associates the experience of "Shechinah", and the experience of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", which Assmann identifies as the first stage of the Wordsworthian process of "Recollection", with childhood or with child figures (Assmann 1999: 105, 109):

Die Realpräsenz der Schechinah assoziiert Wordsworth mit Kindern, die im Besitz der Bürgerrechte der Natur sind. In ihnen sieht der Dichter das Andere seines Selbst: die verlorene, die unsprünglichere Anamnese, die die Subjektivität unverhofft entgrenzt. Er sieht in ihnen das, wofür seine poetische Technik ein Ersatz ist, die nicht direkt in die Seele, sondern nur aufs Papier zu schreiben vermag. (Assmann 1999: 109)

As Assmann points out, although Wordsworth's work does not usually countenance the idea of "Recollection" as one which endangers the recollecting subject, he does at times allude to the presence of fear, guilt and uncertainty within the processes of memory:

Hinter allem beschönigenden und beruhigenden Erinnerungszauber ist [eine] unheimliche Macht am Werke, die wie ein Raubtier plötzlich aus einem Hinterhalt hervorschießen und ein Heer von Gespenstern entfesseln kann. (Assmann 1999: 94).

The safety of Locke's 'tabula rasa' model of infant consciousness, which poses no threat to the notion of the subjective autonomy of the bourgeois individual, is thus absent

in Wordsworth, whose work suggests a more numinous link between childness, memory and subjectivity. It is, of course, a long way from Wordsworth to Sebald, and it is not my intention here to map Assmann's appraisal of the English Romantic poet onto the late twentieth century German prose author in a naïve manner. Rather, Assmann's study demonstrates the fact that, in the West, post-Enlightenment ideals of childhood – which, as this thesis argues, continue to inform constructions of childhood in contemporary writing to a significant degree – have from their inception been intricately involved and interlinked with cultural constructions of consciousness, memory, and the nature of the Subject. It is thus, perhaps, unsurprising to find Sebald drawing from deeply ingrained cultural ideals of childhood in his narrative constructions of memory and subjectivity.

Through childness, then, the modern West laments the fragmentary, disparate nature of subjectivity, whilst by the same token celebrating a myth of pure and unfragmented origins. Although Freud's work on infant sexuality went some way towards demythologizing or at least radically modifying the models of infant consciousness to which Locke and Wordsworth contributed, I would suggest that post-Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of childhood, with their potential for performing the work of both mourning and reassurance, are of such power that they have remained in the ascendancy in Western literary imaginations into the present. In the early twentieth century, for example, Walter Benjamin writes – albeit somewhat agnostically - of children's engagements with picture books: "Wenn es irgend überhaupt etwas wie die platonische Anamnese gibt, so hat sie bei den Kindern statt, deren Anschauungsbilderbuch das Paradies ist." (Benjamin in Tiedmann and Schweppenhäuser 1985: 124) The child's perspective thus continues to play the role of oracle, although the

visions it serves to mediate are no longer those of Wordsworthian awe, anamnesis and divine dissolution.

Here, I argue that Sebald's narratives make use of childness in their constructions of memory in order to balance authenticity against unreliability or insufficiency, subjective wholeness against instability and fragmentation, desire for restoration against confrontation with irrevocable loss and damage. The most appropriate methodology for this exploration is, again, close textual analysis, focusing particularly on matters of focalization and perspective.

In his study of childhood memory and autobiography, Richard Coe is concerned with the particularities of a form of narrative "destined never to be fully realized: the ideal being to tell a total truth about a previous self which, in reality, can never be more than half-remembered." (Coe 1984: 2-3) Of course, one might doubt the likelihood of any literary text, autobiographical or not, subscribing to an ideal based on the notion of "total truth," and I certainly would not apply this model to any of the texts I analyse in this study. However, Coe's statement does highlight the peculiarities of perspective that pertain to the textual narration of childhood memory. The breaches and proximities that can materialize between the remembering adult subject and the remembered child self provide fertile ground for authors whose concern is with the problematics of memory. Christa Wolf, for example, has her narrator mark out the moment of remembering her child self as the point of departure from truthfulness:

Das Kind selbst aber, das nun zu erscheinen hätte? Kein Bild. Hier würde die Fälschung beginnen. Das Gedächtnis hat in diesem Kind gehockt und hat es überdauert. (Wolf 1977: 15)

Martin Walser's narrator, on the other hand, suggests that it is desirable, if not necessarily possible, to allow childhood to return in a fully authentic manner, as if of its own accord:

Der Vergangenheit eine Anwesenheit wünschen, über die wir nicht Herr sind.  
(...)Wunschdenkens Ziel: Ein interesseloses Interesse an der Vergangenheit. Daß sie uns entgegenkäme wie von selbst. (SB: 283)

This closing section of the dissertation explores Sebald's construction of childhood memory between these poles of scrupulous mistrust and idealistic yearning. To this purpose, an examination of Sebald's constructions of the child's perspective can reveal the narratological structure of childhood memory in his texts. This, in turn, can tell us about the role played by childness in his constructions of subjectivity and memory, riven, or perhaps rather held together, as they are with dialectical tension. I begin the analysis with a study of the childhood memory narratives of Luisa Aurach in *Die Ausgewanderten*, and of Sebald's narrating persona in *Schwindel. Gefühle*'s 'Il ritorno in patria'. Here, I identify the tropes, tendencies and narrative functions that mark Sebald's construction of childhood memory. Following this, I turn to the sections of *Austerlitz* in which there is intense engagement with childhood memory, to argue that childness plays a central role in providing this text with structuring myths, metaphoric images, and models of subjectivity and memory.

### 1.3 “Wer war dieses fremde Kind?” The child’s perspective in ‘Il ritorno in patria’ and the memoir of Luisa Aurach

The Holocaust is a defining lacuna that provides the most significant differences between the extended narratives of childhood memory included by Sebald in ‘Il ritorno in patria’, the closing section of *Schwindel. Gefühle*, and in Luisa Aurach’s memoir, which appears in ‘Max Aurach’, the closing story of *Die Ausgewanderten*. ‘Il ritorno in patria’ sees Sebald’s narrator return to the place of his own childhood, and the narrated memories produce a picture of post-war, South German childhood in which the Rhineland and Moravia are distant, mythic places, and yet in which the rural everyday is perforated by images of the uncanny which are evidence of the history and knowledge that has been communally repressed by the citizens of W. Here, the repression of the Holocaust and the violence of the recent past manifest themselves in the child’s experience of the uncanny. Luisa Aurach’s memoir, by contrast, is the narrative of a childhood that took place prior to the First World War. Knowledge of the Holocaust nonetheless surrounds this section of ‘Max Aurach’, as I have discussed previously and as Anne Fuchs succinctly describes:

Für den Leser müssen die (...) Aufzeichnungen Luisas als eine von Sebald in den Text eingelagerte Figur der ironischen Brechung erscheinen. (Fuchs 2004: 137)

Knowledge of the Holocaust is thus not situated *within* the narrated childhood, Fuchs’s analysis suggests, but surrounds it and determines the reader’s reception of Luisa’s narrative. This description of the two narratives would seem to suggest

fundamental differences in their modes of engagement with childhood memory, Heimat<sup>94</sup> and the Holocaust. Profound difference is certainly implied by Fuchs's authoritative discussion of the "Heimatdiskurs" practised by Sebald through these texts (Fuchs 2004: 111). Fuchs identifies in Luisa's memoir a pastoral "Rettungsethnographie" in keeping with Schiller's ideal of the sentimental, which is however transformed into a "Leerstelle" by the reader's knowledge of the Holocaust in general and Luisa's fate in particular (Fuchs 2004: 131). In 'Il ritorno in patria', by contrast, she sees the narrator overcoming his sentimental impulses towards Heimat and experiencing first the unease of the uncanny before finally conducting an 'archaeological' engagement with Heimat which brings to light the various forms and figures of difference existing within the social fabric of W. (Fuchs 2004: 149-52)

Fuchs's discussions of these two narratives indicates strongly that there lies in them a close correlation between Heimat and childhood. Indeed, the figure of the child appears repeatedly in Fuchs's analysis, from the opening quotations from Max Frisch and Ernst Bloch (Fuchs 2004: 109, 111), to her frequent references to Schiller's concept of the sentimental, to her own description of Heimat itself as "Ort der Kindheit." (Fuchs 2004: 150) Fuchs's analysis of Sebald's Heimat-discourse identifies features that seem to some extent analogous with those which I have identified in relation to the structuring role of the myth of childhood innocence in his works. This may hardly be surprising, given that both Heimat and the innocence myth were formed or re-forged as cultural ideals in the wake of modernity and industrialisation (Boa & Palfreyman 2000: 2), and that both are, on the face of it, myths that promise stable identity, whole origins and

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<sup>94</sup> Here I follow Boa and Palfreyman's use of the word Heimat without translation or italicization. Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat: A German Dream. Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).



social continuity. For both myths, too, fear of discontinuity, instability and difference lies not far below the surface – something Sebald was consciously engaged with in relation to the Heimat myth through his “anti-Heimatdiskurs” and “Heimatarchäologie”, to borrow Fuchs’s terms.

As we have seen, though, Sebald’s critical and deconstructive engagements with the myth of childhood innocence are rather less systematic and explicit. The common ground between Fuchs’s appraisal of Heimat in Sebald and my analysis of the innocence myth thus consists mainly of an identification of the centrality of loss.<sup>95</sup> Fuchs suggests that Heimat carries meaning in Sebald only in combination with the “Folie des Heimatverlusts,” which “die ersehnte Heimat von vornherein in einen *locus* der Ambivalenz [verwandelt], der die erstrebte Identifikation mit dem Ursprungsort immer schon an die ihr vorausliegende Entfremdungserfahrung zurückverweist.“ (Fuchs 2004: 115-6) Loss, of course, as has been established by Rose, Kincaid and Higonnet (see above), is an indispensable element of the ideal of childhood innocence, lending it great affective power (Higonnet 1998; Kincaid 1992; Rose 1994). Despite this strong correlation, indicative of the centrality of dialectical tension and of loss to Sebald’s structuring of his narratives, it is not sufficient simply to transpose Fuchs’s findings regarding Sebald’s Heimat-discourse onto my discussion of childness in Sebald. A primary reason for this is that, while Sebald conducts a clear and sustained critique of Heimat throughout his literary and critical oeuvre, a corresponding critical engagement with the tropes and myths of childhood does not take place. Rather than segueing into a

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<sup>95</sup> For a more broad-ranging analysis of the correspondences between constructions of Heimat and the myth of innocence, see Peter Blickle’s chapter on ‘Heimat and innocence in childhood’ in Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (Rochester, NY; Suffolk: Camden House, 2002). pp. 130-50

clearly defined discursive or critical scheme (such as that of anti-Heimat, sentimental utopia, lacuna, and Heimat-archaeology identified by Fuchs), Sebald's literary engagements with childhood, factotum-like, serve a variety of purposes according to the exigencies of narratological requirements. Thus, childness can be called upon in the service of a caustic critique of bourgeois normativity, or of an elegiac tribute to the lost stability of bourgeois life, or to create a moment of extreme affective impact in the narrative, or simply to amplify the subjectivity of the narrator. Although this admission would appear to have me "hoist with my own petard" regarding conducting a systematic critical analysis of Sebald's work, I believe that is the very factotum-like quality of childness as it operates in his texts that provides me with an opportunity to engage not only with the author's discursively and thematically worked-out dialectics of loss and yearning, but also with the narratological formation of his texts and the nature of their addresses to the implied reader.

I follow on from Fuchs's analysis of Heimat in 'Il ritorno in patria' and the memoir of Luisa Aurach insofar as her work indicates that childness may play a central role in these narratives' discursive engagements with the Schillerian utopian ideal of sentimentality and with the unease of the 'Unheimlich.' However, it is not my intention to replicate Fuchs's analytic method or structure, which, as I have said, best serves discussion of a narrative element that is itself worked out relatively systematically and programmatically within Sebald's oeuvre. Rather, I turn my focus in the first instance to the narratological presence of childness in these two narratives of childhood memory and Heimat. By examining the construction and function of the child's perspective – something Fuchs does not take into account in her study – I hope to explore in greater

depth the means by which the elegiac and the uncanny are inserted into these narratives. It is also possible for me to incorporate into my study new information regarding Sebald's adaptation of the source-text for Luisa's memoir, which has emerged since the publication of Fuchs's study (Gasseleder 2005). This approach reveals that, despite the apparently profound discursive differences between the two narratives, the many points of similarity between them are suggestive of structuring tropes of childhood common to both.

As narratives of childhood memory, Luisa Aurach's memoir and 'Il ritorno in patria' share some basic structural features. Each begins with a journey sequence, Luisa describing from memory the route into her "engere Heimat" of Steinach (DA: 290), and *Schwindel. Gefühle*'s narrator describing the physical journey made on his return to W. (SG: 190-202) This journey-motif structures childhood memory and Heimat as entities to which the remembering Subject can voluntarily 'return', in contrast to the seemingly autonomous and overwhelming visitations of childhood memory upon adult Subjects that we will see in the discussion of childhood memory in *Austerlitz*. As Fuchs points out, though, in 'Il ritorno in patria' on the narrator's arrival in W. the narrative rapidly rejects the notion of the "Zeitreise" back to the land of childhood (Fuchs 2004: 149). Nonetheless, the increasing presence of the child's perspective as the narrative goes on is suggestive of an imaginative return on the part of the narrator to the territory of childhood, even if this is rejected in the texts as a physical or topological possibility.

Both narratives begin with a journey into the territory of childhood, and both narratives make use of fever as a device to signify departure from this territory. Luisa suffers a prolonged bout of fever when she is separated from her twin brother, who

receives further formal education while she is to be consigned to the domestic sphere and her mother's authority. At this point, too, Luisa appears to become increasingly conscious of death. (DA: 308-9) The child of 'Il ritorno in patria' falls ill after witnessing ice-bound scenes of sex and death involving the hunter Hans Schlag, one of the text's several Gracchus-figures (Kilbourn 2006; Prager 2006). In both cases, fever seems to demarcate the end of childhood by means of association with knowledge of gender, sexuality and death (as is, incidentally, also the case with Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*, which begins with a bout of illness that propels Michael into sexuality (Schlink 1997)). As we will see, though, Sebald adapts these moments of caesura in accordance with his wider narrative projects.

