

Omnium Gatherum:

The Ecological Fictions of Ransmayr,
Tokarczuk and Flanagan

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis presents a comparative reading of novels by three prominent contemporary writers who engage with ecological themes. Christoph Ransmayr, Olga Tokarczuk and Richard Flanagan are all well-known writers both internationally and within their respective cultural contexts of Austria, Poland and Australia. A comparison of their work is justified not only by the international scale of the climate crisis – and by their own opposition to categories of national literature – but also by an array of shared literary influences and intertexts, foremost among them Franz Kafka and Ingeborg Bachmann. As well as providing a detailed reading of works by these three authors and their literary ancestors, the thesis advances an argument about ecological fiction itself, supporting an understanding of ecology as an expansive category that is inseparable from the aesthetic. It also constructs an argument about acts of reading, and particularly of comparative reading, through its theoretical framework of the ‘omnium gatherum’.

Chapter 1 introduces the three focus authors, and goes on to outline some of their key experiments with the form of prose fiction in the light of the climate crisis. These experiments, it is argued, are influenced by a modernist forebear to whom all three authors frequently allude: namely, Franz Kafka. The chapter considers the representation of ‘scale effects’ in contemporary fiction; forms of guilt and trauma arising from the climate crisis; the contrast between maximalist novel forms and simpler parabolic writing; and the attempts of contemporary fiction to ‘break its bounds’ in order to affect the reader and the world, all of which are presented as instances of how Kafka’s writing anticipates and informs that of the later writers.

Chapter 2 analyses the portrayal of systems that are historically implicated in ecological destruction. Taking Kafka’s story ‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’ [‘The Great Wall of China’] as its point of departure, it considers systems of empire and their links to the production of scientific knowledge, as well as the many forms of resistance which processes of colonisation, disenchantment and resource extraction are met with. This resistance is shown to arise both from ‘ecological’ forces and from subjugated humans themselves. Humans, nonhuman animals and other elements of the biosphere are presented as allies in a struggle against systems that hold them all in contempt. A particular focus of the chapter is Flanagan’s literary engagement with Tasmanian colonial history. Flanagan’s novels trace the effects of this genocidal past, which continue to shape the Australian present; the inclusion of Flanagan as a Tasmanian author thus allows for a more direct discussion of the intersections between colonial history, ecological destruction and global climate injustice in the present day. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which readers themselves can resist literary and textual systems, an idea which complicates the argument of Chapter 1.

Chapter 3 introduces another key literary precursor for these texts: the Austrian poet and fiction writer Ingeborg Bachmann. Correspondences between the writing of Bachmann and Ransmayr, in particular, help to shed light on the role of archetypal representation in ecological fiction, which is bound up with the importance of gender and narrative perspective. The chapter is centred around a close comparative reading of Bachmann's novel fragment *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*] and Ransmayr's recent cli-fi novel *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*, 2021]. The correspondences between these two texts help us not only to make sense of Ransmayr's dense and disturbing novel, but also to cast a new critical eye on the crucial role gender has always played in his work. In assessing archetypal representations of the type of destructive system described in Chapter 2, this chapter also analyses conceptions of crime and guilt as they appear in climate-conscious fiction and theory.

Chapter 4 outlines the manifesto for contemporary fiction put forward in Tokarczuk's Nobel lecture 'The Tender Narrator'. One of the tensions inherent in the lecture, I argue, is the incompatibility of omniscience with bodily experience. This tension is explored in more detail through the figure of Janina Duszejko, the narrator of Tokarczuk's 'eco-thriller' *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (*Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*, 2009; trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2019). Duszejko's 'Ailments', legible on one level as a state of depression, highlight the relationship between individuals and unjust systems, as well as the side of tenderness that consists in vulnerability – being open to and wounded by the world. By comparing *Drive Your Plow* to Marlen Haushofer's novel *Die Wand* [*The Wall*, 1963], the chapter explores the connections between Tokarczuk's 'tenderness' and gendered ideas of care. Finally, it considers the distinction between identification and empathy, two key ideas that are not meaningfully distinguished in Tokarczuk's lecture. Identification – particularly identification with animals – is shown to be closely linked to ideas of consumption in the texts under discussion, either by 'consuming' the reality of the other or being consumed by it in turn.

The epilogue draws together the central arguments of the thesis using Ursula K. Le Guin's essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. Le Guin's essay, I argue, offers an original and hopeful alternative to the types of story and system seen elsewhere in the thesis. Through the archetype of the gatherer, and the idea of the novel form as a kind of carrier bag, the epilogue offers ways of bypassing the trap of comprehensiveness (the 'omnium') through composite forms and new constellations (the 'gatherum'), including those engendered by comparative reading itself.

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Abbreviations

- A Christoph Ransmayr, *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2012)
- C —————, *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2016)
- FB —————, *Der fliegende Berg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006)
- FM —————, *Der Fallmeister* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2021)
- LW —————, *Die letzte Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988)
- SU —————, *Strahlender Untergang: Ein Entwässerungsprojekt oder die Entdeckung des Wesentlichen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2000)
-
- GB Flanagan, Richard. *Gould's Book of Fish* (London: Vintage, 2016)
- NR —————, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014)
-
- E Bachmann, Ingeborg. *Ingeborg Bachmann, Werke 2: Erzählungen*, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1993)
- TA —————, *Ingeborg Bachmann, Werke 3: Todesarten*, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1993)
-
- BB Kafka, Franz. 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 263-76.
-
- F Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017)
-
- DYP —————, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2019)
-
- TN —————, 'The Tender Narrator'. Nobel lecture, trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/12/tokarczuk-lecture-english-2.pdf>> [Accessed 4th April 2023].

Introduction

How are we to write, how are we to structure our story to make it capable of raising this great, constellation form of the world?

Tokarczuk, 'The Tender Narrator', 17.

In a TV broadcast from 1964, an interviewer points out to the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann that the words used most frequently in her poetry – night, light, eyes, wind, land, sun, sky, and sea – are, in many ways, 'Standardworte der konventionellen Naturlyrik' [the standard words of conventional nature poetry]. Bachmann, who has been fiddling idly with the lever of her typewriter, places her hands down and looks at him. Her expression is impassive; it contains, perhaps, just a hint of exasperation. The interviewer, unperturbed, asks: 'Wollen Sie Natur in Ihrer Lyrik wiedergeben?' [Do you wish to represent nature in your poetry?]. After a beat, Bachmann replies: 'Nein, gewiss will ich das nicht. Die Natur, oder was man im Zusammenhang mit Lyrik unter Natur versteht, interessiert mich überhaupt nicht' [No, I certainly don't. Nature, or what is usually meant by nature in the context of poetry, doesn't interest me at all].¹

To contemporary ecocritical eyes, it is a fascinating exchange. The verb the interviewer uses – 'wiedergeben' – does not mean strictly 'to represent', but to reflect or reproduce; literally, to 'give back'. It is a clumsy choice for Bachmann's poetry, which is highly stylised, anything but mimetic. More intriguing, however, is Bachmann's response. Although she clearly rejects this characterisation of her writing, she does not say simply that 'nature' does not interest her – meaning, presumably, the aspects of the physical world and biosphere that her go-to nouns commonly designate. Instead, she specifies that the real object of her indifference is *what is usually meant by nature in the context of poetry*. 'Ich glaube nicht,' she concludes, 'dass ich zu den Gräserbewisperern gehöre' [I do not believe that I am one of those who whisper to the grasses].

¹ *Ingeborg Bachmann erhält den Georg-Büchner-Preis 1964*, 5:44. URL: <<https://youtube/XJRzkixRKQE>> [Accessed 3rd February 2023]. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

What Bachmann's reply leaves open, then, is the possibility of something like Timothy Morton's idea of 'ecology without nature'. For Morton, the true implication of what we now understand about the climate crisis is that there is nothing outside of ecology; that the very attempt to separate out or cordon off 'nature' or 'the environment' from ourselves is part of the problem. What's more, the idea that there is a set way of being ecological – that it's the grass-whisperer way or the highway – imposes categories that are at odds with the mess and complexity of what they claim to protect, and that too often leave the aesthetic by the wayside.

The three authors this thesis will focus on – Christoph Ransmayr, Olga Tokarczuk and Richard Flanagan – are all much more interested in ecological themes, as conventionally understood, than Ingeborg Bachmann. And yet her exchange with the hapless interviewer is, in many ways, the sign under which the thesis is written. For all their focus on animals, trees and fish, water and weather, wildfires, mountains and mushrooms, the sense in which these authors write 'ecological fictions' is closer to Bachmann's and Morton's understanding than the interviewer's. The ecological will be considered in this thesis as something not easily separable from the aesthetic – something, indeed, that it may be impossible to think 'outside' of.

This is what the 'omnium' of my title refers to. The knowledge of the climate crisis, and the new, theoretically contested epoch of the Anthropocene, forcibly expand the frame of contemporary thinking and writing in a way that really is – to use a word now nearly exhausted – 'unprecedented'. The first thing that struck me when I began reading for the project was the drive of contemporary fiction about ecology to be all-encompassing: to broaden the parameters of omniscience, and push the boundaries of where books begin and end. These texts seemed to want to include everything, everywhere, all at once. This expansion of the frame could be read as a narrative version of contemporary philosophy's renewed attempts to reach what Quentin Meillassoux calls the 'Great Outdoors' – the numinous world beyond human heads and human perception that we know is there, but

cannot access.² On the other hand, it bespeaks an anxiety about the loss of age-old narrative certainties, the disappearance of the ground and the background.

This anxiety is linked to the widely diagnosed crisis of storytelling that we will encounter repeatedly throughout the thesis. For Walter Benjamin, who was proclaiming the storyteller an endangered species all the way back in 1936, the tales of a true storyteller all ultimately refer to ‘die Naturgeschichte’: natural history or, in the ambiguity of the German ‘Geschichte’, the story of nature. What is meant by this appears to be more or less the Holocene understanding of nature as ‘a mostly reliable backdrop to human life, a consoling cycle of growth, decay and renewal’.³ For Benjamin, as Caitríona Leahy puts it, ‘all epic forms refer to the grand grounding narrative of *Naturgeschichte* [...] *the explanation from outside which allows them to operate devoid of explanation within*’.⁴ The fact that so many of the texts I looked at felt the need to foreground the ‘grand grounding narrative’ of *Naturgeschichte*, and to explain its laws, seemed at times like an attempt to pack the whole world into a book – like trying to cram not just two of each species, but also the planet itself onto an ark.

If this type of writing had a prefix, it would be ‘omni-’. Omni- refers not only to the experiments with omniscience that will form an important part of the analysis here, but also to the related theological strain of omnipresence that finds new iterations in contemporary ecological thought. Hints of this omnipresence can be detected in the ideas of scale derangement and species entanglement, which disrupt modern understandings of where individuals begin and end until it seems as though everything is everything else; and in ideas of vitalism and non-human agency, which are back with a vengeance after centuries of efforts to suppress them. At the same time, the growing understanding of interconnected forms of violence – of the links between bushfires, colonialism and concentration camps – leads to totalising visions of the mindset that drives such destruction, which begin to resemble some of the oldest villain archetypes. Ursula K. Le Guin’s vision of hunters who tell ‘the killer story’, for instance, and the tyrannical fathers,

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 29.

³ Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 35.

⁴ Caitríona Leahy, ‘Der wahre Historiker’: *Ingeborg Bachmann and the Problem of Witnessing History* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 62. Emphasis in original.

emperors and commandants of Ransmayr's and Flanagan's novels, begin to look like embodiments of Amitav Ghosh's idea of "'omnicide", the desire to destroy everything'.⁵ These two levels – of omnipresent interconnection and archetypal vision – are united in Tokarczuk's fascination with the idea of *unus mundus*, which names both the Jungian realm of collective symbols and her own understanding of the world as a 'single, living entity' (TN 25). The fiction to be analysed here, then, is engaged in omni-aesthetics on multiple counts.

It is because of this 'omni-' that I have opted for the term 'ecological' over the various available alternatives. It would certainly be justified to refer to the texts collected here as examples of fiction about the 'Anthropocene', and I will occasionally use this term. All of the texts to be analysed in this study – including those of its two central literary ancestors, Kafka and Bachmann – offer ample material for what Christoph Schaub calls 'anthropozäne Lektüren' [Anthropocene readings], and many also meet the rather strict criteria for what he deems genuine 'anthropozäne Texte' [Anthropocene texts].⁶ Schaub draws this distinction in response to the pitfalls of the Anthropocene discourse, which proves irresistible to literary scholars partly because it suggests the relevance of literary studies in responding to urgent ecological and socio-political challenges.⁷ Better yet, the idea of Anthropocene fiction 'kann [...] für die literaturwissenschaftliche Forschung als durchaus produktiv unbestimmt betrachtet werden, insofern erst einmal unklar bleibt, was genau mit dem Begriff gemeint ist' [can be seen as indeterminate in a way that is undoubtedly productive for literary-critical research, insofar as it remains unclear what exactly is meant by the term].⁸ By considering such differential criteria as whether the text falls within any or all of the competing start dates for the Anthropocene or is recent enough to be aware of the Anthropocene discourse, and by analysing the specific representation of human impacts on the planet, Schaub seeks 'einer vorschnellen Identifizierung von literarischen Texten als Beispielen von anthropozäner Literatur vorbeugen zu können' [to be able to prevent premature identification of literary texts as examples of Anthropocene

⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London: John Murray, 2021), 75.

⁶ Christoph Schaub, 'Kein anthropozäner Text. Über Christoph Ransmayrs *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*', in *Anthropozäne Literatur: Poetiken – Genres – Lektüren*, ed. Christoph Schaub, Gabriele Dürbeck and Simon Probst (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2022), 262.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸ *Ibid.*

literature].⁹ Ransmayr's prose collection *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* [*Atlas of an Anxious Man*, 2012], for example, although it offers excellent material for Anthropocene readings, is precisely 'kein anthropozäner Text' [not an Anthropocene text], since it does not construct a world 'im Sinne der strukturierenden Grundannahme des Anthropozändiskurses [...] – also der Einsicht in die anthropogene Veränderung der Erde im planetarischen Maßstab, die ein neues Erdzeitalter einläutet' [in accordance with the structuring assumption of the Anthropocene discourse – namely insight into anthropogenic changes to the Earth on the planetary scale, heralding a new geological era].¹⁰

This is a valid response to the very real risks of vagueness and performativity inherent in the discourses of Anthropocene reading and writing. However, in my view, it also entirely misses the point. In its method of producing definitions, this approach fails to take seriously the extent to which the knowledge in question means that 'the fundamental context for all intellectual work has changed, or must be recognised anew, as the ground beneath it becomes unstable'¹¹ – like a cartoon runner hanging in mid-air, because they have not yet looked down. Critiques, rebuttals and alternatives to the idea of the 'Anthropocene' are certainly called for, particularly where they seek to bring specificity to its vagueness and highlight the socio- or geopolitical realities it obscures. Several such critiques will be discussed in the course of the thesis. Nonetheless, the knowledge of the climate and biodiversity crises – of changes to planetary systems once viewed as timeless and immutable – undermines the foundations of Western thought in a way that extends beyond the contingent historical context of the Anthropocene. In what follows, I will refer for the most part to the climate crisis or climate emergency, and, less often, to the Anthropocene. But these are to be understood as symptoms that draw attention to the overall condition. The 'ecological', then, is the hold-all that contains within it both the discourse around the Anthropocene and the specific material realities of the climate crisis.

The metaphor of a hold-all or bag is not chosen arbitrarily. It relates to the second element of the thesis title, the 'gatherum'. This names the recognition that while what is

⁹ Ibid, 262.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, 29.

at stake may be the ‘omnium’, the thought or viewpoint that could encompass everything, such a thought is impossible to represent in the sense of ‘wiedergeben’ [reproducing or reflecting]. The omni- can be experienced and described only in pieces, like the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The writers discussed here distinguish themselves from their contemporaries partly through their quixotic attempts to write the omni-, seeking to reach the level of all-encompassing principles, such as Ransmayr’s refrain ‘keinem bleibt seine Gestalt’ [nothing retains its form, *LW* 99] – the Ovidian ‘structuring principle’ from which, as Leahy argues, nothing is exempt, ‘except that principle itself’.¹² But they are also notable for their composite fictional forms, which recognise that the whole can only ever be understood and grasped through the bricolage of its parts. The assemblage of mismatched pieces that constitutes the form of Tokarczuk’s *Flights*, for instance, is also a kind of omnium gatherum – a designation with less historical baggage than the ‘Wunderkammer’ [cabinet of curiosities, *F* 39] that many reviewers identify as its narrative model.¹³ The distinction between the Wunderkammer, as a collection produced by the very act of fragmenting the world, and more salutary forms of narrative ‘gathering’ will be unpacked in more detail in the course of the thesis. Tokarczuk herself describes *Flights* as a ‘constellation novel’, an idea that bears clear resemblances to Benjamin’s understanding of history. Here, however, I will consider *Flights* above all through the lens of Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’, which posits that ‘the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag’, as opposed to something linear – an ‘arrow or spear, starting *here* and going *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)’.¹⁴ Le Guin’s alignment of fiction with the archetypal figure of the gatherer, as opposed to the hunter, entails both a preference for literary forms organised around individual bits and pieces over those that follow a focused trajectory, and an idea of how to relate to stories, objects and other beings that includes the dimension of care. In this regard, it is in tune

¹² Leahy, ‘*Der wahre Historiker*’, 129.

¹³ Silvia Moreno-Garcia points out that ‘*Flights* functions [...] like a cabinet of curiosities, the kind which served as a precursor to natural history museums’, while James Wood takes the idea further, writing: ‘Tokarczuk’s book is a cabinet of curiosities that must also include itself in the cabinet’ (Silvia Moreno-Garcia, ‘*Flights* Is A Trip, If You Like Wandering Off The Edges Of The Map’ *NPR*, August 2018, <<https://www.npr.org/2018/08/15/638603756/flights-is-a-trip-if-you-like-wandering-off-the-edges-of-the-map>>; James Wood, ‘*Flights*: A novel that never settles down’, *New Yorker* online, September 2018. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/flights-a-novel-that-never-settles-down>> [Both accessed 4th April 2023]).

¹⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (UK: Ignota Books, 2019), 34. Emphasis in original.

both with Morton's ideas about 'being ecological',¹⁵ and with Tokarczuk's vision of the 'tender narrator', which will accompany us throughout the thesis.

These two aspects of the *omnium gatherum* – the 'all' and the 'gathering' – describe not only the contents of the study, but also its form and method. The phrase itself reflects its own meaning through the humorous piecing together of grammatically incompatible languages, which form an entanglement of the old (Latin) and the new (the vernacular), the grandiose and the everyday. The 'faux' feeling of the phrase is in keeping with the self-conscious way in which many of the texts at hand allude and aspire to the gravitas of older forms and discourses, not without an element of humorous pastiche. This thesis, meanwhile, also assembles its corpus from multiple linguistic and geographic contexts, represented by the Austrian Christoph Ransmayr, Olga Tokarczuk of Poland, and the Australian or Tasmanian Richard Flanagan, along with various other writers who crop up as influences and intertexts. The seeming mismatch is justified by the big picture: by the scale of the ideas in question, which transcend national and linguistic borders; and by the reach of shared influences, foremost among them Franz Kafka. All three writers – despite, in the case of Tokarczuk and Flanagan, their clear interest in their countries of origin – speak of this larger connection in similar terms, which recall once again the idea of *unus mundus*. Flanagan cites Kafka, with his unique confluence and conflict of linguistic and cultural identities, as an exemplar of 'the great paradox of national letters: writers who seem rooted in the particular but whose works are deemed universal'.¹⁶ Literature, he

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 59. While Morton's more capacious understanding of what it means to 'be ecological' – based not only on aesthetic criteria, but also on simpler premises such as 'relating to nonhuman being[s] for no particular reason' (Ibid) – will inform a good deal of the argument that follows, it is worth acknowledging that this is only one position within the ecocritical discourse, and by no means one that has gone unchallenged. Ian Fleishman, for instance, takes issue with the woolliness of some of Morton's rhetoric, pointing out that 'much of Morton's critical project relies [...] on his apparently privileged position as an arbiter of who "really means it" and who does not' (Fleishman, 'The Rustle of the Anthropocene', 42). More fundamentally, critics such as Kate Rigby and Timothy Clark cast doubt on the very project of ecocriticism when faced with the realities of the climate crisis. Clark remarks on ecocriticism's fondness for a 'fallacy to which much academic life is prone: that of ascribing most problems and ills of the world to some sort of intellectual mistake or set of false assumptions' (Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, 131), while Rigby goes further still, suggesting that ecocritical discourse might constitute not prophetic intervention, but 'idle chatter' (Kate Rigby, 'Writing in the Anthropocene: Idle Chatter or Ecoprophetic Witness?', *Australian Humanities Review* 47 (2009), 173-87 [174]). Drawing on Adorno, Rigby raises the suspicion that writing about ecology, and writing about writing about ecology, might amount to little more than background noise while catastrophe unfolds (Ibid). The same anxiety can be detected in many of the literary works to be analysed here, and will form an important part of the discussion in Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Richard Flanagan, 'Does writing matter?'. *The Monthly*, Oct 2016.

argues, ‘is not reducible to kitsch ideas like national spirit, nor is it bound by borders. A writer belongs both to the homeland of the people they love *and* to the universe of books’.¹⁷ Tokarczuk, too, maintains that ‘we should drop the definition of “national literatures,” knowing as we do that the universe of literature is a single thing, like the idea of *unus mundus*’ (TN 22).