Within this common structural frame, and, as I have stated, in spite of or alongside the clear and significant differences between the two narratives, can be found common narrative engagements with images of death and of the uncanny. The presence of uncanny images in Luisa's memoir, indeed, might easily be overlooked, given the strong pastoral and elegiac tone that infuses the narrative. Not only are significant images of the uncanny present in Luisa's narrative, however; as Gasseleder's research has shown, several of these images were inserted by Sebald in his adaptation of Thea G.'s source text (Gasseleder 2005: 169). Whether or not these images complicate the clear picture Fuchs provides of the various forms of Sebald's Heimat-discourse is open to debate; they could be read as signifying the presence of a Sebaldian 'anti-Heimat-discourse' in the narrative, or alternatively, and I would suggest more likely, they could be read as spectral emanations of death, moments in which the tragic irony of the larger, framing narrative penetrates into Luisa's text. I will return to these considerations

presently, but first wish to point out some striking motivic similarities that exist between these instances of the uncanny and those which pepper the childhood memories of the narrator in 'Il ritorno in patria':

Wenn ich erwache, sehe ich die Gläser mit dem Eingemachten still auf dem Kasten stehen und in den kalten Fächern des Kachelofens. Vergebens bemühe ich mich, mir auszudenken, was sie bedeuten. Sie bedeuten nichts, sagt die Mama, es sind nur Kirschen, Pflaumen und Birnen. (DA: 308)

Stets von neuem sah ich mich im Delirium an der weinenden Frau Sallaba vorbei die Kellerstiege hinuntergehen und in der hintersten, dunkelsten Ecke den Kasten aufmachen, auf dessen Boden in einem großen irdenen Topf den Winter über die eingelegten Eier aufbewahrt wurden. Ich faßte mit der Hand und dem Unterarm durch die kalkige Oberfläche des Wassers bis fast auf den Grund des Gefäßes, spürte aber zu meinem Entsetzen, daß es sich bei dem, was in diesem Topf eingelegt worden war, nicht um sauber in ihrer Schale aufgehobene Eier, sondern um etwas weiches, den Fingern Entgleitendes, handelte, von dem ich sogleich wußte, daß es nichts anderes als Augäpfel waren. (SG: 273-4)

Der Fischer erscheint unter der Tür und geht mit uns (...) an die Saale hinunter, wo ein großer hölzerner Kasten im Wasser schwimmt, aus dem er die Barben einzeln herausgreift. Wenn wir sie zum Nachtmal dann essen, dürfen wir, wegen der Gräten, nicht sprechen und müssen selber so stumm sein wie Fische. Mir ist es bei diesem Essen nie besonders wohl gewesen, und die verdrehten Fischaugen haben mir oft nachgesehen bis in den Schlaf. (DA: 296)

In the first two passages quoted, we see the figure of the fevered and delirious child functioning as a focalizer for richly layered, symbolic images of anxiety, containment, preservation and sustenance. The particular anxiety of each image would

appear to be somewhat gendered; the obvious connection in the image of “Eier” and eyeballs is to Freudian, Oedipal castration anxiety, while Luisa’s anxiety about the preserves pertains to the relationships between objects and their meanings (an anxiety also dramatised through a deliriously ill, female child focalizer by Emine Sevgi Özdamar in *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* (Özdamar 1992: 113)). Despite her mother’s assertion to the effect that this relationship is unproblematic (“es sind nur Kirschen, Pflaumen und Birnen”), the next image in the passage is resonant with foreboding:

Draußen, sagt sie, sammeln sich schon die Schwalben. In der Nacht, mitten im Schlaf, höre ich große Scharen von Zugvögeln über das Haus hinwegrauschen.  
(DA: 308)

What the preserves mean, then, may be death, and posthumous memory. Perhaps, indeed, the jars could be seen as a counter-image to the kind of memory-work suggested by the description of Max Aurach’s painting technique of layering up and scraping away, in the light of which Fuchs reads Luisa’s memory-narrative (Fuchs 2004: 129-30). A preserved fruit is not so much preserved as pickled, transformed in taste, texture and nutritional content by the medium of preservation, to survive indefinitely only if kept sealed tight, visible but not tangible in its glass jar. The ‘sea-change’ of loss and transformation takes place at a molecular level within the skin of the original fruit, as it soaks in the preserving liquid. Although the painting-metaphor clearly corresponds to Sebald’s representation of his narrator’s editorial technique, this image of the preserves is suggestive of memory as a chemical process of storage, loss and transformation that does not involve continuous, conscious ‘work’ on the part of a remembering subject. Read in this way, the preserves in the jar might be understood as a metaphor for the memoir itself,

which, passed on to her son, continues to 'preserve' Luisa's voice and memories after her death in the Holocaust, but which he is unable to read (DA: 289). In this sense, the fevered child focalizer becomes a mediator for an image of the fate of her own story. This use of a child focalizer as an ironically unwitting subject of darkly prophetic vision is something I will return to in relation to *Austerlitz*. For now, I wish to turn to consider the nature of the child's vision as suggested by the Oedipal hallucination of eyeballs in the place of stored eggs in 'Il ritorno in patria.'

This fever-dream follows on in the narrative from a number of instances in which hidden and forbidden moments are witnessed by and focalized through the childhood self of the narrator. These include the death of Dr. Rambousek, whose "halb hervorgetretene[], aber immer noch sehr schöne[] dunklen Augen" fascinate the child (SG: 255), and the return of the frozen corpse of Hans Schlag to W. (SG: 269-72). In addition to these scenes of death, the child has also witnessed a sex scene between the (still living) Schlag and Romana, another outsider in W. owing to her unusual looks (SG: 260-1). The fever-dream might be read as a response to the witnessing of these scenes, marking the threshold of the child's entry into knowledge of sex and death, and as such a marker of the 'end of innocence.' One could continue rather convincingly in this vein to suggest that Schlag thus represents the threatening 'father' figure of the Oedipal structure, and Romana the mother and object of the child's desire. This would see Sebald's narrator constructing for himself an Oedipal 'family romance' which locates him as the progeny of outsiders rather than of his own parents, who are conspicuously absent from his narrative of childhood memory.

However, closer consideration of the resonances of the fever-dream image would seem to indicate a causal narrative connection other than to these three outsider-figures who are the objects of the child focalizer's fascination. I would suggest another interpretive possibility here, in that the image of the egg crate points us back to the same event to which Luisa's preserves point us forward: the violent caesurae of the Holocaust and the Second World War. The "etwas weiches, den Fingern Entgleitendes" can thus be read as representing the slippery, secret inheritance that has been stored up in the cellar for the child by his parent's generation. Whereas, in the image of preserved fruit, we had a metaphor suggestive of a process of transformation involving loss but not destruction or damage, here we have an image sequence (from the eggs to the eyes) in which an image of cleanliness ("sauber"), containment and rich sustenance is violently displaced by an image of mutilation, violence and ungraspability. The "knowledge" the child is inducted into in 'Il ritorno in patria' is thus not the result of witnessing the sexual congress of Schlag and Romana, or the melancholy deaths of Rambousek and Schlag. The child is in fact not initiated into knowledge so much as constructed as gaining an instinctual comprehension of the repressed history of violence that is hidden at the heart of his community.

In this sense, the fever-dream might more aptly be described as an oracular or visionary moment of instinctive perception, not a metaphor of initiation into adult knowledge. Like Luisa Aurach and the young Jacques Austerlitz, the narrator's child-self is constructed as an unwitting visionary, through whose focalizing perspective the shadow of the Holocaust is cast upon the narrative. It could thus be argued that in these instances Sebald takes simultaneous advantage of the qualities of lack of knowledge and



intuitive vision that are associated with the child's perspective, in his working out of a narrative strategy of oblique engagement with the Holocaust.

This aspect of Sebald's strategy carries with it certain risks. To have a child focalizer sense the presence in his community of a repressed history does not stretch the bounds of logic or disturb the realist mode in which 'Il ritorno in patria' is narrated. In Luisa's narrative, though, the child focalizer unwittingly predicts or foreshadows the circumstances of her own death and the destruction of her community, facts of which the readers of Luisa's text – Max Aurach, the narrator and the implied reader – are aware, thus forcing a breach in the narrative. This element, described by Fuchs as an "ironische Brechung" and a "Leerstelle" thus not only surrounds and enshrouds Luisa's narrative, but reaches into and penetrates it, just as the child's vision appears to penetrate out beyond the temporality of childhood and into the catastrophic darkness that lies beyond. There is a risk here, I would argue, of over-freighting the child focalizer with melancholy significance, even of falling into to the trap of "schwarze Kitsch" that was Iris Radisch's accusation against Sebald (Radisch 2001). 'Kitsch' is, of course, a notoriously subjective category, but I would argue that there is evidence of Sebald over-freighting with ominous significance the child's view of her bourgeois, German-Jewish home in the following passage which centres on one of the author's favoured symbolic substances, ash:<sup>96</sup>

Beispielweise höre ich, vielleicht, weil ich zu jener Zeit das in Flammen aufgehende Paulinchen nicht aus dem Kopf zu bringen wußte, wie die Mama (...) den Papa davon ins Bild setzt, daß Damenkleider jetzt mit sehr geringen Kosten feuerfest gemacht werden können, indem man sie oder den Stoff, aus dem sie angefertigt werden sollen, in eine Auflösung aus Zinkchlorid taucht. Selbst das

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<sup>96</sup> For in-depth considerations of 'Kitsch,' see Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod. Der Widerschein des Nazismus*, Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1971), Ruth Klüger, *Gelesene Wirklichkeit: Fakten und Fiktionen in der Literatur* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006) at 29-51.

feinste Zeug kann man nach dieser Eintauchung (...) an ein Licht halten und zu Asche verkohlen lassen, ohne daß es Feuer fängt. (DA: 299)

Compared to this, the narrator's childhood encounters with the particle-substances of flour and dust in *Schwindel. Gefühle* remain somewhat more opaque and less heavily freighted with irony:

Aus Weißbrotteig waren diese Seelenwecken gebacken und so klein, daß man sie leicht in einer geschlossenen Hand verbergen konnte. Jeweils vier davon kamen auf eine Reihe. Sie waren mit Mehl bestäubt, und ich erinnere mich, daß mir einmal der Mehlstaub, der an meinen Fingern zurückgeblieben war, nachdem ich einen solchen Seelenwecken aufgegessen hatte, vorgekommen ist wie eine Offenbarung und daß ich am Abend desselben Tags lang noch mit einem Holzlöffel in der im Schlafzimmer der Großeltern stehenden Mehlkiste grub, um das dort, wie ich meinte, verborgene Geheimnis zu ergründen. (SG: 73-4)

Was ich mir vorstellte damals und was mir späterhin im Traum oft noch erschienen ist, das war ein großer fremder Mensch, der eine hohe runde Mütze aus Krimmerpelz tief in seiner Stirn sitzen hatte und der gekleidet war in einen weiten braunen Mantel, zusammengehalten von einem mächtigen, an das Geschirr eines Pferdes erinnernden Riemenzeug. (...) Immer wieder hat mir geträumt und träumt es mir gelegentlich heut noch, wie dieser fremde Mensch seine Hand ausstreckt nach mir und wie ich, aller meiner Furcht zum Trotz, näher und näher mich heranwage an ihn, so nah, bis ich ihn schließlich anlangen kann. Und jedesmal habe ich dann die von der Berührung staubig, ja schwarz gewordenen Finger meiner Rechten wie das Zeichen für ein durch nichts auf der Welt mehr auszugleichendes Unglück vor Augen. (SG: 249-50)

Of course, alongside the similarities between the role of the child focalizers in these narratives, one significant difference is the nature of the interaction between the

focalizing perspective of the child, and that of the remembering adult subject. The adult perspective of Luisa Aurach is almost fully absent from the section of her memoir covering her childhood. Indeed, as Gasseleder's research suggests, this is not the case in the source text for the memoir, as Thea G.'s narrative is structured in episodic, fragmentary scenes interspersed with retrospective commentary (Gasseleder 2005: 170). Sebald thus increased the presence of the child's perspective for Luisa's narrative, and Luisa's adult perspective emerges clearly only at the close of the childhood memoir, in a reflection on the passage of time (DA: 310-11), and in a brief clarifying statement about the Jewish school of her childhood, which was not "was man unter einer Judenschule versteht." (DA: 303) The sustained and continuous presence of the child's focalizing perspective is, I would argue, central to the establishment of the memoir's elegiac and pastoral mode. In contrast, the child's perspective of 'Il ritorno in patria' is frequently modified by the adult perspective of the narrator in a manner suggestive of a faintly scornful attitude towards the restricted knowledge of the child. The child's parochial vision is exposed, for example, when he overhears it whispered that Dr. Rambousek was a morphine addict and thus had yellowed skin:

Ich war deshalb lange Zeit in dem Glauben, die aus Mähren Gebürtigen würden Morphinisten genannt und ihre Heimat liege nicht weniger weit in der Ferne als die Mongolei oder China. (SG: 256)

Here, the child focalizer is shown to have recourse only to inadequate and inappropriate fields of knowledge, connecting Rambousek with the stereotype of 'yellow-skinned Orientals' because he is unaware not only of what a "Morphinist" is but also of where Moravia is and thus of the post-war expulsions of 'ethnic Germans' from Eastern

Europe and the fact that Rambousek was such an expellee. Sebald uses the same satirizing strategy every time the child focalizer is met with concrete evidence of W.'s interconnectedness with the rest of Germany and its post-war condition:

Im oberen Stock hatte der einbeinige Pächter Sallaba, der nach dem Krieg in W. aufgetaucht war, (...) eine Wohnung. Sallaba besaß eine große Anzahl eleganter Anzüge und Krawatten mit Einstecknadeln. Es war aber weniger seine für W. wirklich außergewöhnliche Garderobe als seine Einbeinigkeit und die erstaunliche Geschwindigkeit und Virtuosität, mit der er sich auf seinen Krücken fortbewegte, die ihm in meinen Augen den Anstrich des Weltmännischen gab. Es hieß bei Sallaba, er sei Rheinländer, eine Bezeichnung, die mir lange Zeit rätselhaft geblieben ist und die ich für eine Charaktereigenschaft gehalten habe. (SG: 212-3)

Es war eine allseits weit ausladende lila Limousine mit einem hellgrünen Dach. Unendlich langsam und völlig geräuschlos glitt sie heran, und drinnen an dem elfenbeinfarbenen Lenkrad saß ein Neger, der mir, als er vorbeifuhr, lachend seine gleichfalls elfenbeinfarbene Zähne zeigte (...). Da unter unseren Krippenfiguren einer der drei Weisen aus dem Morgenland, und zwar derjenige mit dem schwarzen Gesicht, einen lila Mantel mit hellgrünem Besatz trug, stand es für mich außer Zweifel, daß der Fahrer des Automobils (...) in Wahrheit der König Melchior gewesen ist und daß er in dem enormen Kofferraum seiner stromlinienförmigen lila Limousine ein kostbares Gastgeschenk, viz. ein paar Unzen Gold, ein Weihrauchgefäß oder eine mit Myrrhe gefüllte Dose aus Ebenholz bei sich führte. Meine Gewißheit in dieser Sache rührte übrigens auch daher, daß ich sie mir bis in die Einzelheiten hinein so ausmalte, als es am Nachmittag dicht und dichter zu schneien begann (...). (SG: 267-8)

This somewhat satirical, mocking mode of engagement with the child's perspective acts to some extent as a counterbalance to the child's instinctive perception of repressed secrets at the heart of Heimat; the child is not permitted to function fully as a

Wordsworthian “eye among the blind” but is shown to be formed and restricted in knowledge and consciousness by the social and ideological environment into which he has been born.<sup>97</sup> Of course, it also serves to suggest that the adult narrator has achieved a state of superior knowledge and understanding, and has overcome the limitations of Heimat and upbringing. In this sense, I would argue that while the adult Luisa is in many ways a lacuna or absence in her childhood memoir, the adult narrator of ‘Il ritorno in patria’ is defined as a subject and to some extent valorized by means of the focalizing perspective of his childhood self. The child’s instinctive perception of repression, and the attraction to peripheral, outsider-figures that he shares with Walser’s Johann (Walser 1998), help to construct the subjectivity of the narrating persona as highly sensitive to the uncanny repressions of patriarchal normativity. The child’s restricted knowledge and his immersion in parochialism function as indicators of the narrating persona’s successful overcoming and rejection of these poor beginnings. That is to say that the dominance of the child’s perspective in Luisa’s memoir obscures the presence of the (fictional) writer’s adult subjectivity, which thus appears to be already lost even at the moment of writing, while, by contrast, the child’s perspective in ‘Il ritorno in patria’ serves to solidify and even valorise the adult subjectivity of the narrating persona.

This consideration of the role of the child’s perspective in the narratives of childhood memory of ‘Max Aurach’ and ‘Il ritorno in patria’ has shown that Sebald constructs the child focalizer as having privileged access to the uncanny, thus serving as an unwitting locus for metaphoric intimations, either retrospective or prophetic, of the Holocaust. On close examination, it emerged that these intimations, rather than the usual

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<sup>97</sup> I have argued that Walser employs a similar technique in the first section of *Ein springender Brunnen*, although, as we have seen, this feeds into a narrative strategy of local exculpation in Walser’s case.

initiations into sexual knowledge, form the fevered point of departure of the child focalizer from each narrative, and mark an ending point in the pattern of childhood. In this sense, what appears as an autobiographical statement of fact in Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (1992) is present as an unstated structuring myth in Sebald's narratives:

Der Tod, nicht Sex, war das Geheimnis, worüber die Erwachsenen tuschelten, wovon man gern gehört hätte. (Klüger 1992: 9)

I will now move on to discuss the role of childhood memory in *Austerlitz*, where, again, we will find the child focalizer serving as a channel for prophetic intimations of catastrophe, but where childhood memory and the child's perspective are also involved in the narrative's extended problematization of and poetic engagement with the concepts of consciousness, subjectivity and memory itself.

#### **1.4 “An einer irren Stelle in meinem Kopf”: *Austerlitz*, childhood memory and models of subjectivity**

##### **“Die Schrecken der Kindheit”: Childhood memory as autonomous**

The plot of *Austerlitz* revolves around the protagonist's loss of family, home, name and language when, at five years of age, he is sent from Prague on a Kindertransport and adopted by a childless Presbyterian couple in rural Wales. The novel's central image of the displaced child is one that Sebald also utilises elsewhere. In *Die Ausgewanderten*'s 'Dr. Henry Selwyn', for example, we encounter a fictional subject whose childhood name, language and identity have been extinguished, this time by his

own volition and hand, and who is driven to a final act of self-destruction in late life by the seemingly autonomous and vivid return of childhood memories (DA: 7-37). The image of the lost child is crystallized further in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, where the narrator considers the fates of children taken following the Kozara massacre of 1942, to be raised under different familial and religious identities:

Von denen, die sich noch am Leben befanden, hatten viele das Pappdeckeltäfelchen mit den Personalangaben, das sie am Hals trugen, vor Hunger zerkaut und somit in der äußersten Verzweiflung den eigenen Namen ausgelöscht. Später wurden sie dann in kroatischen Familien katholisch erzogen, zur Beichte geschickt und zur ersten heiligen Kommunion. Wie alle anderen auch haben sie in der Schule das sozialistische Einmaleins gelernt, haben einen Beruf ergriffen, sind Eisenbahnarbeiter, Verkäuferinnen, Werkzeugschlosser oder Buchhalter geworden. Was für Erinnerungsschatten aber in ihnen herumgeistern bis auf den heutigen Tag, das weiß niemand. (RS: 122)

Here, as well as the affective power of the image of children consuming their own identities out of desperation, we see evidence of a preoccupation with memory, as the narrator imagines the remnants of the children's former lives ghosting about ("herumgeistern") in their adult psyches. This image is suggestive of a construction of memory as something not to be recalled, revisited or reconstructed in the mind; there is no "ritorno in patria" envisaged by Sebald for these figures. Rather, early childhood memory is imagined as something autonomous, dwelling within the psyche but not to be ruled or even observed by the conscious mind. This is, of course, an image of memory that is contiguous with trauma theory and psychoanalytic models of suppressed or latent memory – theories which have been drawn from at length and in depth in a very large number of studies of Sebald's literary constructions of memory. It is not my intention to

repeat this work here, but rather to offer a new perspective on Sebald's construction of memory, traumatic and otherwise, by means of an analysis of the narratological role of childhood in these constructions. It is not just in relation to clearly definable traumas of displacement such as the Kindertransport, forced adoption or emigration that Sebald constructs childhood memory as powerfully and dangerously autonomous, though. As early as *Schwindel. Gefühle* we find representations of non-traumatised subjects beset and brought down by the violent return of the past of childhood:

Auf dem Rückweg gerieten wir in die Albrechtstraße, und Olga gab der Versuchung nach, in die Schule, die sie als Kind besucht hatte, hineinzugehen. In einem der Klassenzimmer, ebendem, in dem sie zu Beginn der fünfziger Jahre gesessen hatte, unterrichtete, fast dreißig Jahre darauf, mit unveränderter Stimme dieselbe Lehrerin und ermahnte die Kinder nicht anders als damals, bei der Arbeit zu bleiben und nicht zu tuscheln. Allein in dem großen Vorraum, umgeben von den geschlossenen Türen, die ihr seinerzeit wie hohe Pforten erschienen waren, wurde Olga, wie sie mir später erzählte, von einem Weinkrampf ergriffen. Jedenfalls befand sie sich, als sie wieder auf die Albrechtstraße herauskam, wo ich auf sie wartete, in einem Zustand der Erschütterung, wie ich ihn noch nicht bemerkt hatte an ihr. Wir fuhren in die Ottakringer Wohnung der Großmutter zurück, und auf dem ganzen Weg dorthin und den ganzen Abend hindurch konnte sie sich nicht beruhigen über die unversehene Wiederkunft der Vergangenheit. (SG: 52)

Olga's painfully Proustian encounter with the past - the result of her 'yielding to temptation' - could be said to be caused by unexpected continuity, as what she assumed to be part of the past turns out to have endured into the present.<sup>98</sup> This minor episode in 'All'estero' thus paves the way for a contrast with the narrator's relief in 'Il ritorno in

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<sup>98</sup> On uncanny returns in Sebald, see Zilcosky, 'Lost and found: Disorientation, nostalgia and Holocaust melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*'



patria' when he finds that W. has changed beyond recognition, at least in terms of appearance (SG: 202).

A similar experience to Olga's is undergone by the narrator of *Austerlitz* at Breendonk, although the physical response to memory here is nausea rather than a fit of weeping and there is no mention of yielding to temptation (much work remains to be done on Sebald's representations of femininity):

Genau kann niemand erklären, was in uns geschieht, wenn die Türe aufgerissen wird, hinter der die Schrecken der Kindheit verborgen sind. Aber ich weiß noch, daß mir damals in der Kasematte von Breendonk ein ekelhafter Schmierseifengeruch in die Nase stieg, daß dieser Geruch sich, an einer irren Stelle in meinem Kopf, mit dem mir immer zuwider gewesenem und vom Vater mit vorliebe gebrauchten Wort »Wurzelbürste« verband, daß ein schwarzes Gestrichel mir vor den Augen zu zittern begann und ich gezwungen war, mit der Stirn mich anzulehnen an die von bläulichen Flecken unterlaufene, griesige und, wie mir vorkam, von kalten Schweißperlen überzogene Wand. Es war nicht so, daß mit der Übelkeit eine Ahnung in mir aufstieg von der Art der sogenannten verschärften Verhöre, die um die Zeit meiner Geburt an diesem Ort durchgeführt wurden, denn erst ein paar Jahre später las ich bei Jean Améry von der furchtbaren Körpernähe zwischen den Peinigern und den Gepeinigten (...). (A: 41-2)

Here, the construction of childhood memory as a hidden and disruptive force is clear. The spatial memory-metaphor is suggestive of consciousness as a bordered and subdivided space, with a door and an "irre[] Stelle." The return of "die Schrecken der Kindheit" is a violent one, brought about by the tearing open of a door: a hallucinatory experience in which the normal boundaries of subjectivity and self appear to collapse, so that the wall of Breendonk becomes embodied, sweating like the nauseous narrator, and

bruised perhaps like the bodies of prisoners, despite the narrator's explicit refusal of this connection. The dissolution of the narrating persona's subjectivity is further implied by the grammatical structuring of the passage, for between the reassuring assertions of "ich weiß noch" and "[ich] las [ein paar Jahre später]" the narrator is the grammatical subject of only one verb: "ich [war] gezwungen." That is to say that, in the moment of returning memory, grammatical subject-status is allocated not to the narrating persona, but rather to the memories and physical sensations that are visited on him.

These passages demonstrate that Sebald does not limit his construction of childhood memory as autonomous and disruptive to those of his figures to whom a biography of trauma is explicitly attributed. Despite the narrator's protestations against the notion of instinctive knowledge absorbed from the stones of Breendonk, though, in this instance, for the reader, a merging *does* take place of Breendonk's violent history and the violence- and terror- imbued childhood memories of the narrator. The text seems to suggest that, although the biography and subjectivity of the narrating persona are not marked by traumatic rupture or displacement, the "Zeit [seiner] Geburt," coinciding with the tortures at Breendonk of which, he insists, he was unaware at the time of his visit, is enough to create a kind of confluence or congruence of memories, specific to the site and the visitor, but taking place beyond and to the detriment of the bounds of the narrator's knowledge and subjectivity. The violent past of Breendonk is thus represented as capable of calling up what is most frightening in the narrator's childhood memories, namely images of violent male and patriarchal purging: the hated word of his father, denoting an instrument of scouring hygiene, the 'cleansing of roots,' and in the previous paragraph, the phallic "dicke Schlauch" used by Benedikt (perhaps the same Benedikt depicted as a

child soldier in Wehrmacht uniform in *Schwindel. Gefühle*) to wash blood from the butcher's floor (SG: 221). The inference that is clearly left for the reader to draw from this passage is the one stated rather less obliquely by the narrator at the outset of the Breendonk episode:

Was ich aber im Gegensatz zu dieser in Breendonk ebenso wie in all den anderen Haupt- und Nebenlagern Tag für Tag und jahrelang fortgesetzten Schinderei durchaus mir vorstellen konnte, (...) das waren die Familienväter und die guten Söhne aus Vilsbiburg und aus Fuhlsbüttel, aus dem Schwarzwald und aus dem Münsterland, wie sie hier nach getanem Dienst beim Kartenspiel beieinander saßen oder Briefe schrieben an ihre Lieben daheim, denn unter ihnen hatte ich ja gelebt bis in mein zwanzigstes Jahr. (A: 37-8)

At this point in the narrative, it seems that Breendonk itself sets about remedying the narrator's initial imaginative limitation. Childhood memory is cast as breaking through the limits of the narrator's knowledge and defenses, and it is by means of the "Schrecken der Kindheit" that the 'true' nature of the "Familienväter" and "gute Söhne" is revealed. That is to say that, in this instance, childness and childhood memory serve to forge a connection between the narrator's 'roots' and the Nazis' violence which seems to transcend, overpower and temporarily disable his subjective autonomy.

### **A hungry squirrel in the snow: Childhood memory and creaturely fragility**

Jacques Austerlitz, the central figure of interest in this analysis, carries no such burden of German guilt, yet in many ways the narrator's experience at Breendonk anticipates the role of childhood memory in Sebald's construction of the text's protagonist. His life defined by the caesura of the Kindertransport, Austerlitz's childhood

memories and their loss are constructed not as images of purgative patriarchal violence but of creaturely fragility, pathos and beauty.<sup>99</sup> The ghostliness of memory suggested in the verb “herumgeistern” in the image of the children of Kozara in *Die Ringe des Saturn* is modified in *Austerlitz* with a group of images evocative of vulnerable corporeality. The feeling of the loss of his mother tongue, for example, is imagined or remembered by Austerlitz as

(...) eine Art Scharren oder Pochen von etwas Eingesperrem, das immer, wenn man auf es achthaben will, vor Schrecken stillhält und schweigt. (A: 203)

Other creaturely leitmotifs connected with Austerlitz’s loss of memory are the moth and the squirrel, and of these it is the small, furry mammal that is most strongly connected with childness in the text. As with the narrator’s child-self’s encounters with the flour-chest and the stored eggs in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, and Luisa’s vision of the preserved fruits in *Die Ausgewanderten*, the chief memory-metaphor of Austerlitz that is associated with childhood involves the storage of food and matters of nourishment and survival in the barren winter months. Here, though, the image is removed to some extent from the realm of human industry, suggesting perhaps Austerlitz’s total dislocation from the social world of his birth, but also calling upon the stock post-Rousseauian symbolic association between children and small animals, thus increasing the pathos of Austerlitz’s loss. The removal of the memory- (or rather forgetting-) metaphor from the domestic setting also serves to prevent any trace of the ‘Unheimliche’ from seeping into the

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<sup>99</sup> For an extensive discussion of creatureliness in Sebald, see Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Santner’s work indicates rich ground for exploration of possible theoretical and conceptual connections between creaturely life, Foucauldian bio-politics and childness. Within the confines of the current project, however, my reading of childness and the creaturely in Sebald works against the grain of Santner’s study to some extent, in that the potential for melodramatic or sentimental effect that exists in the conjunction of post-Rousseauian childness and the creaturely is emphasized.

evocation of Austerlitz's lost home, something in which the food storage images in the two earlier texts are steeped, as we have seen.