If this is the big picture, of course, then literary scholarship nonetheless cannot do without the small: the details of texts and contexts, the valences of a specific word in a specific time and place. I am conscious throughout the thesis of the limits placed on my understanding of Tokarczuk’s works, in particular, since I cannot read them in the original Polish. It heartens me to know that Tokarczuk herself is a translation optimist. In her essay ‘How Translators are Saving the World’ (‘Powień wam, kto uratuje świat’, 2019; available to me only in German as ‘Wie Übersetzer die Welt retten’, translated Lisa Palmes), she outlines how speaking with her translators frequently reveals new dimensions of her work that she was unaware of, and which she is delighted to discover.¹⁸ As well as consulting Polish literary scholars in crucial cases, I make do here with the expedient of comparing English and German translations of her work – an arrangement I believe Tokarczuk would be pleased with, reflecting as it does the types of perspectivism she experiments with in her novels. For the sake of simplicity, I will quote throughout from the English translations by Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, except in the case of texts that are only available to me in German translation, or where there is a notable discrepancy between the translations.

Tokarczuk’s faith in translation, and her related assertion that ‘the Author and the Reader perform equivalent roles’ (TN 22), directs attention to the final way in which this thesis fits the bill of the omnium gatherum. It is not a thesis like an arrow – if such a thing exists – ‘starting *here* and going *there* and THOK! hitting its mark’.¹⁹ Instead, the thesis itself is organised by the gathering up of materials that have proved particularly affecting,

<<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2016/october/1475244000/richard-flanagan/does-writing-matter>> [Accessed 4th April 2023].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Olga Tokarczuk, *Der liebevolle Erzähler: Vorlesung zur Verleihung des Nobelpreises für Literatur*, trans. Lisa Palmes (Zurich: Kampa, 2020), 89.

¹⁹ Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 34.

intriguing, perplexing, or 'irritierend', in its Germanic meaning of something that bothers you because it is not easily understood. It began life as a thesis on Christoph Ransmayr, and picked up Flanagan, Kafka, Tokarczuk, Bachmann and many others along the way. This was no accident, but rather an experiment with a method of reading and writing that seems qualitatively appropriate to the texts and topics at hand. One of the questions that arises from the thesis is what ideas of ecology as 'letting things be' might mean for practices of reading. Sabine Gölz, for instance, argues convincingly that Bachmann's prose enacts a critique of the models of reading implicit in the texts of her male forebears, foremost among them Franz Kafka. For Gölz, this is above all a feminist critique, but it is not hard to see how her analysis might extend to an idea of ecological reading that attempts to listen to the text, rather than bouncing one's own voice off its walls.

This type of reading may, in practice, turn out to be an impossibility. The closest possible approximation might consist in the act of comparative close reading, which places texts side by side and lets them talk to one another. The texts and authors that have ended up in the thesis, then, are those that had the most to say to each other. Perhaps this is what Tokarczuk has in mind when proposing that 'we should trust fragments, as it is fragments that create constellations capable of describing more, and in a more complex way, multi-dimensionally. Our stories could refer to one another in an infinite way' (*TN* 22). This is both a vision of comparative reading as symbiosis and entanglement; and a manifesto for letting the whole arise out of and exceed the parts, as this thesis attempts to do. The purpose of the study is not only to make a meaningful contribution to criticism on three prominent contemporary writers – none of whom have been read alongside one another before – but also to experiment with the possibilities of comparative close reading itself, within the framework of ecological thought.

The four chapters to follow constitute four different approaches to the omni-topic of ecology as it relates to fiction. Chapter 1, 'Forms', begins by introducing Ransmayr, Tokarczuk and Flanagan in more detail, and outlining the shared basis of many of their aesthetic techniques in the works of Franz Kafka. The central question of the chapter is one anticipated in Kafka's writing: namely, the vexed relationship between the book and the world, which takes on a new urgency in an era of environmental destruction and

biodiversity loss. This central question plays out in several different ways in the chapter. The first relates to the understanding of scale effects that characterises the ‘era of ecological awareness’,²⁰ presenting a fundamental challenge to narrative omniscience. Scale effects, and the related idea of ‘entanglement’, also present a barrier to action, a key concern of the thesis as a whole. The second version of the book/world relationship speaks precisely to this problem: it highlights the ways in which the novels in question attempt to break their own bounds, affecting a change in the world beyond their pages through the medium of the reader. This ambition goes hand in hand with anxieties about the boundlessness of the climate crisis itself. At the same time, it is a testament to the loss of the reassuring cyclical patterns of ‘Naturgeschichte’, placing a different iteration of boundlessness under threat: the comforting, quasi-religious idea of a world without end. The third version of the question concerns entrapment within a book, which can be understood at the same time as entrapment within a ‘falsche Welt’: a wrong or unreal world. This sensation of imprisonment is closely related to ideas of trauma and guilt, discussed in the chapter through Timothy Clark’s concepts of ‘ecological grief’ and ‘Anthropocene horror’. This aligns contemporary fiction about the climate crisis with a tradition of writing about the Holocaust, a charged and complex correspondence that will recur throughout the thesis. Finally, the chapter considers the form of the parable as a way of bypassing the all-encompassing aesthetics of worlds as books and books as worlds, with reference to a short section from *Flights*. The chapter is guided throughout by the ways in which Kafka’s literary models, through these contemporary allusions and adaptations, are revealed as startlingly appropriate to the philosophical and aesthetic challenges engendered by the climate crisis.

Chapter 2, ‘Lines and Systems’, takes a different approach to the topic of ‘forms’, again with reference to Kafka as a literary predecessor. Many of the motifs that Ransmayr and Flanagan borrow from Kafka relate to what Walter Benjamin identifies as the central Kafka theme: ‘die Organisation des Lebens und der Arbeit’ [the organisation of life and work].²¹ These include the ‘System des Teilbaues’ [system of piecemeal construction] used to build the Great Wall of China in one of the Kafka texts that is most important for the later

²⁰ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), 6.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages’, in *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 420.

writers; and the penal colony mirrored in Flanagan's two best-known novels. The prominence of reports to academies in Kafka's work, meanwhile, helps to highlight the ways in which Ransmayr, Flanagan and Tokarczuk are concerned with forms of taxonomy and categorisation, which they identify among the driving forces behind ecocide. Flanagan's 2001 novel *Gould's Book of Fish* can be read as an aesthetic rejoinder to the Linnaean system of species designation also critiqued by Amitav Ghosh, while the Wunderkammer in *Flights* has dark historical valences that are implicated in 'reduc[ing] the world' – including its human inhabitants – 'to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed' (TN 25). The systems illuminated here help to counteract the homogenising tendencies of the term 'Anthropocene', locating responsibility in historically specific structures that combine genocidal violence with the exploitation and destruction of the biosphere. The chapter also introduces ideas of resistance to and rejection by these systems, which will crystallise in later chapters. 'Das menschliche Wesen', Kafka writes, 'verträgt keine Fesselung' [the human being cannot tolerate being bound, BB 267]. The chapter closes with a striking reading of this very same Kafka text by Sabine Gölz, who argues that Kafka's writing attempts to do exactly that, press-ganging the reader into its mechanisms. Gölz sees the antidote to this model of reading in the second of the study's main ancestors: Ingeborg Bachmann.

Chapter 3, 'Mastery', brings Bachmann to the fore as a quite different model for ecological fiction. Where the types of system discussed in Chapter 2 are difficult to narrate on a visible, personal scale, Bachmann pioneers an associative narrative logic that portrays the mindset of mastery and domination in archetypal form. The chapter connects the figure of the 'Herr der Welt' [master of the world] in Ransmayr's first published literary work to prominent Bachmann motifs such as 'der Vater' [the father] and 'die Weißen' [the whites], which condense various forms of violence into vivid, mythlike figures and images. After outlining an early version of this theme and aesthetic in Bachmann's story 'Unter Mördern und Irren' [Among Murderers and Madmen], the chapter focuses on the echoes of Bachmann's novel fragment *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*] in Ransmayr's latest novel *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*]. The textual links are strong enough to prompt a radical re-appraisal of Ransmayr's oeuvre in the light of Bachmann's writing. Whereas Bachmann views forms of violence like fascism and colonialism as intrinsically linked to

gendered domination, Ransmayr has not usually been thought of as a writer at all attuned to issues of gender. By contrast, I argue that the dark narrative turn of *Der Fallmeister* can be read as an archetypal narrative along Bachmann-esque lines. On this reading, the novel portrays gendered violence as a paradigm intimately linked to ecocide and destruction of the biosphere. By analysing the character triads that *Der Fallmeister* adopts and adapts from *Das Buch Franza*, I argue that both texts seek to represent diffuse forms of guilt, in ways that are bound up with the question of narrative perspective. The ideas of crime and confession that they raise pertain, in Bachmann's original, to the aftermath of fascism; in Ransmayr's re-writing, they are transposed into the context of the climate crisis. This chapter is the heaviest, and carries a content warning for sexual assault and femicide. These themes are not chosen lightly, but are present at the centre of Ransmayr's work in ways that criticism has consistently failed to address.

If Chapter 3 confronts us with extreme examples of what Ursula K. Le Guin has called 'the killer story', Chapter 4, 'Tenderness', turns its attention to alternative viewpoints and stories. The chapter engages with the ideas brought together in Tokarczuk's Nobel lecture 'The Tender Narrator' – the first of two propositions for the often-heralded 'new' and 'untold' story that I find most compelling, the second being Le Guin's own essay. 'Tenderness', as Tokarczuk presents it, is a narrative position that synthesises many different conditions, which sometimes appear tantalisingly contradictory: it combines empathy and expanded omniscience, universality and care, the messianic and the everyday. The chapter first considers Tokarczuk's particular vision of omniscience, in the guise of a mysterious 'fourth-person' narrator. This concept serves to highlight the tension between ideas of omniscience and lived experience, which is also evident in some forms of moral philosophy that respond to the climate crisis. The key example used here is William MacAskill's popular philosophy treatise *What We Owe The Future* (2022). To explore this contradiction further, I consider the case of Janina Duszejko, the narrator of Tokarczuk's eco-thriller *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (*Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*, 2009; trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2019), who suffers from mysterious 'Ailments' legible as depression. As with Bachmann's suffering female protagonists, Duszejko's Ailments appear in response to a violent and unfeeling system; yet they are treated as signs of an excessive 'tenderness' on her part, in the sense of

oversensitivity. An analysis of the cultural frameworks of melancholy and mourning that sideline figures like Duszejko – and which by definition seek to contain and control the experience of depression – leads to a consideration of the gendered elements of tenderness, including its links to ideas of care. The female figures discussed here seem united in confronting what Ghosh calls ‘the urge to omnicide’²² with versions of empathy and identification, two further key terms from Tokarczuk’s lecture. These qualities are made visible in the texts through the treatment of animals – the source of the injustices and suffering that are closest to Duszejko’s heart. While empathy is shown as a quality or position that opposes violence against animals and the biosphere, it comes with its own inherent dangers. By linking questions of empathy and identification to vegetarianism and meat-eating, a central theme of *Drive Your Plow*, I consider whether identification in particular carries the risk of ‘consuming’, or being consumed by, its object.

The epilogue, ‘Gathering’, brings us full circle to Le Guin and her ‘Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’. In *Drive Your Plow*, bags had appeared not as a metaphor for form, but as a description of Duszejko herself, who is repeatedly dismissed as an ‘old bag’ by impatient villagers. The novel plays on this image as a marker of Duszejko’s place in society, with the bags acting as a metonym for the stereotypes that produce age invisibility: ‘Nobody,’ she says, ‘takes any notice of old women who wander around with their shopping bags’ (*DYP* 249). Le Guin, too, announces herself in her essay as ‘an aging, angry woman, laying mightily about me with my handbag’.²³ Age, along with gender, is also an important element of Marlen Haushofer’s ecological and feminist classic *Die Wand* [*The Wall*, 1963], and of the framing device for Tokarczuk’s novel *The Books of Jacob* (*Księgi Jakubowe*, 2014; trans. Jennifer Croft, 2021), which spans centuries and continents through the omniscient visions of Grandma Yente, who slyly refuses to die. The epilogue analyses this figure of the gatherer as an old or aging woman, who appears as a further contemporary re-imagining of established archetypes. The gatherer as narrator and focalising figure stands in contrast both to the male hunters who stalk the earlier chapters, and to the female figures who are consumed by their identification with other victims or swallowed up by patriarchal structures. By comparing this archetype within ecologically oriented fiction to Ruth

²² Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 190.

²³ Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 33.

Klüger's Holocaust memoir *weiter leben* (1992), I argue that the gatherer represents a different relationship to the system than the female victims in works by Bachmann and others. As opposed to the 'omni-' as 'all-consuming narrative' from which 'nothing escapes [...] except [the structural] principle itself',²⁴ the gatherer represents a remainder not consumed by the system; a survivor who – like the plastic bags – was intended to be discarded, but stubbornly refuses to go. By tracing the contrast between Klüger's relationship to animals and the 'consumptive' versions of identification discussed in Chapter 4, I argue that the gatherer is the figure who represents empathy as opposed to identification. This figure, then, may be the closest thing we encounter to a real 'tender narrator', who can offer insight into the experiences of others while also standing apart from them.

While the trajectory is not linear, I aim to put the pieces together in sequence as we go, and explain how and why they fit. With all this in mind, then – and with our carrier bags at the ready – let's go and have a look at some ecological fictions in their natural habitat.

²⁴ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 129.

1. Forms

Form is in its way alive.

-Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 209.

Es passiert sehr wenig Neues in der Literatur.¹

-Ingeborg Bachmann

There are many good reasons to compare the works of Christoph Ransmayr, Olga Tokarczuk and Richard Flanagan. Across their different geographic and linguistic contexts of Austria, Poland and Australia, they are connected, for instance, by the philosophical and historical bent of their writing, which often deals with recognisably ecological themes. The position of all three within the literary establishment is of no small significance, especially since the argument that literature is ill-equipped to cope with the knowledge of the climate crisis tends to focus on the novel, and the unofficial and amorphous genre of literary or 'serious' fiction. Amitav Ghosh points out that part of the difficulty in representing climate-changed conditions is that to portray improbable events in a novel 'is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence', risking 'banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house', such as the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror.² Ransmayr, Tokarczuk and Flanagan are among the exceptions that prove this rule, hiding in plain view within the mansion of serious fiction. They began their careers in the late twentieth century, publishing their first novels in 1984, 1993 and 1994 respectively. All three are still active today, and are held in high regard both at home and abroad; between them, they have managed a clean sweep of nearly all the most prominent national and international literary awards.³

¹ [Very little new happens in literature]. Bachmann, 'Das Tremendum. Sylvia Plath: Die Glasglocke', in *Ingeborg Bachmann. Werke*, 4, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1993), 359.

² Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 24.

³ Flanagan is perhaps best known for his Booker-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014), and had previously won the Commonwealth Prize for his 2001 work *Gould's Book of Fish*. In 2019, Tokarczuk was retroactively awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature, also winning the 2018 Booker International for *Flights* (*Bieguni*, 2007; trans. Jennifer Croft, 2017). Ransmayr is less widely read in English translation, but

Part of the reason for this straddling of the borders between ‘serious’ and ‘speculative’ fiction is that Tokarczuk, Flanagan and Ransmayr are all known for their experiments with form, particularly the form of the novel. Like Bachmann, they do not believe that good prose is like a windowpane; they do not ‘wiedergeben’ [reproduce; ‘give back’]. Instead, all three produce works that constantly draw attention to their own artifice. They construct texts that function as worlds unto themselves, literary labyrinths that disorient characters and, by extension, readers. Works by all three writers have been read at times as versions of magical realism – one of the few outlier movements that Ghosh identifies, which can portray events ‘that have no relation to the calculus of probability’ without passing over the imaginary boundary into genre fiction.⁴ None of the three, however, sits easily within this category, which itself constitutes the kind of reassuring definition that their novels most strongly oppose. Instead, as this chapter will show, their experiments with form can be traced back to an older and more inscrutable literary antecedent: namely, the works of Franz Kafka.

Kafka, as we saw in the introduction, is the poster child for literature that refuses to sit neatly within the borders of a nation, language or artistic movement. The drawn-out legal battle over ownership of his manuscripts – on the grounds of linguistic, national and religious affiliations – is a case in point.⁵ At the same time, his work is often viewed as prophetic, foreshadowing events in the world ‘outside’ its pages precisely through its visions of the improbable and unexpected. By imagining what it might mean for a human to be an ‘Ungeziefer’ [vermin], or to be arrested for an unspecified crime, Kafka’s stories seem to foretell the horrors of the Holocaust and totalitarianism. In their irreducibility, they also challenge the types of distinction that we saw in the introduction with ‘anthropozäne Lektüren’ and ‘anthropozäne Texte’ [Anthropocene readings and Anthropocene texts]. Before the era of theory, Kafka’s works are attuned to interpretation

has been a favourite of the German-speaking Feuilletons [arts pages] since 1988’s *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*].

⁴ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 27.

⁵ Elif Batuman points out that ‘the situation has repeatedly been called Kafkaesque, reflecting, perhaps, the strangeness of the idea that Kafka can be anyone’s private property. Isn’t that what Brod demonstrated, when he disregarded Kafka’s last testament: that Kafka’s works weren’t even *Kafka’s* private property but, rather, belonged to humanity?’. Elif Batuman, ‘Kafka’s Last Trial’, *New York Times*, Sep 2010. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/magazine/26kafka-t.html>> [Accessed 5th April 2023].

and exegesis in ways that do not allow for a straightforward location of meaning in either the reader or the text. Like the seeds to which Benjamin compares the tales of a true storyteller, they seem designed to take root in new contexts, growing new meanings in the process.⁶

Flanagan, Ransmayr and Tokarczuk each have a different relationship to Kafka's work, and his texts have taken root in theirs in slightly different ways. For Flanagan, as we have seen, Kafka represents a defiance of national categories. In his lecture 'Does writing matter?', Kafka is the entry point to Flanagan's list of the 'top ten Tasmanian novels', none of which has a Tasmanian author or setting.⁷ Across this contextual distance, Kafka citations take on the unlikely status of a call to action in Flanagan's work, a profession of faith that books, through readers, can change the world. For Ransmayr and Tokarczuk, Kafka is a forebear closer to home, representing both a linguistic inheritance – doubtless a factor in Ransmayr's lifelong preoccupation with 'Verwandlung' [metamorphosis] – and a cultural one, which Tokarczuk aligns with the indeterminate idea of 'Central Europe'.⁸ Perhaps for this reason, it is Tokarczuk who best retains the playful uncertainty of Kafka's writing, which she associates with the form of the parable. The analysis here will focus more on Flanagan and Ransmayr to begin with, with Tokarczuk taking centre stage in the final section on 'Parables'.

The allusions and resemblances to Kafka's work traced through the chapter suggest that his writing has become a crucial reference point for contemporary fiction grappling with a new awareness of ecology in the face of the climate crisis. Kafka's work anticipates the specific aesthetic challenges presented by this new knowledge, including the complexities of scale; the unstable boundaries between the 'insides' and 'outsides' of books and texts; the mechanisms of denial; and the power of uncertainty. By some definitions, Kafka was already writing within the time of the Anthropocene. In keeping with the understanding of the ecological outlined above, however, what matters is how closely his experiments

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Der Erzähler', in *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 446.

⁷ Flanagan, 'Does writing matter?'.