Seeing a stuffed squirrel in the window of a bric-a-brac shop in Terezín, Austerlitz recalls its Czech name – *veverka* – “wie den eines vor langer Zeit in Vergessenheit geratenen Friends.” (A: 284) Subsequently, Věra recalls the protagonist's childhood fascination with squirrels, whereby the text reproduces a phrase in Czech from out of the mouth of the child, filtered of course through Sebald's multiple layers of narration, but nonetheless appearing in direct speech and present tense:

Aber wenn alles weiß sein wird, wie wissen dann die Eichhörnchen, wo sie ihren Vorrat verborgen haben? Ale když všechno zakryje sníh, jak veverky najdou to místo, kde si schovaly zásoby? (A: 295)

When he arrives at the house in Prague, it seems Austerlitz has found his lost store:

(...) die haselnußförmigen Eisenknöpfe in bestimmten Abständen auf dem Handlauf des Geländers – lauter Buchstaben und Zeichen aus dem Setzkasten der vergessenen Dinge, dachte ich mir und kam darüber in eine so glückhafte und zugleich angstvolle Verwirrung der Gefühle, daß ich auf den Stufen des stillen Treppenhauses mehr als einmal mich niedersetzen und mit dem Kopf gegen die Wand lehnen mußte. (A: 222-3)

Here, overwhelmed by returning memory and recognition, Austerlitz repeats the narrator's gesture at Breendonk, leaning his head against the wall. As well as the Benjaminian resonance of the image of the wrought-iron rail, though, it may be suggested that, if this is Austerlitz's lost store of memory, its form places it at one remove from the natural setting of the squirrel motif, so that we may doubt the power of this iron store to

provide sustenance to the protagonist. The squirrel leitmotif is carried through to the end of the novel, when we learn that the protagonist has set off in search of his father, Eychenwald (A 364), and where Austerlitz describes himself imagining seeing “Eichkatzen,” “immer an der Grenze der Unsichtbarkeit,” stranded in the planted area within the complex of the new Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris,

(...) von denen eine apokryphe Geschichte (...) behauptet, daß man sie hier ausgesetzt hat in der Hoffnung, sie würden sich vermehren und zur Zerstreung der gelegentlich von ihren Büchern aufblickenden Leser eine zahlreiche Kolonie ihrer Artsgenossen begründen in diesem künstlichen Pinienhain. (A: 398)

As a motif of the loss and recovery of memory, the squirrel is suggestive of a natural, instinctive order and natural sustenance lost to the protagonist, and on a wider level, to all “Leser” dwelling within the edifice of governmentally regulated archival memory.<sup>100</sup> It is also suggestive of a kind of creatureliness and immediacy that is connected stylistically in the narrative with the voice and vision of the child. Thus, the children’s questions overheard by Austerlitz and Marie de Verneuil at the Paris zoo echo the young Jacquot’s question about the squirrel in form and substance, given as they are in a language other than the main language of the narrative, and phrased in direct speech and in the present tense. An embedded photographic image of a family of reindeer serves to further heighten the pathos of the children’s questions here:

Mais il est où? Pourquoi il se cache? Pourquoi il ne bouge pas? Est-ce qu’il est mort? (A: 375)

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<sup>100</sup> Here, again, too, we have an instance of dialectic “Verschachtelung.” Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald. Die dialektische Imagination*. While the squirrel suggests yearning for a lost, natural world of order and sustenance, all of Austerlitz’s squirrel motifs are in some way abstracted from ‘Nature,’ appearing stuffed in a shop window, or within the constructed, urban spaces of the park and the library. As Santner shows, it is precisely such moments of collision between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ that comprise Sebald’s construction of the creaturely. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* at xv.

This picture of lost naturalness and immediacy would appear to suggest the presence in *Austerlitz* of an ideal of whole, unalienated subjectivity in an elegiac, tragic mode similar to that which colours Luisa Aurach's memoir in *Die Ausgewanderten*. As someone who "zu jenem Typus des Junggesellen gehörte, an dem etwas von einem Knaben bleibt bis zuletzt" (A: 62), Austerlitz could, in the spirit of the Romantic ideal of childhood, represent a poetically child-like figure with privileged access to a lost, whole, natural realm, much as Hoffmann's Anselmus does in 'Der goldene Topf', for example (Hoffmann 2004). This, of course, is not the case. If Sebald evokes the traces of Romantic ideals of childhood and nature here, he does so in order to intensify the sense of tragedy pertaining to this text's insistence on the absolute impossibility of "werden, was wir waren," or even of surviving the partial return of lost memory with our selves intact (Assmann 1978).

To further explore Sebald's depiction of the fragile Subject in the face of childhood memory, I now turn to examine the narratives of Austerlitz's two childhoods. Identifying the narratological differences and commonalities between the Bala childhood and the Prague childhood will, I hope, cast light on the role of childness in Sebald's constructions of memory, identity, origin and the Subject.

### **Instinctive vision in a false world: The Bala childhood and the question of subjective wholeness**

As the Kindertransport is cast as the moment of caesura in Austerlitz's biography, any attempt to insert a further caesura into this biography would risk diminishing the

narrative significance of this traumatic dislocation. Thus, whereas in both 'Il ritorno in patria' and 'Max Aurach' a dangerous bout of fever marks the 'end of innocence', for Austerlitz the narrative places no clear sign marking the onset of adolescence or of adulthood. In this sense, too, then, Austerlitz retains "etwas von dem Knaben" into middle age, trapped as he remains in the patterns of his second boyhood in a 'false world.' The Welsh childhood is structured according to a symmetry of darkness and light – the house at Bala against Andromeda Lodge, Gwendolyn against Adele, Elias against Hilary – rather than a pattern of growth and development. It accommodates a number of passages wherein the vision of the child – named Daffyd by his adoptive parents – seems to divine the truth of his situation in a manner that bypasses his actual knowledge. These passages could be understood as supporting the notion of the child's privileged vision, as I have suggested similar passages do in the childhood narratives of Luisa Aurach and 'Il ritorno in patria', but could also be read as instances of "externalised and fragmentary allegories of the protagonist's self", "signs of [his] subjectivity that are not assimilable to a model of psychological interiority." (Long 2007a: 165)

Childness may be what allows both of these interpretations to stand. Through its Romantic and Wordsworthian inheritance, childness supplies a model of anamnestic consciousness and memory that is not fully "interior" or self-contained. At the same time, though, the myth of childhood innocence delivers a reassuring message of wholeness of origins and subjectivity. Austerlitz's narrative of his Welsh childhood can in this sense be read on the one hand as a continuous, chronological narrative that makes use of the child's perspective and seems to buy into the myth of the gifted vision of the child, and on the other hand as a markedly artificial rendering of a "falsche Welt" beneath which,



moth-like or like the squirrel's hoard, Austerlitz's truth is trapped and hidden. In this sense, although the text may well present the subjectivity of Daffyd Elias/Jacques Austerlitz as fragmented and dislocated, it nevertheless holds on to an ideal of lost wholeness, instinctively mourned and sought after by the child.

While the child's fascination with the drowned village of Llanwddyn and the ghost stories of Evan resonates fairly obliquely with his own forgotten biography ("als sei auch ich untergangen im dunklen Wasser," A: 82),<sup>101</sup> his reported engagement with an illustrated children's Bible seems to echo his family's fate in a manner so explicit and literal as to challenge the reader's credulity towards the device of the child's vision. If we hold on to the notion of Austerlitz's psychological interiority, we must at this point doubt the authenticity of his recollection. If we do not, if we see here evidence of the "allegorical" structure of Sebald's protagonist, then perhaps we ought to question the construction of a rather transparent allegory which appears to define Jewish identity in terms of the Holocaust, and which is located in the image of a child reading an illustrated Bible (Long 2007a: 165):

Tatsächlich, sagte Austerlitz bei einer späteren Gelegenheit, als er die walisische Kinderbibel vor mir aufschlug, wußte ich mich unter den winzigen Figuren, die das Lager bevölkern, an meinem richtigen Ort. Jeden Quadratzoll der mir gerade in ihrer Vertrautheit unheimlich erscheinenden Abbildung habe ich durchforscht. In einer etwas helleren Fläche an der steil abstürzende Bergseite zur Rechte glaubte ich, einen Steinbruch zu erkennen, und in den gleichmäßig geschwungenen Linien darunter die Geleise [*sic*] einer Bahn. Am meisten aber gab mir der umzäunte Platz in der Mitte zu denken und der zeltartige Bau am hinteren Ende, über dem sich eine weiße Rauchwolke erhebt. Was damals auch in

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<sup>101</sup> This could also be read as another intertextual reference to the image of the drowned boy in Storm's *Aquis Submersus*. See Pages, 'Crossing borders: Sebald, Handke and the pathological vision'

mir vorgegangen sein mag, das Lager der Hebräer in dem Wüstengebirge war mir näher als das mir mit jedem Tag unbegreiflicher wirkende Leben in Bala, so wenigstens, sagte Austerlitz, dünkt es mir heute. (A: 85, 88)

Here, indeed, the potential offered by Ruth Klüger's appraisal of *Austerlitz* for a negative critique of Sebald's techniques of narrative over-determination becomes clear:

[Im Roman wird] alle Melancholie einer untergehenden Kultur in das eine Schicksal des jüdischen Kindes gelegt (...) (Klüger 2003: 100).

Although, as I have said, this passage stretches the authenticity-effect and the notion of privilege in relation to childhood memory and the child's vision, it does tie in with a gentler moment of prescience which is also located in the child's reading of a picture-book – the pre-transport child's urgent question about the squirrel and his hoard that, as we have seen, is part of a wider leitmotivic structure in the text:

Immer, wenn wir danach wieder nach Hause kamen, mußte ich dir, trotzdem du es von der ersten bis zur letzten Zeile auswendig kanntest, vorlesen aus deinem Lieblingsbuch, das vom Wechsel der Jahreszeiten handelte, sagte Věra und fügte hinzu, daß ich besonders an den Winterbildern, an den Hasen, Rehböcken und Rebhühnern, die reglos vor Staunen in der frisch verschneiten Landschaft standen, mich nie hätte sattsehen können, und immer, wenn es zu der Seite kamen, sagte Věra, sagte Austerlitz, auf der davon die Rede war, daß der Schnee durch das Gezweig der Bäume herabrieselt und bald den ganzen Waldboden bedeckt, hätte ich zu ihr aufgeblickt und gefragt: Aber wenn alles weiß sein wird, wie wissen dann die Eichhörnchen wo sie ihren Vorrat verborgen haben? (A: 295)

Perhaps something of a darkly ironic play on Walter Benjamin's conception of the picture book and its child reader – of which Sebald was quite possibly aware – can be

traced in these passages, as well as an echo of the passage on his childhood bible from Charles Lamb's *Essays of Elia* quoted by Aleida Assmann. For Benjamin, the child's reading of the picture book, its perception of printed form and colour, was a visionary moment to which he – albeit cautiously – assigned a distinctly Wordsworthian significance:

Die Kinderbücher dienen nicht dazu, ihre Betrachter in die Welt der Gegenstände, Tiere und Menschen, in das sogenannte Leben unmittelbar einzuführen. Wenn es vielmehr irgend überhaupt etwas wie die platonische Anamnesis gibt, so hat es bei den Kindern statt, deren Anschauungsbilderbuch das Paradies ist. Am Erinnern lernen sie; was man ihnen an die Hand gibt, soll die Farbe des Paradieses wie die Flügel der Schmetterlinge ihren Schmelz noch an sich tragen, soweit überhaupt Menschen sie einem Blatte zu verleihen verstehen. (Benjamin in Tiedmann and Schweppenhäuser 1985: 124; see also Schiavoni 2006)

In the passage describing Austerlitz's reading of the illustrated Bible, Sebald appears to be attributing to the child a hellishly anamnetic vision of the fate of his people, in a kind of shadow-image of Benjamin's paradisiacal picture-book. Perhaps, then, Sebald is closer to the Romantic Charles Lamb than to Benjamin, in his suggestion of anamnetic terror sparked by the image of "the Witch raising up Samuel" in the illustrated Bible of his childhood:

Is it that we naturally conceive terror from such objects, considered in their capacity of being able to inflict upon us bodily injury? – O, least of all! These terrors are of older standing. They date beyond body – or, without the body, they would have been the same. (...) That the kind of fear treated of here is purely spiritual – that it is strong in proportion as it is objectless upon earth – that it predominates in the period of sinless infancy – are difficulties, the solution of which might afford some probable insight into our ante-mundane condition, and a

peep at least into the shadow-land of pre-existence. (Lamb 1914: 96-7; see also Assmann 1999: 227-8)

Considering Sebald's passage in the light of these statements, we may have to give some credence to the possibility that the child's instinctive recognition of Jewish identity and of the shadow of the Holocaust in his children's Bible are to be interpreted as attributable to his privileged, child's vision. At any rate, the passage reveals, I would suggest, the points of collision and fracture of constructions of memory, subjectivity and childhood that seem to compete in *Austerlitz*.

Despite the promise of cohesion and continuity that this extended section of narrative of Austerlitz's Welsh childhood and youth seems to offer narratologically, the motivic structures and engagement with notions of memory reveal dislocation and disunity, which is, however, not in the final instance to be understood as a dismissal or deconstruction of the ideal of subjective wholeness. For behind, beneath or concealed within the false life of Daffyd Elias is something whole that produces a "leises Scharren oder Pochen," the revival of which is the object of all of the yearning in the text, which is the truth of the protagonist's identity and the restoration of whole subjectivity (A: 203).