⁸ *Transcript from an interview with Olga Tokarczuk*, NobelPrize.org, 2019. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/159844-olga-tokarczuk-interview-transcript>> [Accessed 5th April, 2023].

with form match the concerns of contemporary ecological fiction and theory – regardless of whether his works hand down these thoughts as a relic or prepare the way for them as their precursor.⁹

Scales

‘You are lost in a small town,’ begins Timothy Clark’s seminal article on problems of scale in climate discourse, ‘late for a vital appointment somewhere in its streets.’¹⁰ If this premise sounds suspiciously familiar, it should come as no surprise. The scenario alone – of being late since before the beginning, finding yourself lost in a place that should be *überschaubar* [manageable; literally ‘overseeable’] – seems to transport us immediately into Kafka’s universe.

In Clark’s mini-parable, a stranger, when asked for help, offers a map with the words ‘the whole town is there’.¹¹ Once they have passed by and the paper is unfolded, it turns out to be a map of the earth. For Clark, this is the condition of humans in the face of the climate crisis: we always seem to be viewing things on the wrong scale. We zoom in when we should be zooming out, and zoom out when we need to zoom in; we cannot seem to find the right point of focus. This is exemplified by the everyday figures of speech that equate switching off unneeded lights or buying an electric car with ‘saving the planet’, or by posters showing ‘the whole earth as giant thermostat dial, with the absurd but intelligible caption “You control climate change”.’¹² In his analysis of the contemporary ‘crisis’ of scale, this is what Clark terms ‘a derangement of linguistic and intellectual proportion’; or simply ‘derangements of scale’.¹³

⁹ ‘Besitzen wir die Lehre aber, die von Kafkas Gleichnissen begleitet und in den Gesten K.'s und den Gebärden seiner Tiere erläutert wird? Sie ist nicht da; wir können höchstens sagen, daß dies und jenes auf sie anspielt. Kafka hätte vielleicht gesagt: als ihr Relikt sie überliefert; wir aber können ebensowohl sagen: sie als ihr Vorläufer vorbereitet’ [But do we possess the teachings that are accompanied by Kafka’s parables and outlined in the postures of K. and the gestures of his animals? They are not there; the most we can say is that this and that alludes to them. Kafka might have said: hands them down as their relic; but we could just as well say: prepares them as their precursor]. Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages’, in: *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 418.

¹⁰ Timothy Clark, ‘Scale’, in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change* (Open Humanities Press/University of Michigan Library, 2012), 148.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 151.

¹³ Ibid, 150.

If the 'Kafkaesque' names anything at all, it is perhaps a destabilising of scale. Physical proportions refuse to stay put; time neglects to flow uniformly; the infinite fails to remain contained within the finite. In one text of just a few lines, a grandfather cannot fathom how a younger person could decide to ride to the nearest village without fearing that a lifetime would prove too short for the journey.¹⁴ Examples of this effect in Kafka's writings are countless. For our present purposes, however, the scope of the discussion will be limited to the text that has bequeathed perhaps the most to Ransmayr and Flanagan, the prose fragment 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' [The Great Wall of China], along with the related fragment 'Unser Städtchen liegt...' ['Our town lies...'], also known by the title 'The Refusal'.¹⁵ Elements of this faux-anthropological text that find their way directly into the chosen subject matter of Ransmayr in particular – foremost among them the 'System des Teilbaues' [system of piecemeal construction], the Tower of Babel motif, and the line of the Great Wall itself – are explored in more detail in Chapter 2. First, though, it is worth briefly turning our zoom lens towards the nascent awareness of scale effects in these fragments.

Scale effects, as Clark points out, present a persistent challenge to an intuitive, human-sized view of the world. In engineering terms, for instance, the consequences of an increase in scale do not follow an immediately predictable, linear pattern: a design that is structurally sound in a miniature wooden model of a building will not necessarily prove stable in a full-sized construction made from the same material.¹⁶ Climatology finds it easier to make predictions for the planet as a whole, a closed system, than for any one of the regions it is composed of.¹⁷ Behaviour that seems perfectly reasonable on the scale of individuals, meanwhile, appears inexplicably self-destructive on a species level.

¹⁴ Franz Kafka, 'Das nächste Dorf', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 311.

¹⁵ Franz Kafka, 'Unser Städtchen liegt...', in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit. *Franz Kafka: Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992). The mentions of 'Grenzkriegen' [border wars] and the frequent changes in 'Dynastien' [dynasties, 262] in this 1920 fragment, as well as the comparison of a town bureaucrat to the 'Mauer der Welt' [wall of the world, 264], link it to the various 1917 texts that are set in China, with details like the bureaucrat's 'lange Bambusstangen' [long bamboo poles, 266] also suggesting an East Asian context.

¹⁶ Clark, 'Scale', 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’ and ‘Unser Städtchen liegt...’ exhibit an obsession with various versions of such scale effects – in particular, with patterned escalations of scale up to an apparent numerical tipping point. ‘Ich hüte mich vor Verallgemeinerungen’, declares the narrator of ‘Beim Bau...’ towards the end of their analysis, ‘und behaupte nicht, dass es sich in allen zehntausend Dörfern unserer Provinz so verhält oder gar in allen fünfhundert Provinzen Chinas’ [I am wary of generalisations, and do not claim that it is like this in all ten thousand villages of our province, let alone in all five hundred provinces of China, *BB* 274-5]. Despite this claim of humility, the narrator’s confidence suffices to identify ‘immer wieder und überall einen gewissen gemeinsamen Grundzug’ [over and over and everywhere a certain fundamental commonality, *BB* 275] across this mind-boggling proliferation of geographical units, creating a sense of each village as a microcosm of the whole. The opening paragraphs of ‘Unser Städtchen liegt...’, meanwhile, represent an attempt to repeatedly up the ante by adding and multiplying units of a similar kind. ‘Man wird müde wenn man sich einen Teil des Weges vorstellt’, we learn of the distance between this Städtchen and the border,

und mehr als einen Teil kann man sich gar nicht vorstellen. Auch große Städte liegen auf dem Weg, viel größer als unser Städtchen. Zehn solche Städtchen nebeneinander gelegt und von oben noch zehn solche Städtchen hineingezwängt ergeben noch keine dieser riesigen und engen Städte.¹⁸

[One gets tired imagining part of the way, and one can’t even imagine more than one part. There are also big cities along the way, much bigger than our town. Ten such towns laid side by side and another ten such towns forced in from above still wouldn’t result in one of these huge and narrow cities].

Unlike most of the examples offered by Clark, this particular version of a play with scale is almost numerical in structure. Rather than zooming in or out to reveal the contrasting forms visible at different levels of magnification, the scale effect in these fragments consists in multiplying recognisable units until they exceed our mental capacity. In doing so, they open the door into ideas of infinity. By building out of ‘Teil[en]’, ‘Städtchen’, ‘Dörfern’ and ‘Provinzen’ [parts, small towns, villages and provinces] compounds that tip

¹⁸ Kafka, ‘Unser Städtchen liegt...’, 261.

over into the realm of the inconceivable, Kafka lays the groundwork for an equation of the numerically vast with the infinite: 'Die Grenzen, die meine Denkfähigkeit mir setzt, sind ja eng genug,' the narrator of 'Beim Bau...' muses, 'das Gebiet aber, das hier zu durchlaufen wäre, ist das Endlose' [the boundaries that my capacity for thought impose on me are narrow enough; the territory that would have to be traversed here, however, is the endless, *BB* 269].

Another important innovation of Kafka's work, then, lies in opening up a space for the metaphysical: that which contemporary theorists frequently call 'ontological', including with regard to the climate crisis.¹⁹ This is one of the central features that connects Kafka's work with that of Ransmayr, Tokarczuk and Flanagan. Scale derangement, after all, results from the overwhelming sense that climate change is both everything and nothing, in that it affects all things but is no one thing we can point at; it is, as Norah Campbell et al. write, 'the 100 trillion objects that are in, that *are* the Earth, traversing the stomach lining of the Burmese python and the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation'.²⁰ One response to this condition – the one proposed by Campbell and her co-writers – is to lean in to the absolutisation of climate change, arguing that to conceive it as 'some "thing" that we can divide and see behind, mis-ontologizes its very nature'.²¹ The overlap between scale derangements and speculative or absolutising moves of this kind is anticipated in the indeterminate status of Kafka's Kaiser. In the vast expanse of this China, Beijing is 'nur ein Punkt, und das kaiserliche Schloß nur ein Pünktchen. Der Kaiser als solcher allerdings, wiederum groß durch alle Stockwerke der Welt. Der lebendige Kaiser aber ein Mensch wie wir' [only a dot, and the imperial palace an even smaller dot. The emperor as such, however, large through all the levels of the world. The living emperor, though, a human like us, *BB* 271].

The perplexity evinced here by the move of flipping back and forth between scales is a theological one. Faced with the difficulty of climate change making up the totality of

¹⁹ Graham Harman, who treats ontology and metaphysics as synonyms, explains this trend rather matter-of-factly: 'By contrast with "metaphysics", "ontology" tends to be treated as a broadly respectable term, more rigorous and less laden with historical or mystical baggage'. Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018), 14.

²⁰ Norah Campbell, Gerard McHugh & PJ Ennis, 'Climate Change Is Not A Problem: Speculative Realism at the End of Organization', in *Organization Studies*, Vol. 40 (2019), 740.

²¹ *Ibid*, 726.

everything without residing identifiably in any one thing, many of the models we have inherited for representing it verge on the religious or mystical. Such overtones are particularly evident in one of the aesthetic features that is most distinctive in the writing of Ransmayr and Flanagan, as well as some of their prominent contemporaries: the tendency to zoom out or pan away from one thing towards all other things in almost cinematic fashion. This technique is arguably at its most straightforward when it draws explicitly on theological traditions, appearing in such cases as another means of containing that which is infinite or absolute. In a story centred around the Catholic sacrament of first communion, for instance, Ransmayr writes:

Und dieser Leib des Sohnes eines allmächtigen Gottes, Schöpfers des Himmels und der Erde, der Ozeane, Sonnen- und Planetensysteme, der Galaxien und Lichtjahrmilliarden durchmessenden Tiefen des Alls und der Zeit, würde sich, in der Form einer Hostie [...] auf die Zunge gelegt, in ihrer Mundhöhle auflösen und dadurch ein Teil von ihnen werden.

[And this body of the son of an all-powerful God, creator of heaven and earth, of the oceans, the solar and planetary systems, the galaxies and the depths of the universe and of time, spanning billions of light years, would, in the form of a host [...] laid on their tongue, dissolve in the cavity of their mouths and thereby become a part of them, A 305].

The result of the radically expanding then contracting scale here is similar to that of the double Gestalt switch in Kafka's vision of the Kaiser. On the surface, both affirm faith in the power of an absolute to bound that which exceeds our capacity for thought, and render it assimilable: they insist that the infinite can become embodied, even incorporated into one's self. By zooming out so radically in the first place, however, the texts undermine the certainty with which Kafka's narrator and the young girl through whom Ransmayr's text is focalised purport to view the figures of God and the Kaiser, leaving us instead to sit uneasily with the paradoxical and imponderable. As we shall see, the theological implications of this vision of the big within the small can, in the context of the climate crisis, easily tip over into forms of guilt that are related to the problem of scale. A different iteration of this moment of communion, for instance, is the uneasy sense that to eat a

piece of meat is to imbibe the entire system of industrial slaughter and agricultural methane emissions; or that an avocado contains within it the sum of its air miles, deforestation and water usage. Schaub, too, notes that the collection this story is taken from ‘sich durchaus auch auf die [...] Frage des “Aufeinandertreffen[s] inkompatibler Größenmaßstäbe, ein[es] *clash of scales*” beziehen [lässt]’ [can certainly be linked to the question of incompatible units of size, a ‘clash of scales’].²²

If the implication of this first type of move through the scales – suggesting that an absolutised Everything resides invisibly within every thing – is a monotheistic one, there are also sudden changes of focus in the texts that suggest a subtly different view, tending towards a pantheistic mode of interconnectedness. In Flanagan’s novel *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001), the protagonist William Buelow Gould’s hallucinogenic revelation that ‘implicit in a single seahorse was the universe’ seems at first like the same scale effect described above; yet it goes hand in hand with the realisation ‘that everyone had the capacity to be someone, something, somebody else’ (GB 402). The boundaries of identity, as well as those between species, are continually dissolving in the novel, culminating in Gould’s metamorphosis into a fish and realisation that ‘the sea was an infinite love that encompassed not only those I had loved but those I had not’ (GB 448).

While the emphasis on flux and metamorphosis is often associated with expanded time scales, this tendency towards a semblance of pantheism is most prevalent in those strands of eco-theory which focus on smaller-than-human scales: on the level of the microscopic. In the collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, for instance, Ursula K. Le Guin’s call to ‘subjectify the universe’ – advocating for ‘the infinite interconnectedness, the naturally sacred order of things’²³ – serves as the logical introduction to a series of articles about forms of symbiosis, with an emphasis on the level of the microbial. A key insight of the collection, offered by Margaret McFall-Ngai and drawing on the work of Lynn Margulis, is that of a ‘postmodern synthesis’ in biology – a response and rebuke to the ‘modern synthesis’ promoted by neo-Darwinian thinkers. In light of new insights into the role

²² Schaub, ‘Kein anthropozäner Text’, 267-8.

²³ Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘Deep in Admiration’, in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan & Nils Bubandt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M16.

intestinal bacteria play in human mood and personality,²⁴ to name just one example, McFall-Ngai argues that modern conceptions of the individual have become untenable; that ‘every “I” is also a “we”’, and what’s more, this ‘we’ is ‘more microbe than human’.²⁵ Life, the collection’s editors conclude, ‘is symbiosis “all the way down”’.²⁶

This vision of profound ‘entanglement’ appears to constitute its own endless knot. In disrupting the anthropocentrism that has caused such untold damage, it also presents a challenge to the notions of agency and accountability that might allow us to act and counteract. The scale effects in these texts leave the human as agent standing on shifting sands, overwhelmed by everything that is, as Kafka has it, ‘für den einzelnen Menschen wenigstens mit eigenen Augen und eigenem Maßstab [...] unnachprüfbar’ [for the individual human, at least with their own eyes and by their own measure, [...] unverifiable, *BB* 263]. Among the theorists who have attempted to square this circle is Jane Bennett, who proposes, rather than a free anthropocentric ‘will’, an ‘agency of assemblages’: agency ‘distributed across a mosaic’ of things, in which humans are only ever one actant.²⁷ ‘The sentences of this book’, she writes in *Vibrant Matter*,

also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from ‘my’ memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or particulates in the room, to name only a few of the participants.²⁸

Contrary, perhaps, to Bennett’s metaphor of the mosaic, we have moved here from a zoom in or out to a pan across. Rather than expanding or contracting, the frame roams seemingly at random. Nothing can be left out; every thing may be of significance. With its apparent ‘deep focus’ – expanding the frame while keeping a close eye on things of all shapes and sizes within it – this passage brings to light even more precisely the problem that the

²⁴ Margaret McFall-Ngai, ‘Noticing Microbial Worlds: The Postmodern Synthesis in Biology’, in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan & Nils Bubandt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, M52.

²⁶ Anna Tsing et al., ‘Introduction: Bodies Tumbled Into Bodies’, M5.

²⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

complexity of the Anthropocene presents for narrative: the problem of omniscience. In beginning with her own sentences, meanwhile, Bennett also raises the spectre of an unsustainable distinction between inside and outside, between the world and the book. These twin conundrums are what I will call the problem of 'bounds'.

Bounds

Anxieties about the relationship between the 'inside' and 'outside' of books can be seen across a wide range of contemporary literature that engages with the climate crisis. Richard Powers's 2018 doorstopper *The Overstory*, for instance, is arguably the most prominent work of overtly 'environmental' fiction published in recent years. Widely fancied for the Booker that year, it offers a neat case study of all the aesthetic paradoxes at hand. In his promotion of the book, Powers made no secret of its status as literary activism, a novelistic call to arms: the idea for the work, he explains, came to him after an encounter with an old-growth redwood in the mountains near Santa Cruz, a moment he describes as 'a religious conversion'.²⁹ The novel is thus an ecological manifesto, and not only within its text. The copyright page of all but the earliest editions proclaims that the book is printed on 100% recycled paper, saving '408 trees, 393,576 gallons of water, 132,228 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions, and 40,272 pounds of solid waste'.³⁰ Powers does not beat around the bush – he is well aware that the temporal urgency of the climate crisis leaves the boundary between book and world, always illusory, nonetheless newly dissolved. The book's sustainability disclaimer is yet another example of what Timothy Morton describes as 'an inside-outside opposition untenable in an age of ecological awareness, in which categories such as "away" have evaporated. One doesn't throw a candy wrapper away – one drops it on Mount Everest.'³¹

²⁹ Emma John, 'Interview – Richard Powers: "We're completely alienated from everything else alive"', *Guardian* online, Jun 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/16/richard-powers-interview-overstory>> [Accessed 4th April, 2020].

³⁰ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), iii.

³¹ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), 6.

The Overstory is awake to scales, too; it knows all about omniscience. It skips from the microbial to the planetary as well as back and forth through time. A 19th-century child must be taken by God, since 'there are no microbes, yet'.³² A car crash victim lands in 'a row of Osage oranges planted for a hedge a century and a half earlier'.³³ The brain of a seven-year-old 'fires and rewires, building arborized axons, *dendrites*, those tiny spreading trees'.³⁴ Dirt is 'a microscopic forest, a hundred thousand species in a few lowa grams'.³⁵ Animals evolve 'carrying around on their skin and in their guts whole worlds of earlier creatures'.³⁶ And so on. The novel wants to say so much that the scale of its sentences, too, feels unstable: even those passages that do not begin 'miles below and three centuries earlier'³⁷ seem constantly on fast-forward, eliding huge swathes of biographical time from paragraph to paragraph. Over the span of one fairly typical page, 'Plant-Patty becomes Dr. Pat Westerford. [...] She lands a postdoc at Wisconsin. [...] The postdoc turns into an adjunct position. [...] Confirmation comes the following spring'.³⁸

The reason for this inhuman pace is that the novel is not content to be merely encyclopaedic. Instead, it strives for the true omniscience of non-anthropocentrism, by imagining, where it can, life from the perspective of trees. This impossible undertaking adds a new element to the line from that great omniscient authority, George Eliot, which Campbell et al. cite as the condition of thinking the Anthropocene: 'If we had a keen vision of all [...] life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat and we should die at the roar which lies on the other side of silence'.³⁹ Where Eliot's full quote refers specifically to 'ordinary human life', *The Overstory* attempts to literalise her analogy by paying attention to what humans cannot physically perceive, as well as what they usually overlook. The text is conscious of its own quixotism in this regard: 'If your mind were only a slightly greener thing,' trees tell one character, 'we'd drown you in meaning',⁴⁰ thereby acknowledging not only the limits of the human sensorium, but also – in the

³² Powers, *The Overstory*, 7.

³³ *Ibid*, 118.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 93.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 408.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 475.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 124-5.

³⁹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 182; cf. Campbell et al., 'Climate Change Is Not A Problem', 740.

⁴⁰ Powers, *The Overstory*, 4.

metaphor of drowning – our lack of processing capacity for so much input. As a result, *The Overstory* often falls back from performative omniscience to the familiar mode of mystery and entanglement. ‘Tight nets of thousands of species’, it frequently reminds us, ‘knit together in weaves too fine for any person to trace’.⁴¹ Like McFall-Ngai, it knows that ‘there are no individuals in a forest, no separable events’.⁴²

What makes Powers such a useful case study, however, is the extent to which the form of *The Overstory* seems to resist this insight. For Campbell et al., the resonance of Eliot’s line with the vast complexity of climate change means nothing less than ‘the end of demarcation, the end of a background’.⁴³ They refer to this quality of climate change as its ‘unboundedness’: the collapse of any sense of things being inside or outside of it, of being able to say where it begins or ends.⁴⁴ Concurrently, they argue, climate change is ‘unframeable’, which – transposed from their discipline of organisational studies into the realm of literature – means essentially ‘unnarratable’. Despite its protestations, *The Overstory* seems to want to respond to these claims by asking: ‘Have you tried a bigger book?’

In its very title, Powers’s novel immediately betrays this tendency towards self-consciousness over and above self-awareness. The ‘overstory’ it puns on refers, supposedly, to the foliage of trees a level above human heads. They, the text insists, are the ones who know what’s up, the keepers of the keys to the grand narrative. In stamping this title on a 500-page tome, however, the opposite effect is achieved: here, it seems to suggest, is the Big Story, the one which *can* overarch all the complexity, incalculability and unthinkability. Here is a book that will take a God’s eye view;⁴⁵ that will be the way, the truth and the life. A book like that needs an all-encompassing beginning. Sure enough, the Powers that be decided that it should begin:

⁴¹ Ibid, 242.