Austerlitz's rediscovery of his childhood in Prague, however, does not fulfill but only postpones this yearning for restored wholeness, as has been remarked by numerous scholars. (Finch 2008; Fuchs 2004; Long 2007a) For Finch, it is through the narrator's appropriation and retelling of Austerlitz's story, that is through the narrator's own acts of writing, that "the contraband of subjective wholeness and prelapsarian innocence" is retained in spite of the apparent failure of Austerlitz's own quest (Finch 2007: 197). Long suggests that the dream of restoration is present in the text merely as a kind of red herring

which ultimately leads us back from the magic of *mémoire involuntaire* to the edifice of the archive, and to an understanding of Sebald's protagonist as an "archival Subject." (Long 2007a: 157) His conclusion suggests concurrence with Finch, insofar as he argues that Sebald's texts posit "narrative and artifice" against dissolving subjectivity (Long 2007a: 171). However, where Finch sees covert credence in the power of textual narrative, Long sees a pattern of increasing despair and incredulity.

It is my suggestion here that, while the concept of narrative may operate as a counter to the fragmented Subject at a broad level, in *Austerlitz* it is childness that functions as the stage upon which this drama of yearning for wholeness and the inevitability of dissolution and loss is played out at the narratological level, and that it is tropes and images of childhood more than of narration or writing that inform and generate the reader's response to the text. More specifically, it is childness that allows Sebald to construct a vision of authentic, prelapsarian wholeness for Austerlitz's past, whilst at the same time constructing his protagonist as external to himself, without interiority, a model of the Subject as a flat, fissured surface.<sup>102</sup>

### **Rapture and despair: The Prague childhood and the role of the child focalizer**

To allude to the presence of a child focalizer in relation to Austerlitz's memory work on his lost, Prague childhood may at first appear somewhat improbable. As I will come to discuss below, the defining moments of this section of the text are focalized in various forms of exteriority to Austerlitz's childhood self. The Liverpool St. Station scene thus presents the child as a hallucinatory object observed by the focalizing adult

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<sup>102</sup> Here, I am building on Zilcosky's reading of *Austerlitz* as a "melodramatic" text. The concept of childness allows me to pinpoint the narratological source at least of one aspect of the text's melodrama. Zilcosky, 'Lost and found: Disorientation, nostalgia and Holocaust melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*'

subject. This rift is dramatized again where Austerlitz views a photograph of himself as a child. The moment of his departure on the Kindertransport is narrated entirely through the perspective of Věra, closing in a mythically resonant image of disappearance into the underworld:

Es ist nur noch ein undeutliches, gewissermaßen verwischtes Bild in mir von der Stunde des Abschieds auf dem Wilson-Bahnhof, sagte Věra und setzte nach einigem Nachsinnen hinzu, ich hätte meine Sachen in einem ledernen Köfferchen gehabt und in einem Rucksack etwas Proviant – un petit sac à dos avec quelques viatiques, sagte Austerlitz, das seien die genauen, sein ganzes späteres Leben, wie er inzwischen denke, zusammenfassenden Worte Věras gewesen. Věra erinnerte sich auch an das zwölfjährige Mädchen mit dem Bandoneon, dem sie mich anvertraut hatten, an ein im letzten Augenblick gekauftes Chaplinheftchen, an das Flattern, gleich dem einer auffliegenden Taubenschar, der weißen Taschentücher, mit denen die zurückbleibenden Eltern ihren Kindern nachwinkten, und an den seltsamen Eindruck, den sie gehabt habe, daß der Zug, nachdem er unendlich langsam angerückt war, nicht eigentlich weggefahren, sondern bloß in einer Art Täuschungsmanöver, ein Stück aus der überglasten Halle hinausgerollt und dort, noch nicht einmal in halber Ferne, versunken sei. (A: 253-4)

However, between these moments of terrible exteriority that mark the boundaries of Austerlitz's engagement with his lost self are some moments of clear interiority, where the protagonist gains entry, as it were, to his childhood subjectivity and the child's perspective comes into play in the narrative. I would argue that these instances represent more than the illusory red herring suggested by Long, and that they rather contain the central talismans of *Austerlitz's* painful negotiations with memory, subjectivity and childhood.

There are three moments at which the child's perspective comes into play in this part of the narrative: where Austerlitz remembers boarding the ship for England, where he remembers being looked after overnight by Věra, and where he remembers waiting for his mother to return home from the theatre (A: 208, 229-31, 237). The first instance, which precipitates Austerlitz's journey to Prague, contains a narratological transition from adult to child focalizing perspectives:

Ich sah mich nur warten, an einem Kai, in einer langen Zweierreihe von Kindern, von denen die meisten Rucksäcke trugen oder Tornister. Ich sah wieder die mächtigen Quader zu meinen Füßen, den Glimmer im Stein, das graubraune Wasser im Hafenbecken, die schräg aufwärts laufenden Taue und Ankerketten, den mehr als haushohen Bug des Schiffes (...). (A: 208)

Thus introduced to the narrative, the child's perspective becomes the channel for the text's exposition of some of its core figures of yearned-for wholeness, innocence and interiority in Austerlitz's first, miraculously recuperative visit with Věra, which I have chosen to quote extensively here:

Věra war (...) aufgestanden und hatte das innere und das äußere Fenster geöffnet, um mich hinabschauen zu lassen in den Nachbargarten, in dem der Flieder gerade blühte, so weiß und dicht, daß es in der einbrechenden Dämmerung aussah, als habe es mitten ins Frühjahr hinein geschneit. Und der süßliche, aus dem ummauerten Garten emporwehende Duft, der zunehmende Mond, der schon über den Dächern stand, das Läuten der Kirchenglocken drunten in der Stadt und die gelbe Fassade des Schneiderhauses mit dem grünen Altan, auf dem Moravec, der, wie Věra sagte, schon längst nicht mehr lebte, seinerzeit nicht selten zu sehen war, wie er sein schweres, mit Kohlenglut gefülltes Bügeleisen durch die Luft schwenkte, diese und andere Bilder mehr, sagte Austerlitz, reihten sich nun eines an das nächste, und so tief versunken und verschlossen sie in mir gewesen sind, so

leuchtend kamen sie mir während des Hinausschauens aus dem Fenster nun wieder in den Sinn, auch dann, als Věra, ohne ein Wort, die Türe aufmachte zu dem Zimmer, in welchem neben dem von der Großtante geerbten Baldachinbett mit den gedrehten Säulen und den hoch aufragenden Kopfpolstern das kleine Kanapee noch stand, auf dem ich immer geschlafen habe, wenn die Eltern nicht zu Hause waren. Die Mondsichel schien in das dunkle Zimmer herein, eine weiße Bluse hing (wie auch vordem oft, so erinnerte ich mich, sagte Austerlitz) an der Klinke des halboffenen Fensters; ich sah Věra, wie sie damals gewesen war, als sie bei mir an dem Diwan saß und Geschichten erzählte aus dem Riesengebirge und dem böhmischen Wald, sah ihre selten schönen, gewissermaßen im Dämmer verschwommenen Augen, wenn sie, angelangt am guten Ende, ihre tief geschliffenen Gläser abnahm und sich niederbeugte zu mir. Später, während sie nebenan ihre Bücher studierte, bin ich, so konnte ich mich nun erinnern, gern eine Zeitlang wachgelegen, behütet, wie ich mich wußte, von meiner fürsorglichen Wächterin und dem weißlichen Schein des Lichtkrieses in welchem sie bei der Lektüre saß. Ich konnte mir mit der kleinsten Willensbewegung alles vorstellen, den krummen Schneider, der jetzt gewiß auch in seiner Kammer lag, den Mond, der rings um das Haus fuhr, die Muster des Teppichs und der Tapete, sogar den Verlauf der Haarrisse in den Kacheln des hohen Ofens. War ich aber des Spiels müde und wollte einschlafen, so brauchte ich bloß darauf zu horchen, bis Věra drüben umblättern würde, und jetzt noch spüre ich, sagte Austerlitz, oder spüre erst wieder, wie es war, wenn mein Bewußtsein sich auflöste zwischen den in das Milchglas der Türe geätzten Mohnblüten und Ranken, eh ich das leise Rascheln des nächsten gewendeten Blattes vernahm. (A: 229-31)

With the double-opening of the window, Austerlitz is allowed to take up the same spectator-position as his childhood self, and indeed present vision and remembered sight are, in the grammar of the second sentence, virtually indistinguishable from each other. The sense of immediacy and presentness created by the words “gerade” and “schon”, the



references to the natural, temporal processes of the blossoming tree and the waxing moon, and the rich sensuousness of the smell- and sound-descriptions, ensure that Austerlitz's remembering is not, at this point, and in contrast to the other narratives of childhood memory I have discussed, figured as a step or look back into the past, but rather as images from the past materializing in or percolating through an intensely and lyrically rendered present moment of fertile opening up. Indeed, it might not be too much of a stretch to suggest that, at this point of ideal union between past and present, Sebald imposes a gendered structure on memory, with the opening of inner and outer windows, foaming blossoms and waxing moon constituting a female-structured, receptive present, while the memory-image of the tailor's red-hot iron sailing through the air serves as an active, energetic, masculine counterpart. In this sense, Sebald is at this point constructing in erotic and gendered terms Austerlitz's desire for recuperation of his childhood memories and his lost self.

Both channel and product of this union, on the opening of a third portal to the past – the door to Věra's bedroom – Austerlitz enters into a rapturous state of oneness with his childhood self, seeing again through his earlier vision. Here, then, is the converse moment to the narrator's experience of terror at Breendonk. Again the image is used of childhood memory entering into the adult present through an opened portal, and again the fabric of the present and of adult subjectivity become passive recipients for returning memory. Here, though, is no terror, for the return is wished-for and pleasurable, and furthermore appears to strengthen or even restore Austerlitz's adult, subjective wholeness whereas the narrator's is momentarily disabled and dissolved. The scene in Věra's bedroom is saturated with images and structures of safe interiority, containment and

wholeness. If, as Finch suggests, Austerlitz's memory of his mother is suffused with desire for pre-Oedipal unity, Věra's room represents a female, maternal, even uterine space which is free of the vicissitudes of Oedipal desire and the unease of the uncanny (Finch 2007: 190). A dark room curiously filled with whiteness, it is rich in symbolic possibility, and can be understood as a photographic metaphor representing the moment at which light is shone through the negative onto the paper as well as a corporeal and erotic metaphor suggestive of a moment of fertilization. In it, Austerlitz recalls sensations of pleasure and security, where the images and objects he visualizes correspond in an unproblematic and reliable way to outside reality, so that, unlike the squirrel's hoard under the snow, the locations of things are certain even though they are out of sight. Continuity is guaranteed by the student's turning of the pages of her book, and the remembering adult subject encompasses, in the last moment, his childhood self, in the recollection of the child's loss of consciousness in the instant of falling asleep.

In short, the child's perspective in this passage functions as a mark of rapturous union between the protagonist's lost, childhood self and his adult subjectivity, and as a standard of visionary truth, facilitating the narrative construction of memory, in this instance at least, as unquestionably and self-evidently authentic. In a scene populated with images suggestive of a gendered and sexualized construction of remembering as an act of fertilization, the protagonist's consciousness appears as embryonically and ecstatically whole, and it is clear enough that the text is at this point accessing that Romantic ideal of innocence as a state of organic wholeness and potentiality in the service of a construction of memory as corporeal, primal and restorative.

Of course, this description of one passage is by no means representative of Sebald's constructions of childhood memory throughout *Austerlitz*. It hardly needs to be repeated that the protagonist's recovery of one of his mother tongues (Czech) and of some of his early memories represents only a partial and insufficient restoration. This section of the narrative, describing Austerlitz's first conversations with Věra, thus inserts the dream of wholeness into the text as a credible and intensely desired counterpoint to the fragmentation and exteriority of his adult subjectivity, analogously, one might perhaps say, to the manner in which the cultural myth of childhood innocence served or serves as a response to the experiences of fragmentation, dislocation, loss and uprooting that accompanied modernity. It should, therefore, not surprise us to find even in this Arcadian vision of wholeness in Věra's room some of Sebald's favoured images suggestive of loss and historical trauma: the lilac blossoms cover everything like snow, the tiles of the oven are fissured with tiny cracks, and the glass into which the child's consciousness dissolves is opaque and engraved with poppies, emblematic of forgetting and of death. Following this experience in the narrative is a second 'bedroom scene,' in which the protagonist strains to remember his mother's goodnight kiss on her return to the theatre, but cannot recall her face, only "einen irisierenden, niedrig über der Haut schwebenden Schleier von weißlich getrüübter Milchfarbe." (A: 237) Helen Finch has discussed this section in detail from psychoanalytic and intertextual perspectives (Finch 2007, 2008). I would add to her discussion only a suggestion that this short passage marks the failure of the child's perspective as a redeeming or unifying force at the moment of its greatest narratological intensity, for it is here that Sebald has Austerlitz shift briefly into the present tense, creating a heightened sense of immediacy:

(...) und dann sehe ich, sagte Austerlitz, wie ihr der Schal von der rechten Schulter gleitet, als sie mir mit der Hand über die Stirne streicht. (A: 237)

The remainder of Austerlitz's imaginative encounters with his child-self are thus marked by dislocation, fracture and the uncanny, leaving the first experience of rapture in Věra's room to function within the narrative as a talisman of yearning and deferral.

### **The corpse in the luggage net: The pathetic uncanny of the child-self as Other**

My discussion thus turns now from childhood innocence as a reassuring myth of subjective wholeness and pristine origins to the closely related notion of the child as 'other', as unsettling emblem of the discontinuous, fissured nature of consciousness, memory and subjectivity. The child as sinister 'other' is, of course, a perennial fascination in Western literary and also cinematic narrative, and finds its place in some of the canonical texts of modern German literature, for example the deathly and alluring Tadzio or the mercurial and unsettling Oskar Matzerath. Sebald, too, includes a small number of figures of sinister childness in his works, primarily in *Die Ausgewanderten*, where they seem to define the narrator's encounters with England's servant- and working classes. There is, for example, the uncanny Aileen, servant to the Selwyns, whose bedroom is filled with dolls and who seems to flit about within the walls of the house (DA: 17), and the frightening Angel Fields children in 'Max Aurach', whose strange play in the urban wasteland intensifies the narrator's sense of alienation in Manchester (DA: 233). Indeed, a concerted analysis of Sebald's textual representations of social class, and particularly of working-class and immigrant figures, might provide a valuable addition to the discussion of his texts as critiques of Western bourgeois social structures. However,

my immediate concern is with the figure of Jacques Austerlitz, who, unstable and fractured as his identity and subjectivity may be, is anything but working class, and representation of whose lost family Finch understands as an elegiac portrait of bohemian bourgeois life (Finch 2007).<sup>103</sup> Where Austerlitz encounters his child-self as 'other,' it is not in the vein of the sinister primitivism of the Angel Fields children with their bonfires, but rather in terms of devastating pathos which dramatises the fracturing of his subjectivity as tragedy.