⁴² Ibid, 218.

⁴³ Campbell et al., ‘Climate Change Is Not A Problem’, 740.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 726.

⁴⁵ In her influential essay on ‘situated knowledges’, Donna Haraway takes issue with precisely this ‘god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14.3 [1988], 575-599 [581]). The ‘view of infinite vision’, as Haraway puts it, ‘is an illusion, a god trick’ (Ibid, 582). This point will prove crucial to the discussion of embodied omniscience in Chapter 4.

First there was nothing. Then there was everything.⁴⁶

And end:

*This will never end.*⁴⁷

It is in this regard that *The Overstory* serves as a useful overture to the questions of boundedness and boundlessness that obsess Ransmayr, Flanagan and Tokarczuk, and which can be traced back to Kafka. For the former two writers, in particular, these questions centre around the metaphor of the book: around the comfort of beginnings and endings, insides and outsides; and, conversely, the communion of books without end.

Gould's Book of Fish, for instance, is Flanagan's fictional outward expansion of a real, pre-existing book of fish. The historical figure William Buelow Gould, who shares a name with the novel's protagonist, was an English convict sent to Van Diemen's Land in 1827 for theft. Once there, he was transferred to the harsher penal stations of Macquarie Harbour and Sarah Island for forging a banknote. A talented painter, Gould was eventually assigned as a house servant to a series of colonial surgeons who put him to work producing watercolours of local plants, animals and fishes; his *Sketchbook of fishes*, now housed in the State Library of Tasmania, is the earliest record of many species found in the oceans off Tasmania, some of which remain relatively unknown to science today.⁴⁸ Flanagan – a trained historian whose first creative writing job was to ghost-write the memoir of a notorious conman – picks up the detail of forgery from Gould's biography, and uses it to construct a postmodern labyrinth designed to leave the reader unsure where one Gould's Book ends and the other begins.

⁴⁶ Powers, *The Overstory*, 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 502; emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ten years after the publication of Flanagan's novel, Gould's *Sketchbook of fishes* was entered into the UNESCO Memory of the World register, with reference to the success of Flanagan's 'imaginative treatment' (*The Australian Register. UNESCO Memory of the World Program*) <https://www.amw.org.au/sites/default/files/memory_of_the_world/science-and-innovation/william-buelow-goulds-sketchbook-fishes.html> [Accessed 31st March 2023]. Images from the sketchbook also adorn the covers of popular works by other Australian writers, such as Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Metazoa: Animal Minds and the Birth of Consciousness* (London: Harper Collins, 2020).



Fig. 1.1: Sketch titled 'Leafy sea dragon' (officially 'Weedy seadragon') from William Buelow Gould's Sketchbook of fishes. Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Hobart.

The historical Gould's *Sketchbook of fishes* contains only images and the names of species, largely supplied by others, without any written narrative. Flanagan's version – subtitled 'A Novel in Twelve Fish' – includes twelve of Gould's original paintings as the frontispieces for each chapter. The novel's metamorphosical premise is that Gould's *Sketchbook of fishes* is also, at the same time, a book of portraits depicting the inhabitants of the penal colony. In the course of each chapter, named after the fish pictured, the connection between a quality or feature of a given character and the sketch of a particular fish is revealed. What sounds at first like an anthropocentric reading is, in the event, left surprisingly open with regards to the direction of the comparison: when an officer stands before Gould, 'reading out a charge of murder that I had not committed, I realised the awful truth about Sarah Island: that this was not a colony of men at all, but a colony of fish masquerading as men' (GB 287).

In its form, *Gould's Book of Fish* makes every conceivable effort to leave the reader uncertain where the 'real' book of fish ends and begins. It opens with a framing device in which Sid Hammet, a late 20th-century Tasmanian counterfeiter who specialises in faking old furniture for tourists, happens across a mysterious '*Book of Fish*' inside 'an old galvanised-iron meat safe' in a junk shop (GB 12). The text sounds much like the one we

are about to read: the story of 'a convict named William Buelow Gould' interspersed with paintings of fish. Since 'the keeping of such journals by convicts was forbidden, [...] each story was written in a different coloured ink which, as their convict scribe describes, had been made by various ingenious expedients from whatever was at hand' (GB 17). Accordingly, the original hardcover print run of Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* used a different colour of ink for each chapter, a considerable effort that demonstrates how crucial the book/world relationship is to any understanding of the novel. Although the counterfeiter Hammet claims to be convinced of the real importance of his finding, experts who analyse the manuscript proclaim it a fake, riddled with historical inaccuracies. Hammet's confusion is further increased by his discovery of the *Sketchbook of fishes* in the State Library, which appears to him to be an exact copy of the *Book of Fish* he has found, only without the words. After the junk shop *Book of Fish* mysteriously vanishes, Hammet sets about recreating it from memory, adding a further layer of doubt to the narrative before Gould's story has even begun.

Outlined in this way, the novel might sound too clever by half, guilty of the most exhausting excesses of postmodern narration. The effect, however, is far from arch. In its engagement with the violence of Tasmanian colonial history and its consequences in the present day, *Gould's Book of Fish* has an urgency that can be felt throughout its many turns of grotesque humour and picaresque twists of fate. What the elaborate framing device circles around is the relationship between the book and the world, the relationship at the crux of ecologically oriented fiction. On the one hand, Flanagan, like Morton, believes strongly in the value of the aesthetic on its own terms; he is an outspoken apologist for the novel form, saying in his Booker Prize acceptance speech that the novel is 'one of our greatest spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual inventions [...] Novels are not content. Nor are they a mirror to life [...] Novels *are* life, or they are nothing'.⁴⁹ As we saw in the introduction, his allegiance is half to the 'universe of books', a quasi-religious idea that also finds its way into the later novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014), and is discussed in more detail below. On the other hand, Flanagan is a prominent public speaker and non-fiction writer, who advocates in no uncertain terms for the political causes

⁴⁹ 'Man Booker prize-winner Richard Flanagan's acceptance speech in full', *Guardian*, Oct 2014. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/15/man-booker-prize-winner-richard-flanagans-acceptance-speech-in-full>> [Accessed 5th April 2023].

reflected in his novels. Foremost among these is the recognition of Australia's colonial crimes and their entanglement with the destruction of the biosphere, the consequences of which continue to ripple out to this day.

In *Gould's Book of Fish*, we also find the first explicit textual evidence that the uneasy relationship between the world and the book is, for Flanagan, directly linked to his understanding of Kafka. Towards the end of the novel, Gould finds himself sentenced to death both for a crime he did not commit and for another crime that he did. Looking back over his life and his art, Gould concludes that his paintings of fish as people and of people as fish, with all their boundary-blurring uncertainty, were part of his infraction against the colonial system of Sarah Island. 'Such things weren't what people wanted in their paintings', he realises,

they wanted their animals dead & their wives dead, they wanted something that helped them to classify & judge & keep the dead animals & dead wives [...] in their place inside the prison of the frame, & this business of smuggling hope might make them wonder, might be the axe that smashed the frozen sea within [...] And that wasn't a painting worth twopence, but something more criminal than stealing. (GB 440)

This citation of the Kafka quote par excellence encapsulates perfectly the dual valence that the Prague modernist's aesthetic takes on in Flanagan's work. On the one hand, Kafka as the quintessential metamorphoser of people and literaliser of metaphors represents literature as a self-enclosed world, subject to its own laws; on the other, he represents the speaking of truth to power in a way that can easily tip over into a call for action.

The image of the axe and the frozen sea is a Flanagan favourite, returned to again and again throughout his journalism and non-fiction. Criticising the decision of the Brisbane Writers' Festival to drop controversial guests, for instance, Flanagan asserts the prerogative of writing to disrupt conventional thinking – to be, 'as Kafka put it, the axe that

smashes the frozen sea within'.⁵⁰ This fairly simple allusion would not in and of itself require close engagement with Kafka's work; at first, it appears too blunt an instrument to accomplish much with. In planting it both within and outside his fiction, however, Flanagan consistently draws attention to the type of vexed relationship between the world and the book that is prefigured, as we will see, in Kafka stories like 'In der Strafkolonie' [In the Penal Colony].

The new resonances of the 'frozen sea' over a century after its original iteration are striking, with the disappearance of sea ice now one of the most salient images of global heating.⁵¹ The act of smashing, meanwhile, is legible enough: it is what those of less poetic bent might call 'impact', a translation of the written word into real-world affects and effects. Even Flanagan's choice of translation is telling: where Kafka's German means simply 'the axe for the frozen sea within [us]',⁵² with its relation to 'stinging' and 'biting' allowing for a reading of this as a process of gradual chipping away, the later writer's more forceful metaphor suggests a longing to shatter the boundary between the 'inner' world of the book and the world of material reality 'outside'. The increased urgency is noteworthy. It is perhaps only in the hundred years separating the original from its citation that the image of 'smashing' a sea – of sudden, cataclysmic change, great sheets of ice crumbling and falling away – has become intuitive or even imaginable. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh outlines how industrial modernity was dominated by a 'gradualist' understanding of geology – comparable to the Axt as pickaxe, chipping away piece by piece – that wilfully suppressed the 'catastrophism' of earlier epochs, a mode that has regained ground in the face of a changing climate.⁵³ It is apt, then, that Flanagan's version implicitly longs for the dam to break, for the book to burst its bounds.

⁵⁰ Richard Flanagan, 'I didn't want to write this, but the courage to listen to different ideas is vanishing', *Guardian*, Jul 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jul/29/i-didnt-want-to-write-this-but-the-courage-to-listen-to-different-ideas-is-vanishing>> [Accessed 22nd March 2022].

⁵¹ Hannes Bergthaller also notes the 'oddly dislocated' quality of Kafka's metaphor in the context of climate change. See Bergthaller, 'Climate Change and Un-Narratability', *Metaphora* EV 2 (2017) <https://metaphorajournal.univie.ac.at/climate-change/volume2_bergthaller.pdf> [Accessed 26th June 2022].

⁵² 'Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. [...] Ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns' [I believe you should only read the kind of books that bite and sting you [...] A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us]. Franz Kafka, in *Franz Kafka: Briefe 1902-1924*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1966), 27.

⁵³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 19-20.

These bounds are themselves twofold; they are circular in structure. In order for the book to affect the material world beyond its pages – the first inner/outer divide at play – it must first cross the threshold into the inner world of a reader. If we read Kafka's *Axt* as a pickaxe, this first step appears as an end in itself: for a book, through the act of reading, to be transmuted into something that can pierce the skin dividing the reader from the outer world and affect their interiority is metamorphosis enough. In Flanagan's adaptation, however, a second crossing is implied: not only must the axe break through into the reader's interiority, but in doing so, it should cause a total and irreversible change of state that results in an outpouring, channelling the inner affect back into the external world.

If this seems at first to present too close a reading of Flanagan's citation, it is affirmed by the wider context of his work. Along with this particular allusion, references to Kafka abound in his journalism and speeches not least when they constitute an immediate call to action. Several paragraphs are dedicated to a discussion of Kafka in the lecture 'Does writing matter?', a plea for Australian readers to force their government into ending the inhuman practice of offshore detention centres.⁵⁴ Flanagan walks the walk: his 2007 exposé of corrupt and ecologically destructive logging practices in Tasmania, which subjected him to harsh attacks from the island's politicians and media, eventually resulted in the collapse of the worst offender, the logging company Gunn's. The fantastical approach to empathy with fish and non-human animals pursued in *Gould's Book of Fish* was followed, twenty years later, by a damning journalistic indictment of Tasmanian salmon farming; in *Toxic* (2021), Flanagan outlines the damage this practice inflicts both on the biosphere and on the wellbeing of the island's residents.⁵⁵ This spirit of active intervention via the written word also shapes his most recent novel, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (2020), which responds allegorically to the devastation of the natural world. One review describes the novel as having been written 'more or less in real time' during the nightmarish bushfires that ravaged the continent in 2020.⁵⁶ It is, above all, this

⁵⁴ Flanagan, 'Does writing matter?'.

⁵⁵ Richard Flanagan, *Toxic: The Rotting Underbelly of the Tasmanian Salmon Industry* (London: Penguin, 2022).

⁵⁶ Beejay Silcox, 'A wrenching response to a devastated world', *Guardian*, Oct 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/16/the-living-sea-of-waking-dreams-by-richard-flanagan-review-a-wrenching-response-to-a-devastated-world>> [Accessed March 22, 2022].

temporal urgency that has added a new dimension to familiar literary conundrums about insides, outsides, and where to begin – paradoxes, that is, most often addressed in literary forms that trace their genealogy back to Kafka.

In Ransmayr's case, too, Kafka's legacy relates above all to the unstable boundaries of fictional worlds. For an Austrian writer whose central theme is unquestionably that of metamorphosis, and who has set several texts at the Great Wall of China, the gravitational pull of Kafka's work is inescapable. Ransmayr's most explicit engagement with this literary antecedent came on the occasion of being awarded the 1995 Franz Kafka Prize. His acceptance speech, 'Die Erfindung der Welt' [The Invention of the World], begins with the same roar of omniscience outlined above, on an equally nonhuman scale. 'Wie kalt und unbewegt', he asks a presumably nonplussed audience, 'ist die Meerestiefe vier- und fünftausend Meter unter dem Kiel eines Frachters, der auf einer transatlantischen Route im Sturm liegt? Wie heißen die Leuchtfische, die durch dieses Dunkel schweben?' [How cold and dispassionate are the ocean depths four or five thousand metres below the keel of a cargo ship caught in a storm on a transatlantic route? What are the luminescent fish called that float through this darkness?]⁵⁷ These, the storyteller explains, are just some of the countless, ineluctable questions over which a writer must stumble at every turn, questions whose long arc bends towards the encyclopaedic: 'Fragen etwa der Wetterkunde, der Geschichtsforschung, Anthropologie und Zoologie [...] Fragen der Vogel- und Gesteinskunde, der Botanik und Astronomie und so weiter...' [Questions of meteorology, for instance, of historical research, anthropology and zoology (...) questions of ornithology and geology, of botany and astronomy and so on...].⁵⁸ The only recourse the narrator has, he explains, lies in the boundaries set by beginnings and endings. And these, for Ransmayr, are exactly what Kafka's work disrupts.

'Verlieren sich denn nicht Anfang und Ende jeder Geschichte, die man nur lange genug verfolgt', the increasingly despondent Erzähler of the speech comes to ask, 'irgendwann spurlos in der Weitläufigkeit der Zeit?' [Don't the beginning and ending of every story that

⁵⁷ Christoph Ransmayr, 'Die Erfindung der Welt: Rede zur Verleihung des Franz-Kafka-Preises', in *Die Erfindung der Welt: Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr*, ed. Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 198.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 199; ellipsis in original.

we follow for long enough disappear at some point without a trace in the vast expanse of time?]⁵⁹ There it is again: the difficulty of a radically expanded scale; of unframeability; of unboundedness. There is yet hope, however. Comfort can still be sought within the covers of a book, a self-contained volume of stories in which each story in turn is self-contained, by virtue of being – unlike this Erzähler's – already complete, 'vollendet' [fully finished].⁶⁰ How unhappy a coincidence that what comes to hand is a collection of Kafka stories. Their significance for this storyteller bears quoting in full:

Aber dann, ein zum Trost aufgeschlagenes Buch vor sich, einen Band mit Erzählungen *vollendeter* Geschichten, in denen von einem *Urteil*, von einer *Verwandlung*, von einem *Landarzt* [...] oder einer *Strafkolonie* erzählt wird, meint er plötzlich das Geräusch einer Maschine zu hören, das Geräusch eines entsetzlichen Apparates, der den Verurteilten einer Strafkolonie Worte, ganze Sätze mit Nadeln auf den Leib schreibt, ins Fleisch sticht – und tötet, indem er weiter und weiter schreibt. Gebannt von der Vorführung dieser Maschine, will der Erzähler schon sagen *das bin ich, dieser Verurteilte, das bin ich, auf mir wird geschrieben, an diesem Schreiben gehe ich zugrunde...* Aber dann erwacht er und legt das Buch für einen Augenblick erleichtert zur Seite. Es war *nur* eine Geschichte, eine Geschichte, die doch einen Anfang und doch ein Ende hatte, so wie alle Geschichten, auch die seine, einen Anfang und ein Ende haben werden.⁶¹

[But then, a book opened in search of consolation in front of him, a volume of *completed* stories, which tell of a *judgement*, a *metamorphosis*, a *country doctor* [...] or a *penal colony*, he suddenly thinks he hears the noise of a machine, the noise of a dreadful apparatus, that writes words, whole sentences with needles on the bodies of the condemned in a penal colony, engraving it into their flesh – and then kills them, by writing on and on. Entranced by the demonstration of this machine, the narrator wants to say *that's me, this condemned man, that's me, the sentences are being written on me, I'm being killed by this writing...* But then he awakes and lays the book aside for a moment, relieved. It was *only* a story, a story that did have a beginning and did have an end, just as all stories, his too, will have a beginning and an end].

⁵⁹ Ibid, 201.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

The operative model of writing bleeding (or cutting) into material reality here is that of Kafka's 'In der Strafkolonie' [In the Penal Colony]: the progenitor of a whole tradition of meta- or labyrinthine texts that fixate on the relationship between writing and bodies, language and materiality. The story sees an educated European traveller in the style of Ransmayr visit a brutal, surreal penal colony after the fashion of *Gould's Book*.⁶² If Kafka's work specialises in the 'radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical'⁶³ (most famously the notion of calling someone an 'Ungeziefer' [vermin]), then the metaphor which is realised here is that of 'am eigenen Leib erfahren' [experiencing first-hand; literally 'on one's own body'].⁶⁴ The 'Apparat' of the story – a writing machine turned torture instrument – inscribes the injunction its victim has transgressed against on their body, albeit in an elaborate, indecipherable script known only to an Officer who devotes himself to the machine. In the story's denouement, the Officer places himself inside the machine, both to convince the visitor of the metaphysical power of this violent process, and to experience its transcendence first-hand. Instead of inscribing the Officer with 'Sei gerecht!' [Be just!]⁶⁵ as it is supposed to, however, the machine unceremoniously impales him in the process of malfunctioning and disintegrating – as though the mysterious script has escaped even more radically from language into materiality, enacting the Officer's command in a brutally literal manner.

⁶² Most of the existing critical comparisons between Ransmayr and Kafka have focused specifically on 'In der Strafkolonie'. In their discussion of 1995's *Morbus Kitahara* [*The Dog King*], the panellists of the legendary German TV program *Das literarische Quartett* [*The Literary Quartet*] agree that 'in gewisser Weise ist der [Roman von] Ransmayr mit der "Strafkolonie" vergleichbar [...] Wenn es eine Literatur gibt, an die er anknüpft, dann ist es Kafka, dann ist es die "Strafkolonie"' [In a certain way, Ransmayr's novel is comparable to the 'Penal Colony' (...) If there is a literature that it links itself to, then it is Kafka, then it is the 'Penal Colony'. *Das Literarische Quartett*, 19th October 1995 <<https://youtu.be/e7YN-YT4v6U>> (Accessed 23rd January 2023)]. In her analysis of Ransmayr's early prose poem *Strahlender Untergang* [*Radiant Demise*], Leahy notes that 'here, [...], unlike in the case of the prisoner in Kafka's *Strafkolonie* (a text which in many ways shadows *Strahlender Untergang*), knowledge of the law inscribed on the body is granted to the dying man' (Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 108).

⁶³ David Foster Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed', in *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (London: Penguin, 2014), 851.

⁶⁴ It would be useless to inform the condemned of his sentence, the officer explains: 'Er erfährt es ja auf seinem Leib' [he will learn it on his body]. The verb used here – 'erfahren' – often means to learn something or find something out; you can 'erfahren' a piece of gossip or interesting factoid, for instance. At the same time, it is one of two words used in German that mean 'to experience'. This valence will become particularly pertinent in Chapter 4, in discussing the gap between omniscience and experience. Franz Kafka, 'In der Strafkolonie', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 149-180 (154).

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 173.

In Ransmayr's speech, yet another layer is added to the machine's irruption from language into physical presence: it has broken the boundaries of the book to write on the reader. Kafka's book has become an instrument of violence, something that can indeed 'bite and sting', through recognition of something outside the book – the Erzähler's writerly agonies – anticipated within its pages. *Gould's Book of Fish* plays with this same relationship between texts and bodies. One of the chapters – printed in red-tinted ink in the original, multi-coloured edition – purports to be written in Gould's own blood: 'I [...] am dipping my quill carved from a shark's rib into the blood that oozes slowly forth to write what you are now reading' (GB 55).

The relieved sense of an ending that Ransmayr's narrator believes himself to have found by closing the book, meanwhile, rings hollow: it was 'zum Trost' [for consolation], after all, that he had opened it in the first place. What the reader is left with is the unshakeable sense of a bad dream you cannot wake up from, because you have woken up from it already: the condition, that is, of someone who wakes from uneasy dreams only to find reality a waking nightmare.⁶⁶ Reading Kafka, Ransmayr's narrator is no longer sure whether he is telling his own story, or trapped forever in somebody else's.

Character after character in the works of Ransmayr and Flanagan is haunted by this sensation. William Buelow Gould often seems uncannily aware of his status as the literary pawn of an unknown author, feeling himself, for instance, 'slowly suffocating, as though pages as large as houses were falling upon me, pressing in upon me as if I were only a flower to be desiccated & preserved through flattening; as though a book as vast as the sky were wrapping around my humbled form, soon to close forever' (GB 348). In his hallucinogenic revels after briefly escaping Sarah Island, Gould finds a book that – once again – seems to be the very same one the reader holds in their hands. The sentences he reads that 'make no sense whatsoever, about buying chairs as a futile act of atonement' (GB 381) refer directly to the Sid Hammet framing device, while Gould soon recognises his own story among the pages. Tearing up the book to throw it on the fire in panic, he experiences yet another instance of the lucid nightmare:

⁶⁶ Franz Kafka, 'Die Verwandlung', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 88.

Trying desperately to avoid the conclusion that if this book of fish was a history of the settlement, it might also just be its prophecy, I then realised that the book was not near ended, that it contained several more chapters, & with mounting horror I read on the succeeding page of how—'I realised the book was not near ended, that it contained several more chapters, & with mounting horror I read on the succeeding page of how—' (GB 383)

Gould's bad trip resonates on multiple levels with Ransmayr's stories that swallow their creators. The realisation that the mysterious book could be either history or prophecy – pre- or post-diction⁶⁷ – and that there is no way of telling, chimes with the Austrian's first published novel, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* [The Terrors of Ice and Darkness, 1984]. Here, the character Josef Mazzini engages in his own 'Erfindung der Wirklichkeit' [invention of reality] by thinking up and writing down detailed stories, then checking the records of history to see 'ob es in der fernen oder jüngsten Vergangenheit jemals *wirkliche* Vorläufer für die Gestalten seiner Phantasie gegeben habe' [whether in the distant or recent past there were ever *real* precursors for the figures of his imagination].⁶⁸ Unlike Gould, Mazzini is unperturbed in this game by the knowledge that 'eine phantasierte Geschichte, die tatsächlich einmal geschehen sei, sich doch durch nichts mehr von einer bloßen *Nacherzählung* unterscheiden [würde]' [an imagined story that had actually happened before would no longer be distinguishable from a mere *retelling*].⁶⁹ Having invented the story of an Arctic expedition, then found it perfectly reflected in an account of the 1872 Payer-Weyprecht quest for a northwest passage, Mazzini sets off to follow in the footsteps of his real invention, only to disappear amid the ice. Where Gould finds himself in a book and decides to burn it, Cotta, the protagonist of Ransmayr's breakthrough novel *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*, 1988], goes in search of a book rumoured to have been burned – Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – only to discover that he has been living in it all along. Having followed Ovid all the way to Tomis on the Black Sea coast, Cotta realises – on the final page – that the town's inhabitants are the characters of *Metamorphoses*, and that he is among their number. Cotta is left raving, his own name echoing back at him from the walls.

⁶⁷ Acknowledgement is due to Cairtíona Leahy for this characteristically memorable turn of phrase.

⁶⁸ Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 21; emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*; emphasis in original.

In the Tokarczuk novel most often read as a work of magical realism, *Prawiek i inne czasy* (1996; *Primeval and Other Times*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2010), characters also begin to suffer from a kind of textual Truman syndrome. Primeval, the village in which the characters live, is legible on one level as a metaphorical space that demonstrates how narrative operates. Primeval, the opening sentence tells us, 'is the place at the centre of the universe' (P 9); the first thing the text does is to demarcate its borders in all four directions. In the middle of the novel, two children find the boundary and discover that it is impossible to leave: 'This is where Primeval ends, there's nothing beyond here' (P 108). The many characters who have ventured further afield, to Kielce or Russia, 'just thought they were there. They set off on a journey, they reach the boundary, and here they come to a standstill [...] Then, after a while, they wake up and go home, and they take their dreams for memories' (P 108-9). The children try and fail to cross the boundary, then decide to go home, and make no mention of the incident to others. It remains an insight for the reader into the machinery of the book-as-world: the boundary 'can give birth to ready-made people, and we think they've come from somewhere' (P 109). Their closing words on the subject, however, leave a lingering sense of entrapment and claustrophobia: 'What I find most frightening is that it's impossible to get out of here. As if we're sitting in a pot' (P 109).

To be trapped in a book, then, is a nightmarish fate; and the only escape is an ending. Dorrigo Evans, the protagonist of Flanagan's 2014 novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, knows this all too well. Dorrigo's passionate affair with Amy, his uncle's wife, is interrupted by his deployment as a military doctor in the Second World War. Having been captured by the Japanese Imperial Army and become a leader for his fellow Australian POWs on the Siam-Burma 'Death Railway', Dorrigo receives a letter bearing the news of Amy's death. The novel's complex temporal structure, spanning Dorrigo's entire life, circles around this moment of trauma; it takes a second reading to grasp that the chapters set on the Death Railway, interspersed throughout the novel and making up at least half of its narrative time, all relate the events of this single day. This is the day on which Darky Gardiner, who is, as Dorrigo will discover much later, his half-Indigenous nephew, is beaten to death by the camp guards. Like most of Flanagan's novels, the narrative is circular rather

than linear in structure. One of the intratextual models for its narrative principle is an unfinished book that is simultaneously a bad dream. After reading of Amy's death, Dorrigo reaches for

a book he had been reading that he had expected to end well, a romance which he wanted to end well [...] Love is two bodies with one soul, he read, and turned the page.

But there was nothing – the final pages had been ripped away and used as toilet paper or smoked [...] There was no last page. The book of his life just broke off. [...] And Dorrigo Evans understood that the love story would go on forever and ever, world without end.

He would live in hell [...] (NR 447)

Deprived of an ending, trapped in traumatic 'unreality' (NR 383), Dorrigo lives in a dream, a nightmare, in hell. His story lacks not only a last page, but also a narrative direction. It resembles instead the death poem of the poet Shisui, a painted circle reproduced twice in the novel as one of many intertexts to Japanese haiku: 'the great wheel', thinks Dorrigo of Shisui's poem, 'eternal return: the circle – antithesis of the line' (NR 28). Before reading the fateful letter, Dorrigo has just awoken from 'a terrible dream of death' (NR 435); in the preceding chapter, set half a century later, Dorrigo in his dying moments is 'stunned to find that his life was only just beginning, and in a faraway teak jungle that had long since been cleared, in a country called Siam that no longer existed, a man who no longer lived had finally fallen asleep' (NR 435).⁷⁰

On the one hand, then, to be trapped within a book without end is a horror; it is the 'heaviest burden' of Nietzsche's eternal return. This is one valence of the sensation Sid Hammet experiences when he finds the *Book of Fish*, leading him to 'think I had lived the same life over and over, like some Hindu mystic forever trapped in the Great Wheel' (GB

⁷⁰ This short passage bears a marked resemblance to a story by another Kafka- and Borges-influenced Australian writer, Gerald Murnane. The story 'Land Deal' (1980), in which Indigenous narrators are confronted with the 'unreality' of their trade of vast tracts of land to colonisers in exchange for metal and wool, ends with the insistence of some characters 'that for as long as we handled such things we could be no more than characters in the vast dream that had settled over us — the dream that would never end until a race of men in a land unknown to us learned how much of their history was a dream that must one day end'. Murnane, 'Land Deal', in *Stream System* (New York: Farraur, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 57.

1). As with religious models of reincarnation, the impulse of Nietzsche's aphorism is an ethical one: it is a call to live the right life, lest you find yourself stuck for all eternity in the wrong one. In the context of the climate crisis, the nagging sensation of this 'wrong life' corresponds to the condition that Timothy Clark calls 'Anthropocene horror', discussed in more detail below. First, though, it is worth briefly analysing the uncertain place of a more hopeful, quasi-religious version of boundlessness in the texts at hand, and in the wider context of the climate emergency.

In *The Overstory*, a book that begins with a genesis and that brims over with messianic imagery,⁷¹ it is difficult to read the denial of an ending as a moment of entrapment or despair. Instead, ending with 'This will never end' extends a definite olive branch (or palm sprig) of comfort to the reader after confronting us repeatedly with humanity's imminent day of reckoning. For Sid Hammet, too, the encounter with the *Book of Fish* gives rise to a sense not only of eternal recurrence, but also of endless wonder and oneness reminiscent of Ransmayr's communion story: the belief that 'contained within me was all men and all fish and all things' (GB 2). This notion of books and their boundlessness as a sacrament, or eternal life, is experienced perhaps most vividly by Dorrigo Evans moments before he meets Amy for the first time. Browsing for an old copy of the Aeneid, Dorrigo becomes aware that in truth he is searching for

the aura he felt around such books—an aura that both radiated outwards and took him inwards to another world that said to him that he was not alone.

And this sense, this feeling of communion would at moments overwhelm him. At such times he had the sensation that there was only one book in the universe, and that all books were simply portals into this greater ongoing work—an inexhaustible, beautiful world that was not imaginary but the world as it truly was, a book without beginning or end. (NR 63)

This passage occupies a strange place in a novel which is not otherwise replete with religious imagery. Once again, the talk is of beginnings and endings, insides and outsides;

⁷¹ For instance: "This tree would be a gift so big, it would be like Jesus coming down and..." She trickles off on a thought that Watchman has at the same moment. *Been there. Felled that, too.* Powers, *The Overstory*, 289.

and once again these categories are hopelessly blurred. This time, however, the associations of the infinitude are overwhelmingly those of 'Trost', of consolation – a striking interlude in a text that otherwise offers little by way of comfort or escape. This appears to be an uncharacteristic flight into the 'world behind the world' that is the metaphysical;⁷² or, indeed, into a world to come.

Where Dorrigo's reverie imagines a oneness of all books, a recent Ransmayr text offers a vision of how any one book can be endlessly multiplied through the 'Prozeß der Verwandlung' [process of transformation] that is the act of reading.⁷³ This mysterious 'Vervielfältigung' [proliferation], Ransmayr points out, is 'kaum weniger wunderbar [...] als die Vermehrung von Fischen und Broten an jenem [...] See *Genezareth* genannten, ehemals fischreichen Gewässer in einer Schrift, die wegen solcher und ähnlicher Geschichten als *heilig* verehrt und gelesen wird' [hardly less wondrous (...) than the multiplying of loaves and fishes at those waters known as the *Sea of Galilee*, once abundant in fish, in a text that is revered and read as *holy* because of these and similar stories].⁷⁴ As an equal opposite to Dorrigo's moment of 'communion', this vision helps to draw out the unease that underlies the messianic in the age of the Anthropocene. Here, even as the world of books grows ad infinitum, the materials it is fed from are running dry at the source. Where the fish in books endlessly multiply, the fish in the world grow increasingly scarce. What's more, the meaning of books, Ransmayr's speech seems to affirm, consists in futurity: in their potential to enter into a communion with new readers and readings, to go forth and multiply long after their own genesis. It is this very futurity, however, that the reality of climate change places radically under threat.

The shock that accompanies the literalisation of such metaphors is a recurring feature of the 21st-century present. For Walter Benjamin, the inexhaustible potential of stories 'ähneln den Samenkörnern, die jahrtausendlang luftdicht verschlossen in den Kammern der Pyramiden gelegen und ihre Keimkraft bis auf den heutigen Tag bewahrt haben'

⁷² 'Metaphysics', in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's useful definition, 'refers to an attitude [...] that gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence; the word thus points to a worldview that always wants to go "beyond" (or "below") that which is "physical"'. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xiv.

⁷³ Christoph Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2019), 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

[resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up airtight and have retained their germinative power to this day].⁷⁵ As if in response, Powers the Overstoryteller places a character in charge of a literal seed bank, where she enthuses to her partner about a millennia-old date palm seed – ‘a date pit from a tree that Jesus himself might have sampled’ – that was found in a sealed palace and has germinated.⁷⁶ The seeds she collects and archives are meant for the same fate, far in the future. Her partner, however, ‘never asks what he wants to ask, what she knows he should. *Who’s going to do the replanting?*’⁷⁷

It is this type of shock that Campbell et al. have in mind when they write that the climate crisis engenders a ‘huge, if still latent, psychological re-examination of nothing less than the meaning of life on Earth’.⁷⁸ Under such circumstances, a retreat into the metaphysical – into false un-endings, or universes of books – is a siren song more beguiling than ever before. Yet the characters of Ransmayr and Flanagan, like the characters of Kafka before them, are, for the most part, anxious to wake from the uneasy dreams of life inside a never-ending book. They know that the alarm has been sounding, and that they’re already late. If some miraculous ‘Faustschlag auf den Schädel’ [fist blow to the head]⁷⁹ could restore them to reality, however, they might find themselves dealing with another notorious Kafka problem: a condition of indeterminate guilt.

Cages

Along with the book as axe – as a blow to rouse the reader from the ‘dream that must one day end’ – Flanagan has another favourite Kafka soundbite. Invited to speak on the subject of ‘producing fiction from fact’, the Tasmanian cannot help but begin by sowing doubt about such topics, which ‘seem to be in Kafka’s memorable phrase, “a cage in search of a

⁷⁵ Benjamin, ‘Der Erzähler’, 446; translation from Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 90.

⁷⁶ Powers, *The Overstory*, 392.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Campbell et al., ‘Climate Change is Not a Problem’, 729.

⁷⁹ Kafka, *Briefe 1902-1924*, 27.

bird”⁸⁰. This allusion to the 1917 aphorism ‘Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen’⁸¹ also crops up unannounced in Flanagan’s 2017 novel *First Person* – this time in the context of a meditation on ‘wildness’, and the inability of language to capture it. Remembering the wildness of the Tasmania he grew up in, late in a life that seems increasingly to have taken the wrong turn, the writer-narrator Kif Kehlmann comes to realise that

words were and are inadequate to all that we felt, all that we knew, all that I have lost. Words were part of it, but they were also cages in search of a bird.

And we were the birds [...]⁸²

Having retraced his steps back to the rainforest of his youth, Kif finds in place of this remembered freedom a site of devastation. Standing in the car park that now scars the mountain’s summit, he surveys numbly ‘the once great wild lands, some partly logged and repalmed by woodchippers, the rest in torment as they dried up and burnt in the new age, as the incinerated rainforest gave way to the future: a damp desert, moss and tundra and wet, charred gravel’.⁸³ The wrongness that Kif has come to inhabit in his first-person life – a wrongness born of desperation to be a writer, leading him from ghost-writing the autobiography of a conman to scripting reality TV – coincides grimly with this all-too-real image of paradise lost.

This second Kafka allusion, then, is an inversion of the first. Rather than the suggestion of literature as active intervention – a vision of books as instruments with powers of immediacy – language as a cage is always already behind the thing it chases. Without the things it seeks to enclose, it is empty; in containing them, it robs them of their defining features. As with the frozen sea, of course – as with the loaves and the fishes – the metaphor of cages and birds hits differently in an age of rampant biodiversity loss. It is Kif, after all, who offers this first reading of the cage as words. Reading *First Person*, we could

⁸⁰ Richard Flanagan, ‘Tapping A Cracked Kettle’, in *The Best Australian Essays 1998*, ed. Peter Craven (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1998), 69.

⁸¹ Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit. *Franz Kafka: Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992), 117. This is perhaps the most famous of the ‘Zürich’ aphorisms published by Max Brod under the grandiose title *Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg* [*Observations on Sin, Suffering, Hope and the True Path*].

⁸² Richard Flanagan, *First Person* (London: Vintage, 2018), 389.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 390.

just as easily take the bird to be the words he has devoted his life to, and the cage the dreadful reality that has come creaking shut around him.

The first interpretation – the failure of language or literary form to catch and contain reality – is the one that has occupied us thus far. For Ghosh, this failure is specifically that of the novel – of ‘serious prose fiction’ – to account for the fact of the improbable, including the new extremes of climate change.⁸⁴ ‘Fortunately’, according to *The Great Derangement*, there have also occasionally been movements ‘that celebrated the unheard-of and improbable’, foremost among them magical realism.⁸⁵ As we saw earlier, Ransmayr and Flanagan have both been linked to this mode: Salman Rushdie is among Ransmayr’s few reviewers in English, while Ben Holgate argues for a view of Flanagan’s works – including the meta elements of *Gould’s Book* – as a blend of magical realism and ecocriticism.⁸⁶ Tokarczuk’s works have also frequently been read within the framework of magical realism, in a Central European lineage extending from Kafka via Bruno Schulz.⁸⁷ The literary models of unboundedness outlined above are, on one reading, nothing more or less than magical realist renderings of a dissolving inside/outside boundary, which have generated new meanings in their intersection with contemporary climate discourse. For Ghosh, however, the name is immaterial: the problem remains that the ‘highly improbable’ weather events generated by climate change ‘are overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real’.⁸⁸ Not only are there ethical difficulties inherent in treating them as ‘magical or metaphorical or allegorical’, then; there is also, in Ghosh’s view, a profound futility, since to treat them as such ‘[is] to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling – which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time’.⁸⁹ The hope that Flanagan, in particular, places in the models presented by Kafka is that they might be able to encompass both sides of this equation.

⁸⁴ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991); Ben Holgate, ‘Greening a Narrative Mode: Antipodean Magical Realism and Ecocriticism in Richard Flanagan’s Fiction’, in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 56.

⁸⁷ Ewa V. Wampuszyc, ‘Magical Realism in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*’, *East European Politics and Societies* 28 (2014), 366. As Wampuszyc points out, Tokarczuk herself dislikes this label, on the grounds that ‘I have a problem determining what reality is, and thus I have a problem determining what realism is’ (366).

⁸⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

A feature of Kafka's work which chimes with Ghosh's insistence that 'this is actually happening', and is of obvious interest for thinking about climate change, is its dry observation of the mechanisms of denial. The opening of *Die Verwandlung* is a tour de force in this regard, and finds its way into Flanagan's 2020 novel *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*. Here, the allegory used for environmental destruction is that of body parts inexplicably vanishing. When the protagonist Anna first notices that her ring finger has disappeared, the nods to *Die Verwandlung* [*Metamorphosis*] are impossible to overlook. Anna seems to consider this bizarre disappearance above all as an inconvenience, and responds by first matter-of-factly searching around on the car floor for the missing digit. Where Kafka's text is quick to point out 'Es war kein Traum' [It was not a dream],⁹⁰ Anna acknowledges that 'it wasn't a strange illusion or delusion' – before proceeding, like Gregor, to test out the bodily features of her new physical state: 'There was – it was undeniable – no ring finger. She wiggled the thumb and her three remaining fingers. They seemed fine, doing the finger things fingers do'.⁹¹ Just in case anyone had missed the parallel, Anna next 'dropped her hand and put the odd event down to the exhaustion she was feeling', having that morning caught an early flight.⁹² Where Gregor reasons that if others aren't shocked by his appearance, he must be fine and can go to work, and if they are shocked, he must be sick and can be excused from work, Anna too bases her response to the vanishings on the reactions of those around her. In this version, however, the real horror is that nobody else seems to notice her metamorphosis, and she in turn pretends not to notice theirs. We are left with a whole world of Gregor Samsas living in collective denial of unfolding catastrophe.

For writers who openly wish for their books to bite and sting, the fascination with literary labyrinths can be read not least as a vision of endless frustration, of what *The Overstory* calls 'a horror inseparable from hope': the desperate wish that 'somewhere in all these boundless, compounding, swelling canyons of imprinted paper [...] there must be a few words of truth, a page, a paragraph that would break the spell of fulfilment and bring

⁹⁰ Franz Kafka, 'Die Verwandlung', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 88.