### **The grammar of exteriority**

In narratological terms, Sebald's construction of an adult figure's childhood self as 'other' can be described as a matter of grammatical positioning. The remembering adult is granted grammatical subject-status, while the child-self takes the grammatical object-position. In other words, there is an adult agent of focalization, and a child object of focalization:

Ich sehe, sagte er, wie mir der Kinderlehrer im Cheder, den ich zwei Jahre schon besucht hatte, die Hand auf den Scheitel legt. Ich sehe die ausgeräumten Zimmer. Ich sehe mich zuoberst auf dem Wägelchen sitzen (...). (DA: 31)<sup>104</sup>

So aber erkannte ich ihn, des Rucksäckchens wegen, und erinnerte mich zum erstenmal, soweit ich zurückdenken konnte, an mich selber (...). (A: 201)

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<sup>103</sup> By contrast, Gideon Behrendt's *Kindertransport* autobiography describes a working class Jewish childhood in Berlin, and adulthood in the military in Britain and Israel. Gideon Behrendt, *Mit dem Kindertransport in die Freiheit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2001).

<sup>104</sup> Jan Cueppens also notes this grammar of exteriority in Selwyn's statement in his consideration of 'witnessing' in Sebald. Jan Cueppens, 'Tracing the witness in W.G. Sebald', in Anne Fuchs and Jonathan Long (eds.), *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 59-72 at 66-7.

Here, the effect of exteriority, of utter separation of adult Subject from childhood self, reflects an experience of traumatic dislocation or catastrophic change which Sebald connects with European, Jewish experience in the twentieth century. For Austerlitz and Henry Selwyn, there is a move in childhood from central Europe to Britain, accompanied by a change of language and name. By contrast, Luisa Aurach's memoir of childhood does not use this grammatical model. Even where Luisa reflects on the cataclysmic manner in which the world of her childhood has disappeared, subject-status continues to be apportioned to the child, while the remembering adult subject remains in the background, so that the problem of "Ich sagen" articulated by Christa Wolf's narrator at the opening of *Kindheitsmuster* is bypassed (Wolf 1977):

Die Zeit. In welcher Zeit ist das alles gewesen? Und wie langsam neigten sich nicht damals die Tage! Und wer war dieses fremde Kind auf dem Heimweg, müde, mit einer winzigen weißblauen Häherfeder in der Hand? (DA: 310)

Considered in abstract terms, the subject-object relationship implied in this grammar of exteriority could be thought to suggest a power relationship favouring the adult subject, suggestive of a position of command, authority or even safe distance in relation to the child object. As one might surmise, this relationship is not borne out as far as the figures of Austerlitz and Selwyn are concerned. However, in *Austerlitz*, Věra's one narrated memory from her own childhood provides the text with – in this respect – an intriguingly out-of-place allegory of the relationship between the remembering, adult subject and the objects of remembrance:

Es ist mir dabei oft, sagte Věra, als schaute ich wieder, wie als Kind in Reichenberg einmal, in ein Diorama und sähe in dem von einem seltsamen Flüssigkeit erfüllten Kasten die mitten in der Bewegung reglos verharrenden

Figuren, deren Lebensechtheit sich, unbegreiflicherweise, ihrer extremen Verkleinerung verdankt. (...) Und nun geht solcherlei Reminiszenzen aus meiner Kindheit die Erinnerung zusammen an unsere von der Šporkova aus gemeinsam gemachten kleinseitigen Exkursionen. (A: 231-2)

Here, Věra's own remembrance of her childhood is marked neither by dislocated exteriority nor by the union and interiority implied by the child's perspective. Her act of remembrance is, in itself, relatively insignificant, serving simply to provide the narrative with the memory-allegory of the diorama. As the passage continues, indeed, Věra's memory of her own childhood not only merges with but is, I would argue, subsumed by her memory of Austerlitz's childhood and their companionship then.<sup>105</sup> The allegory itself is highly suggestive of the separation of exteriority, where the remembering subject gazes back, through a transparent, separating medium, at the object of memory. This structure would appear to suggest that remembering is a 'safe' activity for the adult subject to undertake, involving the taking up of a spectator-position, and the engagement with beautifully diminished objects, suspended and contained, which have non-threatening, non-invasive "Lebensechtheit" rather than the uncanny life of Austerlitz's hallucinatory memories. Austerlitz's own encounters with childhood memory as a force external to himself are thus not well represented by Věra's diorama metaphor, as is evidenced by the contrast between the poppy-patterned "Milchglas" and the diorama's transparency.

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<sup>105</sup> Barzilai argues, regarding *Die Ausgewanderten*, that Sebald's female figures perform mediating roles in the service of the text's homosocial narrative structures. Barzilai, 'Facing the past and the female specter in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*'.

### **Perilous pathos: the child-self as haunting Other**

Peril, not safety, is what marks Austerlitz's experience of childhood memory as external to him. Although in these passages' grammar, the adult has subject-status while the child self is relegated to the object-position, the 'safe' separation or power relationship implied by these grammatical roles does not carry through to wider levels of signification. It should not, of course, appear as a particularly rich insight to observe that Austerlitz's returning childhood memories should imperil his already compensatory (in his own phrasing, A: 206) or "allegorical" subjectivity (Long 2007a: 165). What is of interest to me here is the role played by the figure of the child as uncanny un-subject in Sebald's narrative representations of traumatic memory. Such constructions of the child-self as uncannily 'other' occur at two key points of Austerlitz's struggles with memory.

First is his confrontation with the photograph whose composition I have discussed in the previous chapter, and which, for Seth Lerer, "governs," and which we might also say haunts, *Austerlitz* (Lerer 2004). In this instance, memory appears to fail the protagonist altogether, so that his engagement with the image of his childhood self must by reason be defined by radical exteriority and dislocation. In this, though, this scene bears a strong resemblance to that of Austerlitz's first rush of returning memory in Liverpool Street Station, where he also 'sees' an image of his childhood self that he almost fails to recognize:

Seine Beine, die in weißen Kniesocken steckten, reichten noch nicht bis an den Boden, und wäre das Rucksäckchen, das er auf seinem Schoß umfangen hielt, nicht gewesen, ich glaube, sagte Austerlitz, ich hätte ihn nicht erkannt. (A: 201)



Only costume, it seems, provides Austerlitz with a sense of recognition of his childhood self, and the presence or absence of memory as mediator of images appears to be less essential for recognition than one might assume. In this sense, Barthes's 'recognition' of his mother as a child in the winter garden photograph, which by necessity comes from beyond the bounds of his own powers of memory, is inverted in Sebald's text (Barthes 2000: 67-71). The image of the child is so radically 'other' that it is unrecognisable, and can only be identified by the rucksack, which is a point of continuity between the child and the adult Austerlitz. Itself a symbol of transience and contingency (as well as of survival in difficult conditions by the storage of "viatiques"), although it can be read as a continuation of Sebald's chain of food storage-related memory-metaphors, the image of the rucksack hardly ties in easily with the ideals of subjective wholeness and redemptive memory that the narrative seems to set up when Austerlitz first enters Věra's room. These ideals would be better represented by the iconography of Romantic innocence manifested in the page-boy photograph, where the child is clothed all in white and after the school of Gainsborough, and on the back of which the boy's true name is inscribed in his grandfather's hand, suggestive of familial and generational continuity and inheritance.<sup>106</sup> Much as such ideals of innocence and restoration may reside in the narrative as a source of yearning, anguish and momentary rapture, Austerlitz remains unable to recognize his pre-transport, pre-rucksack child self, or to find his way back to his familial identity or his parents' faces. At this moment of the failure of recognition, Austerlitz's adult Subject-status – contingent and compensatory

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<sup>106</sup> On the visual iconography of childhood innocence and the significance of Gainsborough's 'Blue Boy' portrait, see Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

structure that it is – is thus brought near to collapse, while the image of the romantically costumed child is imbued with a subject-status that is both uncanny and rich in pathos:

Und immer fühlte ich mich dabei durchdrungen von dem forschenden Blick des Pagen, der gekommen war, sein Teil zurückzufordern und der nun im Morgengrauen auf dem leeren Feld darauf wartete, daß ich den Handschuh aufheben und das ihm bevorstehenden Unglück abwenden würde. (...) Ich bin (...) nicht etwa, wie man annehmen müßte, bewegt oder erschüttert gewesen, sagte Austerlitz, sondern nur sprach- und begriffslos und zu keiner Denkbewegung imstande. (A: 268)

Frozen in a state of terror or paralysis, it seems that Austerlitz's adult subjectivity has now taken up the position of "etwas Eingesperrtem, das immer, wenn man auf es achthaben will, vor Schrecken stillhält und schweigt," (A: 203) while the image of the child becomes the knowing subject with the "forschenden Blick" elsewhere so strongly associated with adult, male subjectivity and with Austerlitz in particular (A: 11). It is thus by bestowing uncanny subjectivity and authority on the image of a child that Sebald dramatizes Austerlitz's dilemma here. At the same time, the child's plea for salvation allows both fragments of Austerlitz's subjectivity – adult and child – appear vulnerable, intensifying the melancholy pathos of this moment of complete paralysis and silence.

Childness can thus be said to play a significant role in the construction of Austerlitz's fractured subjectivity, linking this subjectivity not with Wittgensteinian surface phenomena (Klebes 2006b, 2006a), nor with a model of "archival" subjectivity (Long 2007a), but rather with a psychological model of subjectivity suggestive of a once-whole, now traumatically and irreparably ruptured interiority. In this sense, my analysis of the role of childness and childhood memory in *Austerlitz* leads me to disagree with

Long's argument that it is the destruction of the archival records pertaining to Austerlitz's life, and not the Kindertransport, that constitutes the "foundational moment" of the narrative (Long 2007a: 152). Rather, my analysis leads me to suggest that the dream of recuperating lost wholeness, and the model of interior subjectivity that pertains to this dream, are of key importance in the narrative construction of Austerlitz as a Subject, and that childness plays multiple roles in this construction. The structure of the myth of innocence, which supports the ideals of whole subjectivity and pure origins at the same time as lamenting their irreparable loss and rupture, is itself a powerful ally to Sebald's project of constructing in his protagonist a fundamentally fractured and contingent Subject, defined by dislocation and yet compelled to search for that which once was, but which has been irredeemably lost.

That Sebald makes use of psychoanalytic models of traumatic memory in the construction of his protagonist is clear and by now thoroughly established in the field of Sebald scholarship.<sup>107</sup> For the present purposes I need only add that it is frequently the psychology specifically of childhood trauma that interests Sebald, as his representations of Henry Selwyn, the children of Kozara and Jacques Austerlitz show. As Marcel Atze shows, Sebald's reading of Halbwachs seems to have heavily informed his writing of *Austerlitz*, the bones of whose plot can be understood as a meditation on Halbwachs's opening reflections, in *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, on the

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<sup>107</sup> See, for example, Jeff Adams, 'The pedagogy of the image text: Nakazawa, Sebald and Spiegelman recount social traumas', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29/1 (March 2008), 35-49, Marcel Atze, 'Die Gesetze von der Wiederkunft der Vergangenheit. W.G. Sebalds Lektüre des Gedächtnistheoretikers Maurice Halbwachs', in Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (eds.), *Sebald. Lektüren*. (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 195-211, Maya Barzilai, 'On exposure: Photography and uncanny memory in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*', in Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds.), *W.G. Sebald: History - Memory - Trauma* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 205-18, Fuchs, 'Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte': Zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W.G. Sebalds Prosa. This list is far from exhaustive.

contingency of early childhood memory (Atze 2005). To suggest that *Austerlitz* is somehow 'all about' childhood memory would, of course, be rather limiting and certainly incorrect; however, it may nonetheless be worth restating my argument here that notions and ideals of childhood have been bound up with Western theories and constructions of memory, consciousness and subjectivity from Locke to Wordsworth and on to the American 'false memory' debate of the 1980s (Assmann 1999).

Childness, I would suggest, thus provides *Austerlitz* with a structural myth of yearning for restoration of an irrevocably ruptured state of wholeness, for the reversal of entropy. The figure of the child as uncanny 'other,' which stems from the dark side of the innocence myth, as it were, functions in the text to suggest the impossibility of this yearning. On the more closely narratological level, childness also provides the text with a set of memory-metaphors that are central to establishing a sense of the creaturely authenticity of Austerlitz's consciousness and memory, an authenticity which is furthermore defined in terms of suffering, fear and extinction. These three aspects of the role of childness in the text's construction of memory and subjectivity can be seen together in one key passage in which the pathos with which *Austerlitz* is imbued crystallizes:

Auch an eine zweite Zwangsvorstellung, die ich lange gehabt hatte, erinnerte ich mich jetzt wieder: die von einem Zwillingenbruder, der mit mir auf die nicht endenwollende Reise gegangen war, der, ohne sich zu rühren, in der Fensterecke des Zugabteils gesessen und hinausgestarrt hatte in das Dunkel. Ich wußte nichts von ihm, nicht einmal, wie er hieß, und hatte niemals auch nur ein Wort mit ihm gewechselt, quälte mich aber, wenn ich an ihn dachte, andauernd mit dem Gedanken, daß er gegen Ende der Reise an Auszehrung gestorben war und im Gepäcknetz lag zusammen mit unseren anderen Sachen. (A: 325-6)

This passage reaches back to *Die Ausgewanderten*'s Cosmo Solomon, who yearns for the return of a brother he does not have at his old nursery window (DA: 142), as well as to the twin siblings Leo and Luisa in 'Max Aurach', and to the image used in Sebald's violent rhetoric in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, of the shrunken and burnt corpse of a child carried in the suitcase of a German "halbirre Weib." (LL: 36) Here we have an image of rupture and lost wholeness in keeping with the myth of innocence and with a psychological model of traumatised subjectivity. Creaturely suffering and extinction is in evidence as, like Austerlitz's moths and his mother tongue, the child wastes away in stillness and silence. In the uncanny image of the double (a perennial Sebaldian motif) we have in this instance the child – Austerlitz's lost self – as yearned-for and inaccessible Other, marking the original loss that, as Finch has it, the adult Austerlitz seeks to make good through homosocially-inflected relationships, first with Gerald and then with the narrator-figure (Finch 2008: 172).