⁹¹ Richard Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2021), 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*

back danger, need, and death'.⁹³ If turning the book inside out does not achieve this effect, you can always try turning it outside in. Interviewed about *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Flanagan attempts to make the unfathomable destruction caused by the Death Railway manifest for readers by pointing out that it produced 'more corpses than there are words in my novel'.⁹⁴ Where Ghosh diagnoses the problem of representing climate change first and foremost as a 'crisis of the imagination' – and where the Kafka citation of *First Person* casts it as a failure of language – *Narrow Road* offers us a view of this gap as another kind of cage, one engendered by 'danger, need, and death': an imprisonment within the time of trauma. Having survived the Death Railway – which the POWs call simply 'the Line' (NR 26) – Dorrigo spends the rest of his life attempting to wake himself from a strange numbness through 'shocks and dangers [...], outbursts, and acts of pointless compassion and reckless surgery' (NR 383), all to no avail. Dorrigo's sense of his own post-war existence as 'one monumental unreality' is a response not only to the horrors of the railway, but also to their unfathomable senselessness. His years as 'part of a Pharaonic slave system that had at its apex a divine sun king' have led him, not unreasonably, 'to understand unreality as the greatest force in life' (NR 383).

Encaged in unreality, trapped in patterns of repetition that fail to wake him up, Dorrigo resembles the 'Waschbär' [raccoon] of the nocturama in the opening pages of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001). This solemn-faced animal meticulously washes the same slice of apple again and again, as though hoping '[dadurch] entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war' [(through this act) to be able to escape the unreal world in which it had ended up, so to speak, through no fault of its own].⁹⁵ One valence of this 'falsche Welt' – the one selected by Sebald's English translator – is that of a false, an 'unreal' world,⁹⁶ matching Dorrigo's 'unreality'. This is the world inhabited by the victim of trauma; in *Austerlitz*, it links the raccoon to the titular Jacques Austerlitz, displaced and dispossessed, unbeknownst to

⁹³ Powers, *The Overstory*, 380.

⁹⁴ Dwyer Murphy, 'Richard Flanagan: More Corpses than Words', *Guernica* online, Oct 2014 <<https://www.guernicamag.com/richard-flanagan-more-corpses-than-words>> [Accessed 30th October 2020].

⁹⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 11.

⁹⁶ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2002), 3.

himself, by the central trauma of the Holocaust.⁹⁷ Its second meaning, however – a meaning not carried into Bell’s translation – is that of ‘wrongness’. This sense of being trapped in the wrong timeline, enclosed in a world gone irreversibly awry, is reinforced throughout the text by characters who fear: ‘wir müssten fortan leben in einer falschen Welt’ [that from now on we would have to live in a world gone wrong; in Bell’s translation, ‘a world turned upside down’]⁹⁸ or feel that, having made a mistake at some point in the past, they are ‘jetzt in einem falschen Leben’ [now in the wrong life].⁹⁹ The echo of Adorno’s dictum ‘Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen’ [there is no right life in the wrongness; ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’]¹⁰⁰ is, as Helmut Schmitz observes, unmistakable.¹⁰¹ For Schmitz, this nod to Adorno ‘macht die falsche Welt des Nocturama zur Allegorie des Weltzustands nach dem Holocaust’ [turns the false world of the nocturama into an allegory for the condition of the world after the Holocaust].¹⁰² Within a text that repeatedly draws such Benjaminian lines of connection, however – and that frequently laments the destruction of habitats and species, even making brief forays into versions of biocentrism – the plight of the raccoon and its observer could also be seen to capture the feeling of another time out of joint: namely, that of the climate crisis itself.

Norah Campbell et al., drawing on research in organisation studies, conclude that ‘we are suffering not so much from a deficit of information as a deficiency of emotional knowledge about climate change’.¹⁰³ Accordingly, they call for ‘an intensification of the problem, an elevation of it to an existential threat or trauma’.¹⁰⁴ The sense that what is required is to be made to *feel* the knowledge of the climate crisis – the aesthetic in its most literal sense, as the opposite of the anaesthetic – is one that aligns with the images of

⁹⁷ Liliana Zavaglia offers a convincing reading of *Narrow Road* as a dialogue with texts by Holocaust survivors, particularly those of Primo Levi. Liliana Zavaglia, “‘Out of the tear-drenched land’”: Transnational sites of memory in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in Robert Dixon (ed.), *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 193-219.

⁹⁸ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 251; Sebald, *Austerlitz* (trans. Bell), 243.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Theodor Adorno: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 43. Translation by E.F.N. Jephcott: Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 39.

¹⁰¹ Helmut Schmitz, ‘Zweierlei Allegorie: W.G. Sebalds *Austerlitz* und Stephan Wackwitz’ *Ein unsichtbares Land*’, in W.G. Sebald: *Schreiben ex patria / Expatriate writing*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 260.

¹⁰² Schmitz, ‘Zweierlei Allegorie’, 260.

¹⁰³ Campbell et al., ‘Climate Change is Not a Problem’, 729.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

texts-as-bodies and bodies-as-texts discussed in this chapter so far. In Chapter 4, we will return to this idea and explore it in more detail, through Tokarczuk's guiding principle of narrative 'tenderness'. Timothy Clark, meanwhile, distinguishes usefully between two versions of the affective response to the climate crisis. In Clark's definition, 'ecological grief' describes a mourning for the loss or endangerment of 'a *specific* landscape, place or species'.¹⁰⁵ This is the desolation experienced by Kif Kehlmann of *First Person* as he surveys the ruins of the wild Tasmania he grew up in, thinking about words and birds and cages. 'Anthropocene horror', on the other hand, is the climate crisis version of 'falsches Leben' [wrong life]; it is 'lived as a pervasive affect in daily life, not as an easily compartmentalized emotion'.¹⁰⁶ While 'grief' is appropriate for the victims of a loss, Clark points out, 'horror' is the more apt designation 'when part of the sadness at issue is from living in a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs'.¹⁰⁷

This is the version of wrongness, then, that many in the West and Global North inhabit with regards to the climate crisis. It is, of course, categorically different from the central wrongness of *Austerlitz*: the traumatic knowledge (or, in Jacques Austerlitz's case, gap in knowledge) of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the connection between these two very different wrongs – between ecocide and genocide – will accompany us throughout the thesis. In Chapter 2, we will consider the types of system that reduce both humans and the biosphere to the status of 'brute' materials, exemplified in the idea of 'Menschenmaterial' [human material, *BB* 275]. Ransmayr's allusions to Bachmann in Chapter 3, in the context of his climate dystopia *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*], trace complex lines of connection between fascism, colonialism and environmental catastrophe. In Chapter 4, meanwhile, Tokarczuk's protagonist Janina Duszejko uses the charged language of the Holocaust to argue for the rights of animals.

Austerlitz, too, places the affective elements of the Holocaust and ecological decline in close proximity to one another. Animals, plants and fish abound in Sebald's work, though – in keeping with his elegiac style – they are often in the process of disappearing. An aging biologist character in *Austerlitz*, remembering the astonishing biodiversity of the British

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Clark, 'Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror', in *American Imago* 77.1 (2020), 61.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

coastline in his youth, mourns the fact ‘daß vor unseren Augen alles verblasse [...] und jetzt, kaum ein halbes Jahrhundert später, sei diese Pracht durch unsere Sammelleidenschaft und andere, gar nicht wägbare Störungen und Einflüsse nahezu völlig vernichtet’ [that before our eyes everything was fading (...) and now, barely half a century later, this splendour had been almost totally annihilated by our passion for collecting and other imponderable disturbances and influences].¹⁰⁸ Among the many difficulties inherent in comparisons between ecological destruction and the Holocaust, one problem that stands out here is the difference of time. While both the world after the Holocaust and the time of the climate crisis – of ‘Anthropocene horror’ – can appear as worlds gone awry, trapping us in ‘wrong life’, one catastrophe has already unfolded, while the other is not yet an entirely foregone conclusion.

‘I am not reconciled to this world’, proclaims Gould near the end of his testimony, ‘& so I tried to rewrite this world as a book of fish & set it to rights in the only manner I knew how’ (GB 455). Gould’s active irreconciliation to the ‘falsche Welt’ in which he finds himself springs from the same source as the melancholy wrongness of *Austerlitz* – an awareness of the destructive patterns of history – but runs in a markedly different direction. While Sebald’s characters stand with their backs to the future, gazing in horror at the growing debris of the past, Gould looks self-consciously forward towards our 21st-century present. When a wildfire ravages Sarah Island, the flakes of ash that rain down appear to Gould as ‘rejoinders from another time and place that we had wrongly understood and hence irretrievably ruptured’ (GB 413). This misapprehended time and place is, on one reading, Tasmania’s Indigenous past; on another, it is the inferno of the island’s future.

In Chapter 4, we will return to the question of affect in writing about the climate crisis, comparing the types of mourning and melancholy exemplified in Sebald’s writing to Tokarczuk’s idea of tenderness. For now, though, it is worth considering one more way in

¹⁰⁸ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 141-2. The novel also contains nods towards biocentric perspectives, as when Austerlitz points out that there is no reason to deny non-human organisms a ‘Seelenleben’ [life of the soul]: ‘Wer weiß, sagte Austerlitz, vielleicht träumen auch die Motten oder der Kopfsalat im Garten, wenn er zum Mond hinaufblickt in der Nacht’ [Who knows, said Austerlitz, maybe moths also dream, or the lettuce in the garden, when it looks up at the moon at night, 134-5].

which Tokarczuk herself draws on formal elements of Kafka's work, through her interest in the form of the parable.

Parables

The only section of 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' published in Kafka's lifetime was the story-within-a-story 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft' [An Imperial Message]. In the text, this is presented as a 'Sage' [legend or saying] used by the Chinese villagers to represent the relationship between the emperor and his subjects. Just as the intratextual parable 'Vor dem Gesetz' [Before the Law] encapsulates on a small scale the overall pattern of *Der Process* [*The Trial*], 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft' stands alone as a vivid representation of the scale derangement that characterises the text as a whole. For Tokarczuk, the success of the fragment might have a simple explanation. 'What we are missing', she claims in 'The Tender Narrator', 'is the dimension of the story that is the parable' (TN 5).

Like Flanagan, Tokarczuk is acutely aware of the climate crisis. In her Nobel lecture, she names 'the climate emergency and the political crisis in which we are now trying to find our way' as the forces her writing sets itself against (TN 25). Tokarczuk, too, nods explicitly to Kafka both in interviews and within her work: towards the end of *Flights* (*Bieguni*, 2007; trans. Jennifer Croft, 2017), for instance, a preserved spine looks to the narrator like 'a Gregor Samsa assembled out of nerves and plexuses' (F 405). Much more than her Austrian and Australian counterparts, however, Tokarczuk follows her Central European forebear in responding to this knowledge through a play with literary form, especially of the fragmentary or pithy variety.¹⁰⁹ Where Flanagan incorporates his chosen Zürau aphorism into the flow of a novel, Tokarczuk assembles many of her works from disparate episodes, narrative scraps and aphoristic observations. Her breakthrough novel *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy*, 1996; trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2010) takes a unique approach to scale effects. Where 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft' portrays mind-boggling distance in the temporal terms of transmission, and where the Anthropocene concept

¹⁰⁹ The author herself draws this connection in an interview from the time of her Nobel win: 'But I also like this kind of parabolic writing, also rooted in Central Europe, like Franz Kafka for instance'. *Transcript from an interview with Olga Tokarczuk*, NobelPrize.org, 2019.

draws our attention not least to inhuman time scales, *Primeval and Other Times* is told episodically through the 'time' of each narrative subject. These are most often human characters, but also include plants and animals ('The Time of the Lime Trees'; 'The Time of Dolly', a local dog); objects ('The Time of Misia's Grinder') and divine or seemingly eternal entities ('The Time of Misia's Angel'; 'The Time of Primeval'). It is in *Flights*, however, that she departs from the more uniform structure of her earlier fragmentary novels, offering instead a Sammelsurium of mismatched pieces. Among these, towards the very end of the book, is a one-page parable à la Kafka titled 'On the Origin of Species'.

'The planet's witnessing the appearance of new creatures now', it begins, 'ones that have already conquered all continents and almost every ecological niche' (F 403). It is another couple of paragraphs before the species in question is named:

The experts say these plastic bags open up a whole new chapter of earthly existence, breaking nature's age-old habits. They're made up of their surfaces exclusively, empty on the inside, and this historic foregoing of all contents unexpectedly affords them great evolutionary benefits. (F 403)

Immediately, there are a few elements here that warrant further attention. The first is the description of the bags as 'creatures', a borderline anthropomorphism that serves the functions both of humour and of what Tokarczuk terms narrative 'tenderness'. In her Nobel lecture, titled after this trait, she links it to a childhood memory of listening – 'with flushed cheeks and tears in my eyes' – to a Hans Christian Andersen story about a broken teapot (TN 15). Tenderness, she writes, 'personalizes everything to which it relates [...] It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk' (TN 24). The same call to 'subjectify the universe', as we have seen, can be heard throughout a whole strain of ecocritical theory, associated most strongly with Bennett and other vital materialists. For Bennett, meanwhile, Kafka's works often provide the touchstone for non-human empathy, from the captured chimpanzee Rotpeter to the 'animate wood' of the mysterious being Odradek.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 7; cf. 52-3.

It is to Odradek that Tokarczuk's plastic bags might most readily be compared. This strange animate object is described by Kafka as a 'Wesen' [being; entity] or 'Gebilde' [formation; object] – indeterminate words that are often rendered, in the English translations familiar to Bennett, as 'creature'.¹¹¹ Odradek is both an 'it' and, as the story unfolds, a 'he'.¹¹² For Bennett, who views the climate and biodiversity crises as arising from a misconception of matter as passive and inert, Odradek's key feature is that, if he or it is an artifact, 'its purpose is obscure'.¹¹³ 'On the Origin of Species', by comparison, takes an object associated almost exclusively with its use value – the poster child for single-use plastic – and divorces it completely from this human-centred function, reducing it to pure form while endowing it with a life of its own. It has become almost a commonplace that, as Robert Macfarlane puts it, 'plastic [...] the substance that has served as our most perfect container [...] now overwhelms our systems of containment'.¹¹⁴ Tokarczuk's parabolic fragment refuses even this anthropocentric view of a rebuke to human mastery. Where Kafka's story ends with a rueful nod to the longer timescale of objects – 'die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche' [the idea that he will also outlive me is one that is almost painful to me]¹¹⁵ – 'On the Origin of Species' takes a more detached view of the bags' longevity, stating matter-of-factly that 'their fleeting bodies won't decompose for some three hundred more years' (F 404).

This distance is closely related to the question of humour in ecological fiction, including in Tokarczuk's work. A growing body of criticism points to the crucial role humour can play in offsetting the potential preachiness and self-seriousness of environmentally engaged

¹¹¹ Franz Kafka, 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters', in *Franz Kafka: Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 312-13 (312); Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 12.

¹¹² See also Ian Fleishman, 'The Rustle of the Anthropocene: Kafka's Odradek as Ecocritical Icon', *The Germanic Review* 92 (2017), 40-62 (49).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland* (London: Penguin, 2020), 320.

¹¹⁵ Kafka, 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters', 312. This element of the story prompts Morton to claim that 'Odradek resembles the hyperobject', a term they have coined to name objects that are 'massively distributed in time and space in ways that baffle humans and make interacting with them fascinating, disturbing, problematic, and wondrous' (Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013], 126; 58; cf. Fleishman, 'The Rustle of the Anthropocene', 49). Other examples of hyperobjects Morton offers include black holes, the solar system, and the climate, as well as 'the very long-lasting product[s] of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags' (Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1; 85). Ian Fleishman argues persuasively that this passing reference to Odradek in *Hyperobjects* is an example of how Morton, Jane Bennett and J. Hillis Miller indulge in an unwitting and inappropriate '*instrumentalizatio[n]*' of Kafka's text as fodder for their own respective theories (Fleishman, 'The Rustle of the Anthropocene', 43; emphasis in original).

fiction. These discussions often hinge on the rhetorical and social functions of irony and self-reflexivity, as exemplified by Nicole Seymour's important (and entertaining) study *Bad Environmentalism* (2018).¹¹⁶ If irony is in essence a form of distance, however, then 'On the Origin of Species' takes this further still. It progresses past everyday irony into what Seymour has posited – with reference to Tokarczuk's work – as a kind of 'warm irony', as opposed to the 'cold irony' that can serve to mock or belittle.¹¹⁷ The joke of the text is, in part, that the trajectory of the bags mirrors our own early development so neatly: a destructive, invasive species more or less by accident, not meaning to be, just going about its business. It is for this reason that the bags are not named in the opening paragraphs, inviting – along with the Darwinian title – the initial assumption that the species in question is us. The humour of the fragment, then, lies in its polite distance from the fate of the human species as a whole. 'Kafka's humour', David Foster Wallace claimed – in remaining 'not only not neurotic but *anti*-neurotic, heroically sane – is, finally, a religious humour'.¹¹⁸ The same technique, of observing with mild interest events which are otherwise tragic, dramatic or painful, is what distinguishes this fragment – and Tokarczuk's writing more broadly – from the vast majority of climate-conscious contemporary fiction.

Indeed, the other aesthetic principle put forward in 'The Tender Narrator' is the dream of narrating from a 'fourth-person' perspective (TN 21). The closest we have come to this radically distant viewpoint, Tokarczuk suggests, is the narrator of the Book of Genesis, who 'with a steady hand set down on paper the incredible sentence: "And God saw that it was good"' (TN 21). To take once more the counter-example of *The Overstory*, this might appear at first to be the same fantasy of an all-encompassing omniscience evinced by Powers's opening line. Compared to the ex-nihilo approach of 'First there was nothing. Then there was everything', however, Tokarczuk's example couples ineffable knowledge with the earlier call for tenderness. In her model of narrative, even God cannot exist alone. Where *The Overstory* is constantly at pains to spell out that 'there are no individuals in a forest, no separable events'¹¹⁹ – and where *Gould's Book* proclaims that 'implicit in a single

¹¹⁶ Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

¹¹⁷ Nicole Seymour, 'Satire', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies*, ed. Laura Wright & Emelia Quinn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 274.

¹¹⁸ Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness', 850.

¹¹⁹ Powers, *The Overstory*, 218.

seahorse was the universe' (GB 402) – Tokarczuk's prose tends to enact this knowledge through forms that are collective or reciprocal. Her answer to Gould's sensation of being trapped in a book written by someone else, for instance, is to imagine that people are always mutually 'writ[ing] each other down' (F 409). Where Gould reads in horror about his own act of reading, the narrator of *Flights* observes a man who 'takes off his shoes, places his backpack at his feet', and begins to write in a notebook: 'So I also get out my notebook and start to write about this man writing down. Chances are he's now writing: "Woman writing something down. She's taken off her shoes and placed her backpack at her feet..."' (F 408; ellipsis in original).

In 'On the Origin of Species', this is mirrored by a final parabolic element inherited from Kafka: a tone of hearsay and almost folkish conjecture. For a critical and fictional discourse that so frequently emphasises a sense of mystical entanglement or unknowability, there is a striking amount of didacticism at play in ecological fiction. Scientist characters abound, from the plant biologist Dr. Pat Westerford in *The Overstory* to the conservationist Lisa Shahn in Flanagan's latest novel – often as a means of shoehorning relevant information into the story, and as tragic observers of denial and inaction. 'The experts' (F 403) exist in Kafka's parables and in Tokarczuk's fragment, too, but their findings are reported second-hand, with the element of perplexity and confusion already built in. 'Es gab', writes the narrator of 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' about a fictional anthropological study linking the Great Wall to the Tower of Babel, 'viel Verwirrung der Köpfe damals [...] Das menschliche Wesen, leichtfertig in seinem Grund, von der Natur des auffliegenden Staubes, verträgt keine Fesselung' [There was much confusion of the heads in those days [...] The human being, frivolous to its foundations, of the nature of swirling dust, cannot tolerate being bound, BB 267]. The same mixture of metaphysical speculation with everyday bemusement is captured in 'On the Origin of Species':

Some, in a kind of metaphysical rapture, believe [...] that [the bags] are pure form that seeks contents but immediately tires of them, throwing themselves to the wind yet again.

Others, meanwhile, with their feet more firmly on the ground, assert that [...] (F 404)

This structure of 'some say, others say' is exactly how the story of Odradek begins: 'Die einen sagen, das Wort Odradek stamme aus dem Slawischen [...] Andere wieder meinen,

es stamme aus dem Deutschen' [Some say the word Odradek originates from Slavic [...]. Others say, though, that it originates from German].¹²⁰ The uncertainty of both claims in this form, meanwhile, 'läßt wohl mit Recht darauf schließen, daß keine zutrifft' [probably leads us to conclude correctly that neither is right].¹²¹ Some, like Powers, might say that such equivocation is out of place in an era of rampant environmental destruction. Others, like Tokarczuk, hold that the constant undermining of certainty is not only the wellspring of fiction, but also the path to more self-aware and tender forms of action. 'Tenderness', after all, implies not only care towards something outside of the self, but also a willingness to be vulnerable, to be unsure. For Fleishman, too, 'the full force' of the figure of Odradek 'come[s] to light precisely in those instances, those points of tension, where [...] discrete interpretations disagree': a site of uncertainty which 'might ultimately afford us a new mode of reading more adequate to the conceptual and ethical difficulties encountered when attempting to take stock of climate change'.¹²²

Conclusion

One thing, however, is certain: Kafka's influence resounds throughout the recent fiction of Ransmayr, Flanagan and Tokarczuk, along with many of their prominent contemporaries. Those writing under the sign of the climate and biodiversity crises find in his work not only a keen understanding of the state of denial and a palpable sense of disorientation and delay, but also a play with insides and outsides, scale and narrative distance that captures the complexity of the present better than any encyclopaedic novel.

Although the reasons for this influence can be found primarily in Kafka's unique experiments with form, they also relate in part to the proximity between the version of modernity he knew and the one that shapes the works of Flanagan, Ransmayr and Tokarczuk. 'The conflagration', Gould attests, 'was first fuelled by the poesy of the very System itself' (*GB* 412) – in this case, the system of the penal colony. Like Kafka, the later

¹²⁰ Kafka, 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters', 312.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Fleishman, 'The Rustle of the Anthropocene', 44.

writers are fascinated by such systems, ruled by tyrannical organising principles: the uprooting and transport of railway irons from all over the Japanese Empire to build an impossible train line, for instance (*NR* 390), or the 'zerhämmern' [hammering down, *BB* 265] of mountains for the construction of a mind-boggling wall. It is to such systematic attempts to organise the whole of life along and into lines that we will turn our focus in Chapter 2.

2. Lines and Systems

Das menschliche Wesen, leichtfertig in seinem Grund, von der Natur des auffliegenden Staubes, verträgt keine Fesselung; fesselt es sich selbst, wird es bald wahnsinnig an den Fesseln zu rütteln anfangen und Mauer, Kette und sich selbst in alle Himmelsrichtungen zerreißen.¹

-Kafka, 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer', 267.

He was a cracked system lacking only a subject [...] He wanted to be the ichthyologist, but I would rather have been the fish. His dreams were of capture, mine of escape.

-Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*, 154.

'All organization', write Norah Campbell et al. with clinical precision, 'begins with the making of some sort of cut in the universe, to simultaneously create and order an inside from an outside'.² On one level, this is yet another iteration of the question of form – of framing or bounding, mirroring that of books and texts. However, if the question of organisation is, as Walter Benjamin asserted, the central Kafka theme,³ then it is inherited by the later writers not only in form, but also in subject matter: in the guise of empires and penal colonies; maps and archives; railways, roads and walls. These last serve as a violent concretisation of organisation's most fundamental feature: its 'drawing of "general lines" in the fabric of the whole'.⁴

¹ [The human being, frivolous to its foundation, of the nature of swirling dust, cannot tolerate being bound; if it binds itself, it will soon begin to rattle madly at its bounds, tearing wall, chain and itself asunder in all directions].

² Campbell et al., 'Climate Change Is Not A Problem', 726.

³ 'In jedem Falle handelt es sich [...] um die Frage der Organisation des Lebens und der Arbeit in der menschlichen Gemeinschaft. Diese hat Kafka umso stetiger beschäftigt, als sie ihm undurchschaubar geworden ist' [In any case, it consists in the question of the organisation of work and life in the human community. This question occupied Kafka all the more as it became inscrutable to him]. Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages', in *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 420.

⁴ Campbell et al., 'Climate Change Is Not A Problem', 726.

One way of understanding the knowledge of the climate crisis and the diagnosis of the ‘Anthropocene’, after all, is as a symptom of the various systems humans have attempted to impose on one another, and on the world around them. It is these systems, in the eyes of many writers and theorists, that are responsible for ‘reduc[ing] the world to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed’ (TN 25). One potential criticism of the Anthropocene concept is that it could be read as counter-intuitively emphasising human power and control: Morton describes the anxiety ‘that *Anthropocene* is hubristic, elevating the human species by assuming that it has godlike powers to shape the planet’.⁵ Morton dissents from this view, however, on the grounds that it suggests an understanding of the human as an individual possessing agency, rather than taking seriously the true implications of thinking on a species level. Viewed on this scale, as we saw in Chapter 1, ‘human “command and control” approaches to environmental management’ frequently end up turning back on themselves, thwarting their own intentions.⁶ For Morton, then, “*Anthropocene*” is the first fully antianthropocentric concept’.⁷

Another possible critique approaches the term ‘Anthropocene’ from a different angle, pointing out the socio- and geopolitical realities it smooths over, and advocating for alternative terms that emphasise these structural inequalities. Prominent theorists such as Donna Haraway, Andreas Malm and Jason Moore favour the term ‘Capitalocene’, which highlights the specific ideological and material system of capitalism as the true destructive element.⁸ Other voices, such as that of Amitav Ghosh, see this concept as a case of

⁵ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2016), 19. Emphasis in original.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24. Emphasis in original.

⁸ “‘The Anthropocene’ is an indefensible abstraction at the point of departure as well as the end of the line [...] a more scientifically accurate designation, then, would be “the Capitalocene”.’ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 392. See also *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), including Donna J. Haraway’s essay ‘Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene’ (34-76). In the context of a thesis on the ‘omnium gatherum’, it is worth acknowledging the connections between the idea of the ‘omnium’ and a longer tradition of theorising social and economic ‘totality’, from Marx via Fredric Jameson to Jason W. Moore. Moore’s work updates this concept for the age of ecological crisis, in the form of the ‘web of life’: ‘Capital and power (and more than this, of course) unfold within the web of life, a totality that is shaped by manifold civilisational projects [...] But it is not just the reproduction of labor-power that has become capitalized; it is also the reproduction of extra-human natures. Flows of nutrients, flows of humans, and flows of capital make a historical totality, in which each flow implies

misplaced emphasis. Although Ghosh supports Malm's argument that fossil fuels prevailed primarily because of how they supported certain 'structures of power',⁹ he also points repeatedly to the inseparability of contemporary capitalism from colonial history. 'In the final analysis', he writes,

it was the military and geopolitical dominance of the Western empires that made it possible for small minorities to exercise power over vast multitudes of people: over their bodies, their labour, their beliefs and (not least) their environments. In that sense it was capitalism that was a secondary effect of empire, as is so clearly visible in the VOC's remaking of the Banda islands.¹⁰

In his book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), Ghosh traces the many ways in which the colonising project of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the Banda islands – beginning with the pursuit of a trading monopoly on nutmeg, and culminating in a genocide against the Bandanese in April 1621 – prefigures the 'planetary crisis' we face today.¹¹ 21st-century conditions, Ghosh argues, could be regarded as 'the deepening crises of a new era, the Anthropocene. Yet, nothing about it is new except the dates'.¹² Instead, what we are witnessing is 'actually a replication of age-old patterns in [...] settler-colonial history', shrinking 'the four-hundred-year gap between 1621 and 2021 to a mere instant'.¹³

Ghosh's study, which refers frequently to its own moment of writing during the Covid-19 lockdowns, wildfires, cyclones and Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and 2021, perfectly exemplifies the idea of history as a 'constellation' proposed by Walter Benjamin. In the last manuscript he was to produce, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' [On the Concept of History], Benjamin writes that any given state of affairs becomes historical only

posthum, durch Begebenheiten, die durch Jahrtausende von ihm getrennt sein mögen.

Der Historiker, der davon ausgeht, hört auf, sich die Abfolge von Begebenheiten durch die

the other' (Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* [London: Verso, 2015] 86; 99).

⁹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 101.

¹⁰ Ibid, 119.

¹¹ Ibid, 120.

¹² Ibid, 214.

¹³ Ibid, 214; 83.

Finger laufen zu lassen wie einen Rosenkranz. Er erfaßt die Konstellation, in die seine eigene Epoche mit einer ganz bestimmten früheren getreten ist.¹⁴

[posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops running the sequence of events through his fingers like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a specific earlier one].¹⁵

This has become an important idea for writing that seeks to understand ecological violence historically, drawing out the correspondences between the destructive patterns unfolding today and those of previous eras. Ghosh's book draws attention to the time of its own writing in references to how the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests coincidentally – or 'uncannily' – intervene in and reaffirm the thinking behind his study. He notes in one place, for example, that 'I began writing this chapter in early March of 2020, at just the time when a microscopic entity, the newest coronavirus' was revealing 'an uncanny intersection between human and nonhuman forms of agency'; in another, that 'I was drafting the above paragraphs on May 25, when I took a Twitter break and came upon a video clip of a White woman [...] calling the police on a Black birdwatcher [...] Later that same day I watched a video clip of a White policeman murdering a Black man by the name of George Floyd'.¹⁶ Both contemporary events – along with Cyclone Amphan, a hurricane that hit Ghosh's erstwhile hometown of Kolkata in May of 2020, and 'unprecedented waves of wildfires' in Oregon¹⁷ – form part of the particular constellation with the Banda genocide of 1621 that the book traces. 'Suddenly', Ghosh observes, 'the connections between settler colonialism and the planetary crisis were being pointed out by protesters marching on the streets in Brooklyn', where he lives; as though 'the pandemic had intervened directly, to demonstrate that the assumptions and narratives that underlie the judgement of Western strategists are [...] products of an "imperial optic," heavily influenced by nineteenth-century ideas of civilizational dominance'.¹⁸

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Gesammelte Schriften I.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 704.

¹⁵ Benjamin, 'Illuminations', trans. Harry Zohn, 263; lightly edited.

¹⁶ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 14; 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134; 222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 139; 140.

Flanagan, too – a trained historian who began one of his first published essays with a quote from Benjamin – repeatedly combines an interest in ecological themes with a depiction of structures like prisons and railways as they appear across time, seeming to ‘metastasise’ throughout his novels.¹⁹ *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, for instance, is shaped around the Japanese imperial project of the Thai-Burma railway, or ‘Death Railway’, referred to by the prisoners of war tasked with building it simply as ‘*the Line*’ (NR 26; emphasis in original). ‘The connections apprehended by Flanagan’s characters’, Robert Dixon argues, are ‘the recurring “elements” of global modernity, linking totalitarianism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, genocide and environmental destruction’.²⁰ This reading of Flanagan’s work – which could equally be applied to that of Tokarczuk and Ransmayr – sounds grandiose, too big and vague to be of much analytical value. The vision of repeated systemic patterns is another version of the omni-level, which can only be apprehended through specific structures and contexts. ‘If historicity since Walter Benjamin has moved into the domain of correspondences’, as Leahy points out, ‘[...] let us not forget that it resides also in difference, in the stubbornness of the particular’.²¹ Ghosh’s book offers one model for how to navigate these two elements of historicity. The literary works to be considered in this chapter, through close attention to given historical moments, often manage the same difficult balancing act. Nonetheless, across the unique historical moments they attend to, the works of all three authors are certainly interested in the structural level: in ‘raising’, as Tokarczuk might put it, ‘the great, constellation form’ of history (TN 17).

Because of his recurring interest in lines and systems like the prison and the railway, across contexts ranging from Tasmanian colonial history, via the 20th century in Europe, Asia and Australia, to the present day, Flanagan’s work is read by Robert Dixon as an instance of ‘multidirectional memory’, an idea that will crop up repeatedly both in this chapter and in those to follow. The term was coined by Michael Rothberg to describe texts that ‘connect instances of institutional violence and social injustice that are apparently

¹⁹ Robert Dixon, ‘Circles of Violence: Historical Constellations in *Death of a River Guide* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*’, in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹ Caitríona Leahy, ‘Disturbing Anselm Kiefer’, in *Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond: Disturbing Pasts*, ed. Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Julia Wagner and Christiane Wienand (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 181.

separate in place and time’, and is offered as a counter-model to ‘competitive memory’, which creates a priority-queue understanding of history in which vaster injustices like the Holocaust leave no space for the commemoration of other atrocities.²² The echoes of Benjamin are unmistakable: Rothberg’s study is informed by Hannah Arendt’s elaborations on the Benjaminian ‘constellation’ in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.²³ Among the examples Rothberg offers for his argument is *Austerlitz*, with its method of connecting the Holocaust to Belgian colonialism.²⁴ Flanagan’s fiction, meanwhile, often accords with his admiration for how the 20th-century Russian novelist Vassily Grossman ‘didn’t compare or rank the horrors of the Gulag and collectivisation or the Holocaust. Rather, and most chillingly, he connected them’.²⁵ Flanagan’s novels expand this constellation to include the biosphere, ‘combin[ing] the themes of the camp [...] and “non-freedom” with environmental destruction’²⁶ – a connection which, as we saw in Chapter 1, is also present in *Austerlitz*.

The model of ‘multidirectional memory’ is not without its detractors. When Rothberg’s book was translated into German in 2021, it sparked a heated public debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its place in German collective memory known as ‘Historikerstreit 2.0’ [historians’ spat 2.0], in reference to a similar disagreement between prominent historians in the 1980s. This serves to highlight just how charged any comparison between the Holocaust and other forms of experience remains. We will continue to encounter such comparisons throughout the chapters to follow. Bachmann’s *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*], as we will see in Chapter 3, has also been re-evaluated as an instance of ‘multidirectional memory’, in order to account for the sometimes uncomfortable links it draws between patriarchy, colonialism and the Holocaust. The case of Bachmann helps to draw out why the idea of ‘multidirectional memory’ is not, in my view, the most appropriate lens through which to read these texts.

²² Dixon, ‘Circles of Violence’, 33; 32.

²³ Ibid, 21; cf. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 42.

²⁴ Ibid; cf. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 27-8. See also Michael Rothberg, ‘Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge’, in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁵ Richard Flanagan, ‘Soviet Man’, in *And What Do You Do, Mr Gable? Short pieces by Richard Flanagan* (Sydney: Random House, 2011), 92; cf. Dixon, ‘Circles of Violence: Historical Constellations in *Death of a River Guide* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*’, 32.

²⁶ Dixon, ‘Circles of Violence’, 39.

Rothberg's analysis arguably remains caught on a level in between the abstract and the specific: it hinges on the question of whether commemoration of one given atrocity can help to draw attention to another, a hypothesis that has been challenged on practical as well as ethical grounds. What his reading does not aim at is the level of symbolic abstraction, the underlying level of archetypes that fascinates both Tokarczuk and, less explicitly, Bachmann. What interests these writers is not only the correspondence between one or more specific contexts, but also the ways in which patterns that run deeper still – the patterns of dreams and myths – can be used to connect different manifestations of violence, and plant these connections deep within the mind of the reader. (Not for nothing did Flanagan make the move from history to fiction). The sense of these patterns and structures as underlying and pre-existing the context in which they manifest themselves is captured in Bachmann's idea of 'das Virus Verbrechen' [the virus of crime] – an image that, as Ghosh would point out, itself stands in a new correspondence to the time of writing.²⁷ The image of 'das Virus Verbrechen', along with related images, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

An understanding of 'our present predicament' as the continuation and culmination of previous forms of modernity – as opposed to the rupture suggested, at least on the surface, by the radical 'newness' of the Anthropocene concept – is part of what leads Tokarczuk, Ransmayr and Flanagan back to the literary models presented by Kafka. What the arguments presented by Morton, Malm and Ghosh have in common, meanwhile, is their suggestion of resistance. The systems at issue here are violent and unjust, wreaking irreversible destruction; yet they do not go unopposed, and in the long run, they do not get their own way. Instead, they are resisted both by the physical world and biosphere, and by the humans they seek to subjugate. In this regard, they echo a central theme of Kafka's story 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' [The Great Wall of China; literally 'While Building of the Great Wall of China'], which appears in many ways as a study of the forces that thwart human purposes, not least humans themselves. By tracing the ways in which

²⁷ Tracing the many parallels between the pandemic response in the US and the colonisation of the Americas using what he calls 'omnicidal warfare' – the kind that attacks all elements of the web of life populations depend on, including through the spread of disease – Ghosh writes: 'Signs like "Blame racism not race" and "Racism is a Pandemic" made perfectly clear that the protesters perceived the disproportionate tolls of the pandemic as being caused by centuries-old patterns of historical and environmental injustice'. Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 170; 68).

texts by Flanagan, Tokarczuk and Ransmayr build on this story – and another written by Kafka in the same year, ‘Ein Bericht für eine Akademie’ [A Report for an Academy] – I will attempt to clarify the authors’ view both of the lines and systems fragmenting the world, and of the specific forces that resist them.

Parts and Unity

‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’ begins by outlining a system: the ‘System des Teilbaues’ [system of piecemeal construction, *BB* 263] that represents, according to the narrator, ‘die Kernfrage des ganzen Mauerbaues’ [the core question of the whole construction of the wall, *BB* 266]. This system of piecemeal construction, which involves transporting workers around far-flung reaches of the empire to complete long, standalone stretches of wall, serves as a point of departure for the narrator’s ‘Bericht’ [report], presented to the reader as a historical analysis: an act of ‘vergleichend[e] Völkergeschichte’ [comparative history of peoples, *BB* 267; 270]. The ensuing reflection gestures simultaneously in two apparently opposite directions that also shape the works of Ransmayr, Tokarczuk and Flanagan: into the mists of the metaphysical and speculative on one side, and towards the material basis of empire on the other. The narrator – himself one of the former builders of the wall – ponders at length *why* it was constructed in this way. The purpose of the wall, after all, was protection against Northern nomads, the ‘Nordvölker’ [Northerners]: ‘Wie kann aber eine Mauer schützen, die nicht zusammenhängend ist. Ja eine solche Mauer kann nicht nur nicht schützen, der Bau selbst ist in fortwährender Gefahr’ [But how can a wall that does not cohere offer protection. Not only can such a wall offer no protection, the construction itself is in constant danger, *BB* 263]. This becomes a question of the authority of the ‘Führerschaft’ [leadership] and its relationship to the lives and perceptions of the ordinary people of China. The narrator comes from the southeast of China, where the Northerners exist only as characters in stories used to scare children. ‘Warum also’, he ponders, ‘da es sich so verhält, verlassen wir die Heimat, den Fluß und die Brücken, die Mutter und den Vater, das weinende Weib, die lehrbedürftigen Kinder und ziehen weg [...] Warum? Frage die Führerschaft’ [Why then, since this is the case, do we leave our homes, the river and the bridges, our mothers and fathers, the crying wife, the children in need of teaching, and move away (...) Why? Ask the command, *BB* 270].

This 'Führerschaft', as is so often the case in Kafka's work, takes on an element of quasi-religious authority. As opposed to the father figures whom early Kafka criticism was quick to identify as images of God, however, the 'Führerschaft' occupies a markedly in-between position: they are not the 'Kaiser' discussed in Chapter 1, to whom the villagers owe their ultimate loyalty, nor are they the arbitrary 'Mandarinen' [mandarins], officials who make and break the rules as they see fit (*BB* 270). The decisions of the 'Führerschaft' are not to be questioned past a certain point; they are not God, but the 'Abglanz der göttlichen Welten' [reflection of divine worlds] falls on their 'Pläne zeichnenden Hände' [plan-drawing hands, *BB* 268]. The narrator is clearly at pains to suppress his doubts about the system of piecemeal construction, noting that

es dem unbestechlichen Betrachter nicht eingehn [will], daß die Führerschaft, wenn sie ernstlich gewollt hätte, nicht auch jene Schwierigkeiten hätte überwinden können, die einen zusammenhängenden Mauerbau entgegenstanden. Bleibt also nur die Folgerung, daß die Führerschaft den Teilbau beabsichtigte. Aber der Teilbau war nur ein Notbehelf und unzweckmäßig. Bleibt die Folgerung, daß die Führerschaft etwas Unzweckmäßiges wollte. Sonderbare Folgerung, gewiß.

[it is difficult for an incorruptible observer to believe that the command, had they seriously wanted to, could not have overcome even those difficulties that stood in the way of a unified construction of the wall. That leaves only the conclusion that the command intended the piecemeal construction. But the piecemeal construction was only a makeshift measure, not fit for purpose. Leaving the conclusion that the command wanted something not fit for purpose. Strange conclusion, to be sure, *BB* 268].