## 1.5 Conclusion

This discussion of the construction and role of childhood memory in *Schwindel. Gefühle*, *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* cannot, of course, provide a comprehensive analysis of the memory-discourse that is carried out throughout Sebald's oeuvre. Studies of this aspect of Sebald's work make up a huge proportion of the field of Sebald scholarship; indeed, it would be – to say the least - difficult to carry out a scholarly engagement with Sebald's work without confronting questions of memory. In choosing to approach a small portion of these questions, regarding the models of memory and

subjectivity employed by Sebald, through the angle of childhood memory and the narratology of the child's perspective, I have focused on an area that as of yet has not been subject to concentrated or sustained critical analysis. As I suggested at the outset, there are a number of factors which make this approach a valid and productive one.

Firstly, there is the close historical correlation between Enlightenment and Romantic models of consciousness and memory, and modern constructions and ideals of childhood. These correlations are evident in Aleida Assmann's fascinating study of memory as a metaphoric and changing construct; however, it would require a far vaster project than the one I have undertaken here to begin to trace fully the common history of these ideas. Although there is evidence in Sebald's work of concerted and systematic discursive engagements with many of the cultural myths of Western modernity, I have suggested that such an engagement *doesn't* take place in his oeuvre in relation to constructions of childhood. Childness is thus free to operate as a platform for some of his narratives' central dialectical tensions - such as wholeness and fragmentation, restoration and loss, or identificatory desire and scrupulous distance - and also as a source of affective impact that is not subjected to the kind of self-conscious, critical rigour that applies at other levels, as it were, of Sebald's literary discourse. In other words, a focus on childness affords me the opportunity to explore the presence in Sebald's narratives of another "illicit cutter, smuggling the contraband of subjective wholeness and prelapsarian innocence into the ruinous landscape of history," to borrow Finch's elegant formulation, in the form of the structuring myth of childhood innocence (Finch 2007: 197).

My focus on the narratology of the child's perspective in Sebald's narratives of childhood memory has revealed a consistent narrative role regarding the insertion, by

means of symbolic imagery, of oblique intimations of the Holocaust into the text. In this sense, the inheritance of the Wordsworthian myth of the child as having access to privileged forms of memory and knowledge lives on in Sebald's texts. The three child focalizers I have discussed are all constructed as having instinctive, in Luisa's case, prophetic, perception, but no concrete knowledge, of the catastrophic events of the Holocaust and the Second World War. At times, indeed, I have argued, this technique of oblique allusion comes close to overloading with melancholy significance the naïve figure of the child focalizer, risking a modulation in the narrative's tone from tragic irony to "schwarze[r] Kitsch" (Radisch 2001).

Narrating childhood memory involves more than a child focalizer, of course. In examining the dual presence in these narratives of focalizing positions attached to a remembering, adult subject and to a remembered childhood self, I have been able to trace the means by which Sebald produces models of subjectivity that are marked by fracture, dislocation and lacunae, but that nonetheless adhere to the ideal of originary, although traumatically and irrecoverably ruptured, subjective wholeness. This leads me to conclude that, at least in the cases of the narrative sections I have analysed here, childhood innocence provides Sebald with a structuring myth that allows for the production of models of subjectivity and memory which dramatize an emotive dialectics of catastrophic loss and impossible yearning.

## Concluding Discussion

### **1. From tabula rasa to carte blanche: Childness and the poetics of persuasion**

In 1902, the Times Literary Supplement reviewed J.M. Barrie's 'The White Bird' (a short story for adults in which the figure of Peter Pan first appeared) in glowing terms which seem to forbid all criticism:

In fine, here is an exquisite piece of work. To analyse its merits and defects – its fun, its pathos, its character-drawing, or its sentimentality, its improbability, its lack of cohesion – would be to vivisect a fairy. (cit. in Rose 1994: 23)

This story, which, as Rose demonstrates, both stages illicit adult desire for the possession of a child and is itself a feat of symbolic appropriation of the child, finds in its reviewer a willing and forgiving reader. To critique a text of such ethereality, the reviewer implies, would be to conduct an act of brutish and torturous violence. Almost a century later, and in the context of an altogether darker and more complex confluence of an individual's fantasy of childhood and wider societal and cultural desires, the historian Stefan Maechler identifies a not dissimilar tendency in the discourse of the Wilkomirski affair, relating both to Wilkomirski's self-created public persona and to the initial popular reception of his text (Maechler 2001). Maechler's analysis shows how skeptical readings of Wilkomirski's text were to a large degree precluded by the use of the child's perspective in the narrative, and by the figure of the innocent child survivor that, as an adult, Wilkomirski appeared to continue to embody. Indeed, Maechler identifies a willingness in the reading public to suspend all expectations of historical accuracy and to



overlook the basic conditions of narration, in its eagerness to believe in the unmediated authenticity of what Wilkomirski presented as his memories:

One important, a priori effect of this artifice [of the child's perspective] is that the reader does not expect historical precision – after all, it's only a small child speaking. Historical imprecisions or contradictions do not impair credibility; on the contrary, they underscore the authenticity of a childlike perception. This assumed perspective suggests that the child's world of experience is directly present within the text, that what is being told is an unadulterated version of what has happened – experience writes itself, as it were. This posture conceals the fact that every word is written in the present and that the author surely shapes his memories with the conscious, knowing mind of an adult. (Maechler 2001, 279)

Wildly unrelated though they are, both cases point to the invocation of tropes of childhood in order to vouch for the innocence of the text, its author and its reader. This innocence seems to be understood as a kind of authentic truthfulness, against which incredulity is cast as an act of cruelty. In the case of Peter Pan, we may kill fairies by our disbelief. In the case of Wilkomirski, scepticism was identified as an act of perpetration, the sceptical reader allied with those who first tortured and brutalized the innocent child in the concentration camps. Here, fears and misgivings about expressing doubts that might fuel the discourse of Holocaust denial were also a factor in public credulousness towards Wilkomirski's narrative, but, as Maechler argues, the desire to revere and sympathise with the figure of the child victim – and to forget more complex Swiss economic, social and cultural ties to the perpetrators – was also strong.

As I have argued in this thesis, childness functions in narrative as an implement of considerable rhetorical and moral force – one might borrow from Walser's rhetoric and describe it as a 'Moralkeule' – through which reader response is prompted and

modulated, and the position of the reader towards the text or sections of the text is determined. The cultural context within which I have chosen to frame my textual analyses – that of post-Wende German literature which engages with Germany's wartime and National Socialist past – is one in which the rhetorical power of childness leads to urgent questions regarding ethics of narration and representation, exculpatory desires, the gaps of memory and post-memory, and the poetics of loss and mourning. It has not been my intention to furnish exhaustive analyses of the texts I have examined; a close focus on one narratological and thematic area cannot give rise to a complete picture of the interpretive possibilities offered by a literary text. Rather, I have hoped to offer new critical perspectives on these texts, to open up new ground on which to question and explore them, and to draw attention to areas of questioning that have been avoided or neglected in existing studies.

What has emerged from this analysis might best be described as a return on the part of the chosen texts to the myth of childhood innocence as a central narratological device, in the service of widely varying desires and modes of discourse in relation to Germany's Nazi past and the Second World War. These desires and discourses are discussed in summary below.

## **2. The narrative functions of childness in the texts examined**

### **An innocent stance in relation to National Socialism**

Exculpatory desire was found to be of primary significance to the construction of child protagonists and focalizers by Forte, Walser and Beyer. Each of these fictional children – Forte’s “Junge”, Walser’s Johann, and Beyer’s Helga – are children of National Socialism, socialised and educated within the regime. Yet each author pursues a strategy whereby the child figure is constructed as fundamentally innocent of or even immune to NS ideology. In the cases of Walser and Forte, this might be understood as aiding a strategy of local and generational exculpation. Each author presents his ‘Heimat’ as having a reduced level of complicity with and responsibility for the regime and each seeks to consolidate the cultural capital held in the contemporary German cultural field by the “heimliche erste Generation” (Weigel 1999) by emphasizing the privileged vision and witness status of the ‘Kriegskind’ without seriously confronting its ideological interpellation by Nazi family, youth and education policy.

The same generational tag cannot be applied to Beyer though, born as he was in 1965, who locates his own coming-of-age as regards historical consciousness with the fall of the Berlin wall, as I discussed in the thesis introduction. Yet he constructs his National Socialist child protagonist as fundamentally innocent of and resistant to the ideological machinations of her parents’ world. One might postulate that this construction and its reception are indicative of a German desire that goes beyond the self-interests of cultural players of Walser’s and Forte’s generation. It could be argued that the desire to ‘become normal’ so frequently given expression in post-Wende and post-millennial

German culture comprises among other things a desire for normalization of the past in relation to the present Federal Republic. The literary technique of the child's perspective might be said to spring out of and serve this desire, offering the reader a posture of innocence through which to engage with the past without confronting feelings of complicity or guilt. As I have shown, Beyer goes some way towards complicating this innocent stance by partially aligning the reader with a perpetrator figure. His narrative is nonetheless unable to do without the stainless perspective of the child protagonist. In this sense, Beyer's *Flughunde* represents a fascinating text of childness, where the adult desires that produce innocence are clearly dramatized, yet where the narrative ultimately seeks to uphold the myth of innocence and quash its own deconstructive impulses.

The desire for an innocent stance in relation to the National Socialist past and the Holocaust at the turn of the twenty-first Century is not, furthermore, solely a German phenomenon, as the success of texts such as Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* would appear to indicate. The moral and historical implications of this kind of stance are complex and problematic, and the possibilities of reductionist, simplistic thinking about the past that it raises are relatively clear. Clear also is the potential such texts offer to the discourse of victimhood in their representations of German children as victims of National Socialism. In this sense there is little difference between Boyne's Bruno and Beyer's Helga, both of whom are constructed as privileged offspring of an NS elite who die at the hands of their parents' machinations. Such a construction of the German child as offspring and victim of National Socialism is not a feature of Walser's and Forte's narratives, both of which seek to locate their child protagonists, together with family and community, at some distance from a Nazi political and ideological centre or heartland –

for Walser, the distant metropolises, for Forte, the rural south. In a sense, then, the younger, more self-consciously post-Wende writer could be said to be concerned with transporting this stance of innocence into the 'centre', as it were, of the National Socialist apparatus, no longer content with the conceit of an innocent 'periphery' of apolitical or resistant communities. Although Beyer (and, for that matter, Boyne) cannot be said to be pursuing any agenda of personal exculpation in relation to the National Socialist past, it might be said that texts such as *Flughunde* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* serve a broader, markedly more contemporary desire to believe in a fairy tale of innocence and compassion dwelling in fragile precariousness at the heart of the twentieth century's great crime and catastrophe. Like the children of Beyer's third novel, *Spione*, perhaps the authors and readers of such texts run the risk of a kind of narcissism, constructing out of the increasingly distant Nazi past a heritage in which their own post-Wende and post-millennial self-images lie, like Easter eggs, waiting to be found.

### **Childness and the discourse of Germans as victims of war**

Childness plays a role in the representation of the air war in Germany and experiences of bombing in several of the texts dealt with in this study. Out of the texts examined, Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* arguably comes closest to a discourse of German victimhood. Extensive narrative attention is paid to the experience of bombing, and the protagonist and his family are firmly aligned with the victims rather than the perpetrators of National Socialism, so that they are constructed as double victims, of the civilian bombings and of the regime. Furthermore, Forte's portrayal of un-bombed southern Germans as well-fed Nazi fanatics adds to the impression the narrative gives

that those who were bombed could not have been Nazi sympathizers. The use of the child's perspective is key here, I would argue, in supporting the otherwise flimsy victim/perpetrator dichotomy upon which Forte's construction relies. Indeed, it might be said that the only thing that prevents Forte's narrative from segueing in with 1990s and contemporary right-wing discourses of German victimhood which seek to politicize cultural and collective memories of civilian bombing and expulsion, is the extremely clear championing of radical left-wing politics and activism, and of multilingual and multicultural social solidarity, that *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* performs.

Beyer, too, makes repeated use of child focalizers in his representations of the experience of civilian war and bombing. Helga Goebbels provides a limited focalizing perspective as she experiences bombing raids from within the protective spaces of home, cellar and bunker. Of course, the protective power of these spaces is constructed as only partial and ultimately inadequate; nonetheless they preclude the panoramic vistas of fire and destruction witnessed by Forte's boy and by the child-self of Hermann Funk in Beyer's *Kaltenburg*. Helga's experience of bombing thus does not move her out of the range of the domestic sphere, nor of innocence. Helga does not come to fully comprehend the devastating vista of the last months of war in Berlin, just as she remains unaware of Karnau's violence, although this violence is in a sense ultimately visited upon her body in the form of the Soviet forces' autopsy and photograph and Karnau's subsequent voyeuristic gaze and fantasy on these documents. These structures of violence, innocence and victimhood might be said to render Helga a double victim in a manner related to Forte's construction of his protagonist, subject as she is to a peculiarly intimate violence from within the National Socialist apparatus as well as from the Allied military.

If Beyer maintains the attributes of limitation and naivety in his construction of Helga's experiences of war, the same cannot be said of his construction of the child's view of the Dresden bombing in *Kaltenburg*. As is also the case in *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, passages in which a full-scale, panoramic representation of bombing and its aftermath is attempted do not construct the child focalizer as markedly naïve or limited. Rather, the figure of the child provides a more neutral, 'camera-eye' style of focalization, and the pathos and drama of the scene are provided by that which the child's vision records rather than by the child himself. In Forte's text, this is conveyed by the sight of suffering and disoriented civilians and amassed corpses. In *Kaltenburg* pathos is created by the accumulation of images of burning creatures – birds falling from the sky and ducks burning on the lake of the 'Großer Garten' in keeping with the novel's ornithological leitmotifs.

It might be argued that this reduction in the marked childness of the child focalizer in panoramic representations of Allied bombings contrasts dramatically with the limitation and naivety of the child focalizer in representations of the social fabric and domestic everyday of NS Germany, such as Forte's representation of Düsseldorf after the 'Kristallnacht' pogroms, or Beyer's portrayal of Wehrmacht soldiers coming to tea in *Kaltenburg*. This could, of course, be put down to the age and developmental stage of the child focalizers, who, in accordance with the realist conventions adhered to by both novels, must have reached a more advanced stage by the later years of the war and the bombing campaigns. In this sense, it could be said that the developmental span of childhood provides Forte and Beyer with an extremely useful pattern or scheme of focalization for the twelve years of NS rule, facilitating a restricted and naïve view of

pre-war and early wartime society in all its fervour, and opening out into a more comprehensive form of focalization where German wartime suffering in the last years of the regime is the subject of representation. Following this line of thought, it could be argued that the posture of innocence facilitated by the effect of the child's perspective appears specifically in the context of literary engagements with German guilt and complicity with National Socialism; it is a narrative stance less strongly associated with representations of the Allied bombings and wartime suffering. This finding strongly supports the argument I have made that childness and tropes of childhood innocence in particular have a persuasive rhetorical function which vouches for authenticity and works against sceptical or incredulous reading practices in narrative situations where doubt and incredulity might otherwise easily and justifiably arise.

Finally, it is worth pointing out in this regard that, despite the intense controversy that has developed around Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* in terms of its ideological affinities with the 'New Right', it could not be said to take part in the discourse of Germans as victims, simply because it evades representation of German wartime suffering and of civilian bombings as effectively as it evades engagement with the Holocaust. In this light of this, I would argue that the child's perspective in Walser's text functions not just in an exculpatory capacity, but also as a means of evading the representation of suffering and trauma in general.

### **Childness and discourses of mourning and memory**

The narratological density and complexity of W.G. Sebald's prose oeuvre has provided ample ground on which to study the narrative roles played by childness in



discourses of loss, mourning and remembrance of the Holocaust from a non-Jewish German perspective. In contrast to the other authors examined, I found that Sebald's use of the child's perspective does not serve to limit or soften his texts' confrontations with matters of German guilt and complicity. Indeed, none of his child focalizers are placed in a position which might precipitate a direct, immediate confrontation with these matters in the first place. Both Jacques Austerlitz and Luisa Aurach, as carriers of the child's perspective, are evocative of lost worlds of European Jewish experience prior to the rise of National Socialism. The childhood self of the narrator in 'Il ritorno in patria' is situated in post-war Germany and as such comes into direct contact, as it were, with the fact of his community's repression of the recent past, rather than with past events themselves. In this sense, the story left untold by Sebald might be said to be that of Benedikt, who goes to war as a "furchtsames Kind" and survives to be consumed by unhappiness (SG 221, 231), and who is remembered washing the blood from the tiles in the butcher's in *Austerlitz* (A 41). By providing only minimal traces of this story, which might in its historical fundamentals correspond to that of Walser's Johann, Sebald could be said to escape the risk of exculpation or reductionism that accompanies the use of the child's perspective in literary representations of National Socialism.

As I have shown, however, Sebald's use of the child's perspective carries its own risks. As a consequence of the ironic lacunae of mourning with which the memories of Luisa Aurach and Jacques Austerlitz are framed, these passages' emotional impact is created by means of a jarring contrast between an idyllic, past harmony of Jewish childhood and the murderous destruction and loss brought about by the Holocaust. This contrast between innocence and death, and the manner in which the knowledge of the

reader, narrating persona and other narrative figures frame the unknowing perspective of the child, produce the risk of falling into the pattern of representation described by Friedländer in his essays on *Kitsch und Tod* (1984).

Furthermore, in spite of Sebald's complex and scrupulous literary engagement with ambiguities and crises of memory, his occasional use of the child's perspective tends towards an almost mystical construction of memory as miraculous, whole and profoundly authentic. Hence the rapturous wonder of Austerlitz's initial recuperation of his childhood subjectivity, and hence the absolute faith in Luisa's writing of her own childhood consciousness that is demanded by the structures of tragic irony and mourning in 'Max Aurach'. Maechler's assessment of the role of the child's perspective in Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir as concealing the constructed nature of memory and the presence of adult consciousness behind a façade of immediacy thus also holds true for Sebald's use of the child's perspective. That is not to suggest that the same ethical problems arise out of the two texts; the central problem with *Bruchstücke* is not that it makes use of the effect of the child's perspective, but that its author made fraudulent and elaborate public claims as to the text's historical truth and his own identity with its first-person narrator. My argument is that childness allows Sebald's texts to escape momentarily from awareness of the constructedness and documentary unreliability of memory – an awareness that is otherwise scrupulously maintained in his works – and to create a secret space within his narratives, in which faith can be placed utterly in the scenes conjured by memory.

Where it occurs in Sebald's texts, the effect of the child's perspective is instrumental in creating structures of loss and mourning that brook no resistance from the

reader. The incontestable authenticity attributed to the memory-visions of childhood establishes a centre or point of origin that is whole and innocent, while the framing knowledge of catastrophic loss and death creates a tragically ironic lacuna between present and past, which the implied reader must impossibly yearn to broach. Thus, at these moments, Sebald constructs the act of mourning Europe's loss as analogous to mourning the loss of childhood innocence.

As I have sought to emphasise earlier, though, the effect of the child's perspective is by no means a regular feature of Sebald's oeuvre. My development of the concept of childness as a critical tool has allowed me to look beyond child focalizers and narrators, taking into account other figures and objects of narration as well as larger narratological tropes and structures. I have found that, in the myth of childhood innocence, Sebald's narratives have a structuring myth that is eminently adaptable to their wider dialectical structures and discursive concerns. The duality of the innocence myth as a means of expressing modern experiences of irrevocable loss, fragmentation and entropy, and of promising the existence of a state of originary wholeness and unity thus supports many of the dialectical tensions that have been identified in Sebald's work. At the same time, the entanglement of the myth of childhood innocence with adult desires, anxieties and taboos serves Sebald's construction of his narrating persona and the dramatisation of his ethics of narration, heightening tensions between appropriative or identificatory desire and scrupulous, respectful distance, and between negative critique of bourgeois normativity and elegiac yearning for lost idylls of bourgeois harmony.

In short, the manner in which Sebald draws upon the poetics of innocence in his literary negotiations with loss, mourning and the crises of post-Holocaust memory is

bound up much more intricately and intimately with the myth's implications of death and desire than is the case in Forte's and Walser's narratives. These two disparate modes of utilisation of the tropes of childhood innocence – one mournful, the other exculpatory, one might say – nevertheless share a common thread. In both cases, childness serves to elicit strong emotional engagement and investment on the part of the reader, and to discourage or even forbid incredulous or sceptical reading practices.

### **Childness, suffering and pathos**

Almost all of the texts discussed in this study contain images of children who are suffering and frightened. These images frequently create heightened moments of pathos by means of association of the child with the creaturely world; hence we have Jacques Austerlitz and the squirrel (A: 295), Hermann Funk and the burning birds in Dresden (K: 93-5), Forte's 'Junge' and his brother portrayed as cubs clinging to their mother during a bombing (JS: 145), and the Goebbels children, fearful for their lives, hiding in the dog-pen in Hitler's bunker (F: 270). Such images speak to our post-Rousseauian associations of the child with nature and with the animal world, and construct the child as vulnerable 'other' to and victim of the adult world. Walser is, in fact, the only author studied to work actively against this association, where he has Johann batter a cat to death in the cellar in a solitary display of power, violence and pleasure (SB: 176). This departure from the nature-child of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Rilke among many others is, however, exceptional in a group of texts that I have found to be partially reliant on the myth of innocence for their contributions to German discourses and debates of cultural memory. I would suggest that this tendency to recourse to the association between the child and the

creaturely points to problematic aspects of the texts' engagements with Germany's and Europe's National Socialist, wartime past, irrespective of their individual focuses on perpetrator or victim collectives. For if the suffering child is constructed as somewhat creaturely in its 'otherness' to the adult world in the text as well as to the adult implied reader, then alongside the pathos and emotional traction of the image of creaturely vulnerability is a sense of the child as so radically 'other' and frail as to be a figure of diminished consciousness, even of diminished humanity. These representations of suffering, in their reliance on post-Rousseauian tropes of childhood and innocence, might be said to reinforce the subject position of the adult reader, facilitating a mode of engagement with the NS and wartime past that does not challenge the reader to take on board a defamiliarising perspective or to take up a position of critical distance, but rather invites a sentimental and objectifying response. By pursuing a critical strategy of reading closely and against the grain, the thesis has sought to highlight and question such representational strategies.

### **3. Conclusion**

The aims of this thesis were twofold: firstly to develop the concept of childness for use as a critical tool and to demonstrate its efficacy, and secondly to investigate the narrative functions of tropes of childhood in post-Wende adults' literature engaging with the German past of 1933-1945.

My adaptation of Hollindale's concept of childness from the field of children's literature criticism for the study of constructions of childhood in texts for adults has

produced an extremely useful critical and conceptual tool. It has freed my analysis from an adjectival vocabulary of childhood that comes heavily laden with positive and negative values in both the German and English language. It has enabled a clear distinction to be maintained between childhood as an empirical biological, psychological and developmental stage of human life, and childhood as a social and cultural construct that is primarily evidence of adult desire, anxieties, interests and conflicts, and not of an empirical stage or state of being.

In terms of narratological analysis, the conceptual tool of childness has facilitated the development of a cohesive and far-reaching mode of inquiry, taking in a broad range of narratological elements, including perspective, focalization and narration, textual models of subjectivity and consciousness, the text's interpellation of the implied reader, and thematic and motivic concerns. My findings suggest that tropes of childhood, and particularly of childhood innocence, often perform functions of persuasion and reassurance within the narratives examined. In this sense, the thesis counterbalances the prevailing critical emphasis on the role of the child's perspective in literature as a device of defamiliarisation.

I have drawn from historical, cultural, visual art and social studies as well as narratological studies in the development of this critical tool, and it has allowed me to make meaningful connections between the results of processes of close analysis and broader literary, cultural and political contexts. This potential for discovering the presence of broad cultural, social and ideological tendencies in the minutiae of the text means that childness can stand as a flexible and useful critical concept well beyond the

boundaries of the present study, and could for example be of value in other fields of literary criticism and film studies as well as comparative and cultural studies.

Finally, in highlighting the manner in which childhood is constructed in the service of adult desires, interests and agendas, the concept of childness also feeds into a more radical school of criticism, represented for example by the work of Jacqueline Rose and Jack Zipes, which calls attention to the processes by which children may be interpellated and childhood “configured” by exploitative agendas (Rose 1994; Zipes 2009).

My application of this conceptual tool in the analysis of childhood tropes in post-Wende German literature about the National Socialist period points above all to the primacy of the myth of childhood innocence in this context. The texts analysed in this thesis showed evidence not of a “crisis of innocence” nor of a paradigm shift towards other modes of constructing childhood (Higonnet 1998). Rather, a shift back towards innocence can be observed in their narratological features and in their underlying structural myths and assumptions. Furthermore, this shift was observed in spite of the texts’ widely differing overall narrative projects, formal structures, degrees of narrative self-reflexivity, generational and ideological affiliations and areas of thematic emphasis. As my analysis has shown, the innocence myth is peculiarly robust; attempts to ‘queer’ or deconstruct it tend ultimately to feed back into it, as we have seen in the cases of Beyer’s and Sebald’s work. This quality has also been discussed by Pinfold in relation to pre-Wende texts of childhood engaging with the Third Reich (Pinfold 2001). However, the return to innocence I have identified in the post-Wende texts studied here constitutes, I would argue, more than a textual struggle with the sticky and persistent structures of a

powerful, modern myth. As I have shown, the texts examined here call upon some of the foundational tropes of modern innocence – the child as *tabula rasa*, as inherently good, as possessed of privileged vision and intuition – not in a spirit of subversion or critique, but in the service of persuasion and the preclusion of readerly scepticism. This can be said of each of the texts discussed, despite varying emphases on exculpation, normalisation, mourning and the critique of discourse.

In a period that has seen seismic, indeed paradigmatic transformations in the political, economic, social and technological landscapes of Germany and of Europe, as well as in the technologies and discourses of cultural memory and historical practice, these texts of Germany's wartime and Nazi past find in the myth of childhood innocence a peculiarly conservative, restorative narrative tool, which is possessed of persuasive emotional force and considerable structural elasticity. Consequently, rather than providing an "eye among the blind" in the service of the reader's moral and sentimental education concerning Germany's past, childness in these narratives frequently prompts the reader to turn a blind eye to exculpatory, reductive, objectifying and even kitsch-tinged impulses within the texts' negotiations with the past .

As I have indicated, this is not intended as a general diagnostic statement about the wider projects of the texts examined. Rather, it is my conclusion that childness functions in tandem with the texts' broader discursive and critical projects, covertly providing an emotive, anti-reflexive impetus where required, in order to carry the reader smoothly over the inevitable discursive and ethical cracks in the narratives, and to camouflage or gloss over problematic and dubious desires in relation to the German past. In this sense, the cultural myth of childhood innocence performs its usual function (as



described by Kincaid and Rose) in these texts, appearing as a product of and disguising vessel for powerful and unruly adult desires.

The authors I have chosen to focus on in this thesis are all white heterosexual men of West German origin. As such, none of them could be described as peripheral or marginalized figures within the fields of German literary and cultural discourse. As is discussed in the thesis introduction, each of these authors seeks to inscribe himself into the generational model of postwar German identity. A further area of questioning opened up by this study would thus concern texts written from more peripheral positions in the German cultural field and literary market. Given that childhood innocence is a myth of modern, bourgeois patriarchy, an exploration of its presence in texts written from feminist, queer, or what is loosely termed post-colonial perspectives might uncover more deconstructive engagements and different forms of narrativisation. Given the myth's elasticity and resilience as demonstrated in this dissertation, though, this might not always prove to be the case. The focus on 'central' rather than 'peripheral' voices in this thesis has succeeded in identifying covert adherence to a patriarchal myth in the service of persuasive rhetoric and the regulation of reader response. The thesis has thus demonstrated that the narrative functions of childness exceed and, at times, work against the processes of defamiliarisation.

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