This note of doubt is accompanied by a voice not very common in Kafka's work: one speaking on behalf of a collective, of 'the people'. 'Wir', the narrator writes, '– ich rede hier wohl im Namen vieler – haben eigentlich erst im Ausbuchstabieren der Anordnungen der obersten Führerschaft uns selbst kennengelernt' [We – I think I speak here on behalf of many – really only came to know ourselves by spelling out the orders of the highest command, *BB* 267-8].

What all of this amounts to is an impression less of theology, and more of ideology. The protagonists of Kafka's more famous works are, as has often been noted, usually kept busy trying to make sense of the inexplicable situations that have been imposed on them.²⁸ *Die Verwandlung* [*The Metamorphosis*], for instance, is characterised not only by the improbable event with which it opens, but also by Gregor Samsa's failed attempts to think things through, as though the very basis of his reasoning had not just been pulled out from under him. 'What goes on in the story', as Leahy puts it, 'is more a self-exposure on the part of reason than any imposition from outside'.²⁹ In contrast to the indignant responses of K. and Josef K. to the seemingly arbitrary authorities they are confronted with in *Das Schloss* [*The Castle*] and *Der Process* [*The Trial*], Gregor's response to his situation entails an ability to explain away conditions unfairly imposed on him as ultimately wise and just. When he discovers that his father has been saving some of the money Gregor was earning to pay his parents' debts, for example, Gregor is 'erfreut über diese unerwartete Vorsicht' [glad about this unexpected prudence]. 'Eigentlich hätte er ja mit diesen überschüssigen Geldern die Schuld des Vaters gegenüber dem Chef weiter abgetragen haben können', the reader learns [He could actually have used this surplus money to pay off more of his father's debt to the boss], shortening his years of service in a job he hates, 'aber jetzt war es zweifellos besser so, wie es der Vater eingerichtet hatte' [but now it was undoubtedly better the way his father had arranged it].³⁰ The same attempt to internalise the imperatives of the system while suppressing the quiet inner voice of protest is at work on a more collective scale in 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer'. The narrator recognises, for example, that an important motivation for the 'System des Teilbaues' [system of piecemeal construction] lies in maximising worker productivity, extracting as much labour as possible from the 'Menschenmaterial' [human material] that has become just another resource utilised in the construction of the wall. This includes the lower officials tasked with overseeing workers, whom a system of building more continuously would have

²⁸ Anthony Phelan remarks that 'Kafka's fictions stage the defeat of reasoned and realistic insights and intentions' (Anthony Phelan, 'Critical Theory', in *Franz Kafka in Context*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 267-74 [272]), while Joyce Crick describes Kafka's sentences as 'a vehicle for the way his figures think, as these conduct their seeming-rational arguments with themselves, which so often, after great expenditure of energy, conclude a paragraph or even a page later' (Joyce Crick, 'Note on the Translation', in *Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Joyce Crick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], xxxv-xl [xxv]; cf. Mark Harman, 'Translation', in *Franz Kafka in Context*, 302-9 [308]).

²⁹ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 114-15.

³⁰ Kafka, 'Die Verwandlung', 114.

rendered 'verzweifelt und vor allem wertloser für die Arbeit' [despairing and above all more worthless for the work, *BB* 265]. Instead, under the system of piecemeal construction '[konnten] etwa fünfhundert Meter Mauer in fünf Jahren fertiggestellt werden' [five hundred metres of wall could be finished in around five years, *BB* 265]. By this time, the officials are 'in der Regel zu Tode erschöpft, hatten alles Zutrauen zu sich, zum Bau, zur Welt verloren' [usually tired to death, had lost all faith in themselves, in the construction, in the world], but they can be revived by being sent far across the country, hearing on the way 'den Jubel neuer Arbeitsheere' [the cheers of new armies of workers] and seeing 'Wälder niederlegen, die zum Mauergerüst bestimmt waren' [forests being cut down that were intended for the scaffolding of the wall] and 'Berge in Mauersteine zerhämmern' [mountains being hammered into bricks for the wall, *BB* 265]. A primary function of the 'System des Teilbaues', then, is – somewhat paradoxically – to construct an artificial unity across the vast territory of China:

Einheit! Einheit! Brust an Brust, ein Reigen des Volkes, Blut, nicht mehr eingesperrt im kärglichen Kreislauf des Körpers, sondern süß rollend und doch wiederkehrend durch das unendliche China.

[Unity! Unity! Chest to chest, a co-ordinated movement of the people, blood no longer confined to the meagre circulation of the body, but rolling sweetly and yet still returning through the endlessness of China, *BB* 266].

On one level, this is another instance of Kafka's work pre-figuring the 20th-century horrors that haunt the texts of the later writers, often in equally displaced forms. The fantasy of the Reich as a single body and consciousness, here only latently sinister, becomes in retrospect a salient image of totalitarianism. The chorus of 'Einheit! Einheit!' [Unity! Unity!] here arises from the 'Hochgefühl des Vereinigungsfestes der tausend Meter Mauer' [elation of the unification ceremony of a thousand metres of wall, *BB* 265], a celebration of the point at which two segments of five hundred metres, having been built from opposite directions, are united. In *Austerlitz*, by comparison, Maximilian Austerlitz identifies 'das magische Wort tausend' [the magic word thousand], repeated ad infinitum in Hitler's speeches, as a dark spell designed to unite 'ins Unabsehbare sich vermehrenden Körperschaften und Menschenscharen' [bodies and masses of people immeasurably

multiplying] into a single entity, marked by ‘eine blinde Eroberungs- und Zerstörungssucht’ [a blind obsession with conquest and destruction].³¹ After Maximilian, who is Jewish, attends a Nazi rally out of horrified curiosity, he reports ‘daß er sich in dieser zu einem einzigen Lebewesen zusammengewachsenen [...] Menge tatsächlich als Fremdkörper empfunden habe, der nun gleich zermahlen und ausgeschieden werden würde’ [that in this crowd, which had grown together into one single organism, he did in fact feel himself to be a foreign entity that would now be ground up and expelled]: an experience ‘am eigenen Leib’ [on one’s own body] of the rhetoric of the Third Reich.³²

As we have already seen, the literary writers under discussion – along with a great number of contemporary theorists – are interested in the links between the type of system evoked here and both earlier and more recent forms of extractivist violence. The tyranny of emperor figures is a recurring theme in Ransmayr’s work, for instance, in ways that often chime with the passages above. For Ransmayr, the ambition of totalitarian rule is the unequal opposite of the true omni-principles of flux and metamorphosis. His breakthrough novel *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*]³³ conjures a vision of Augustan Rome as a 20th-century-style totalitarian state, collapsing the temporal gap between the Third Reich and the Roman Empire it sought to emulate, just as the fixation on the number ‘thousand’ in Kafka’s story seems to hark forwards to the new dream of a ‘tausendjähriges Reich’ [thousand-year empire]. On its publication, *Die letzte Welt* was the subject of a characteristically heated debate on the literary panel show *Das literarische Quartett* [*The Literary Quartet*], but won praise from venerated critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki for what he saw as its precise portrayal of a totalitarian ‘Staatsapparat’ [state apparatus, *LW* 61]. Reich-Ranicki, a Polish Holocaust survivor, declared to his fellow panellists: ‘Wissen Sie, ich habe einen Teil meines Lebens in totalitären Ländern verbracht – im dritten Reich und in einem östlichen totalitären Land. Wie der Ransmayr [das] zeigt [...] Manch einer von uns hat auch unsere Welt wiedererkannt’ [You know, I have spent part of my life in totalitarian countries – in the Third Reich and in an Eastern totalitarian country. The way Ransmayr shows it – some of us recognised our own world].³³ The portrayal of totalitarian Rome in the novel is part of its temporal ‘Unzeit’ [un-time], a common Ransmayr technique that overlays

³¹ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 244.

³² *Ibid*, 246.

³³ *Das Literarische Quartett* 03, 30.09.1988. <<https://youtu.be/bm4RRodIBbQ>> [Accessed 9th April 2023].

features of different eras. The Roman world of *Die letzte Welt* appears pre-industrial, but nonetheless features microphones, telegraph poles and projectors, and includes the knowledge of a defamiliarised Holocaust.

This setting is in service of a clash between totalitarian apparatuses and various kinds of resistance, foremost among them the physical facts of time and metamorphosis, and the related capacity of art to speak such unwelcome truths to power. The novel is a re-imagining of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which includes Ovid himself as a character (known in the novel by his middle name, Naso), and depicts the circumstances of his banishment in terms strikingly reminiscent of Kafka's China. Invited by the emperor to speak at the opening ceremony of a new imperial stadium built on a drained swamp, Naso neglects to begin with the 'um alles in der Welt befohlene Litanei der Anreden' [the litany of titles and addresses, demanded at all costs, *LW* 53] starting his story instead with the words: 'Bürger von Rom' [Citizens of Rome, *LW* 54]. Worse still, he proceeds to tell a story – the Ovidian story of Aegina – that is interpreted as a veiled criticism of the state, since it narrates the emergence of a race of ant people from the death of humankind. Each humanoid individual of this 'neuen Geschlecht' [new race] is comprised of thousands of ants, and these composite bodies in turn move only en masse [*LW* 56]. Naso compares the people of Rome to just such a race, which in his story is 'willig und ohne Fragen und [...] beherrschbar wie kein anderes Geschlecht' [willing and without question and controllable like no other race]; the stadium, he proclaims, is a 'steinerner Kessel, in dem aus Hunderttausenden Ausgelieferten, Untertanen und Hilflosen ein Volk gekocht werde' [stone cauldron, in which out of hundreds of thousands of helpless and defenceless subjects a people is being cooked up, *LW* 56-7].

'The reference to fascist mass gatherings and their adoration of one rather unimpressive looking figure', as Leahy notes, is evident here.³⁴ The occasion is intended to celebrate the completion of the process in which the swamp was 'drained, conquered and civilised', identifiable as 'an expression of man's desire to impose his will on the natural world'.³⁵ Naso's story, addressed as it is to the citizens of Rome, defies this imposed

³⁴ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

stasis both through its reminder of the physical laws of metamorphosis and through its suggestion that human subjects have a choice as to whether or not they are massed into a 'Volk'. *Die letzte Welt*, then, raises the prospect of a dual resistance to imposed systems through both the physical world and art – the ecological and the aesthetic. As Salman Rushdie notes in his review of the novel, its primary subject is 'the eternally-warring myths of stasis and of metamorphosis'.³⁶ 'Stasis', Rushdie writes, 'the dream of eternity, of a fixed order in human affairs, is the favoured myth of tyrants; metamorphosis, the knowledge that *nothing holds its form*, is the driving force of art.'³⁷

In all of the texts at hand, it is difficult to separate human resistance from the resistance of the physical world. For the writers discussed here – including Kafka – the point is that both forms of resistance are intertwined. For the sake of clarity, however, I will first focus on the ways in which the biosphere and planet resist the lines and systems imposed on them, before turning my attention to the resistance of humans themselves. Both of these versions are linked, in different ways, to the Babel motif in Kafka's story.

Resistance I: Ecology

'Zunächst muß man sich doch wohl sagen', the narrator of 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' muses in reasoning with himself about the 'System des Teilbaues', 'daß damals Leistungen vollbracht worden sind, die wenig hinter dem Turmbau von Babel zurückstehn' (sic) [To begin with, one would have to say that things were accomplished at that time which were not far off the building of the Tower of Babel, *BB* 266-7]. This becomes an important motif in the story, which again circles around the contrast between the semi-divine authority of the 'Führerschaft' – as well as the metaphysical conjecture analysed in the 'Parables' section of Chapter 1 – and the material realities of constructing the wall. The narrator describes a treatise, for example, that was 'damals in aller Hände' [in everyone's hands at the time, *BB* 267], and which claimed that the real reason for the biblical Tower of Babel's failure was the weakness of its foundations. In this regard 'war unsere Zeit jener längst vergangenen weit überlegen' [our time was far superior to that one long since

³⁶ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 291.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

passed, *BB* 267]. Since the problem with the tower was not the anthropocentric hubris of its conception, but the technicalities of its construction, a new and successful Tower of Babel should now be possible. This is not quite what the treatise's author had in mind, however; instead, he suggested that the wall itself would become the foundation of the tower, a proposal that makes little recognisable sense. 'Das konnte', the narrator decides, 'nur in geistiger Hinsicht gemeint sein. Aber wozu dann die Mauer, die doch etwas Tatsächliches war, Ergebnis der Mühe und des Lebens von Hunderttausenden?' [That could only be meant in a spiritual sense. But then what was the wall for, which was after all something real, the result of the effort and lives of hundreds of thousands?, *BB* 267].

This first appearance of the Babel motif in Kafka's text highlights two related valences of the biblical story: as blasphemy, and as engineering project. One way of responding to the story is, as the narrator might put it, as a 'Weisung und Warnung [...], die aus alten Zeiten zu uns herüberreicht' [guidance and warning that reaches us from ancient times, *BB* 274] regarding the proper place of the human in the world. This is a religious rebuke to anthropocentrism, a warning that humanity should not seek to rise above its station and become master of the world. The other reading is the techno-scientific reading: we got it wrong the first time around because our technology wasn't developed enough. Just because we could not build our way up to heaven before, doesn't mean we won't be able to in the future. One of the ways in which the literary texts at hand seek to put this latter view in its place is by representing failed attempts at grand techno-scientific projects, which are thwarted not least by ecological factors. Where the Anthropocene concept is concerned with emphasising both the hubristic power of humans and the comparative fragility of the biosphere, these texts emphasise the resilience of other life forms and their power to have the last laugh.

Ransmayr, for example, has set multiple literary texts in China, two of them directly at the Great Wall. The first is a short text from the 2012 book *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* [*Atlas of an Anxious Man*], a collection of 70 vignettes from Ransmayr's extensive travels.³⁸

³⁸ Ransmayr, who began his publishing career as a travelling journalist, shares Tokarczuk's preoccupation with travel, describing himself as leading a 'halbnomadische Existenz' [semi-nomadic existence] (quoted in Dora Osborne, 'Black Flakes: Archival Remains in the Work of Christoph Ransmayr and Anselm Kiefer', in *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, [2011], 221). A feature of his writing is that images and sentences are often transposed from the recognisable contexts and settings of his non-fiction and 'autofiction' into the more

In the text, titled 'Reviergesang' [Territorial Song], the narrator meets a Welsh birdwatcher who is recording the birdsong of all the species that live in the shadow of the Great Wall (A 23). This is not purely a 'grass-whisperer' undertaking: the idea for the recording project arises partly from the recognition that this birdsong 'doch auch nicht bloß der Liebe und der Erhaltung der Art [diente], sondern weit mehr noch *Reviergesang* [war]' [not only served the purposes of love and the continuation of the species, but was rather above all *territorial song*, A 24; emphasis in original], creating the birds' own '*Reichsgrenzen*' [imperial boundaries, A 25; emphasis in original]. Nonetheless, the notion of 'Reviergesang statt zinnenbewehrter Mauern!' [territorial song instead of battlements and walls!, A 25] is presented as ultimately superior not only because of its outward appearance of peacefulness, but also because of its ability to outlast totalitarian attempts at imposing stasis. Mao Zedong, as the text records, ordered that birds be killed in their millions 'als Getreidefresser und Ernteschädlinge' [as crop guzzlers and harvest destroyers, A 26] in 'sämtlichen Provinzen dieser sogenannten Volksrepublik' [all provinces of this so-called People's Republic, A 26]. While this serves as a dark reminder of the possibilities of systematic ecocide, the text nonetheless affirms a vision of 'Vogellieder, die weiter und weiter und immer noch gesungen wurden, wenn selbst die stärksten Mauern [...] bereits zu Schutt zerfallen waren' [birdsongs that were sung on and on and would go on being sung when even the strongest walls had crumbled to rubble, A 26].

'Reviergesang' thus challenges anthropocentrism both by invoking the resilience and long timescales of the biosphere, and by drawing out the absurdities of supposedly 'rational' undertakings like the eradication of pests.³⁹ This, too, is a feature of Kafka's story, in which the narrator does his level best to rationalise an incomplete defensive wall. These two affronts to anthropocentrism – one arising from long timescales, the other from the limits of reason – are also at play in the first meeting between Sebald's narrator and

defamiliarised worlds of his novels, as happens with the short *Atlas* text set at the Great Wall and the later novel *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* [*Cox or The Course of Time*, 2016].

³⁹ This type of definition and eradication is an important part of the grand system Timothy Morton dubs 'agrilogistics', which Morton sees as the root of the trouble. The first axiom of this system – '(1) The Law of noncontradiction is inviolable', which is revealed really to mean '*Thou shalt not violate the Law of Noncontradiction*' – works partly by 'excluding (undomesticated) lifeforms that aren't part of your agrilogistic project. These lifeforms are now defined as pests if they scuttle about or weeds if they appear to the human eye to be inanimate and static. Such categories are highly unstable and extremely difficult to manage'. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 47.

Jacques Austerlitz, in which Austerlitz outlines ‘der ganze Wahnsinn [...] des Befestigungs- und Belagerungswesens’ [the whole madness of systems of fortification and siege].⁴⁰ Just as the ‘in öder Gegend verlassen stehend[e] Mauerteile’ [sections of wall standing abandoned in deserted regions, *BB* 263] of Kafka’s text are in constant danger from the more mobile nomads, Austerlitz points to the attachment of military architecture to the ‘von Grund auf verkehrte[r] Gedank[e]’ [fundamentally wrong idea] that cities can be permanently secured ‘durch die Ausarbeitung eines idealen Tracé mit stumpfen Bollwerken’ [by building up an ideal tracé with bulwarks].⁴¹ This insistence on ‘ein sozusagen aus dem Goldenen Schnitt abgeleitetes idealtypisches Muster’ [an ideal pattern derived, so to speak, from the Golden Ratio] – legible even to lay onlookers as ‘ein Emblem der absoluten Gewalt sowohl als des Ingeniums der in ihrem Dienst stehenden Ingenieure’ [an emblem of absolute violence as well as the ingenuity of the engineers working in its service]⁴² – leads to the absurd situation of defensive forts that are bound to be outdated before they are completed; that attract enemies rather than repelling them; and which, when shown to be categorically deficient, are doubled down on. The unwavering commitment to plans and models that do not survive first contact with reality is evidence, as Austerlitz sees it, of how ‘wir, im Gegensatz etwa zu den Vögeln, die Jahrtausende hindurch immer dasselbe Nest bauten, dazu neigten, unsere Unternehmungen voranzutreiben weit über jede Vernunftsgrenze hinaus’ [we, unlike birds, for instance, who build the same nest for thousands of years, tend to drive our projects on, far past any reasonable boundary].⁴³

It is in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, however, that these ideas are most clearly crystallised. As mentioned above, much of the text details the building of the Siam-Burma railway line by prisoners of war. The author’s father, Art Flanagan, was among the survivors of what has come to be known as the ‘Death Railway’. Where Kafka’s story refers to the ‘Pläne zeichnend[e] Hände der Führerschaft’ [plan-drawing hands of the leadership] – and Ransmayr’s two texts set at the Great Wall both mention how, after changing course to avoid natural obstacles, it ‘[schwenkt] wieder auf die Ideallinie verschollener

⁴⁰ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 25.

⁴² *Ibid*, 26.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 31.

Baumeister und Generäle [ein]' [pivots back to the ideal line of vanished construction masters and generals, *A* 20; *C* 132] – we encounter the Death Railway first through a Japanese officer pointing the protagonist Dorrigo Evans to 'the line of surveyor's pegs that marked the course the railway was to take. The pegs quickly vanished in jungle' (*NR* 41). The novel does not shrink from portraying the merciless treatment of 'Menschenmaterial' [human material] in this system, which the Japanese Empire views as one of its most expendable resources. The extreme material difficulties of constructing the railway are shown both through the eyes of the suffering POWs and those of the put-upon Japanese officers tasked with meeting impossible quotas, who match the despairing 'Bauführer [...] untersten Ranges' [construction leaders of the lowest rank, *BB* 265] of Kafka's story; the officers, too, frequently struggle to explain to themselves and the prisoners the necessity of the railway and the empire.

It is 'for good reason', then, that the POWs begin to 'refer to the slow descent into madness that followed simply with two words: *the Line*' (*NR* 26; emphasis in original). Where linearity might commonly be associated with reason, and madness with disorder or circularity, here the reasonable course is to identify the line itself as the origin and manifestation of the 'unreality' Dorrigo later finds himself trapped in (*NR* 383). The terms used to represent this idea are an intensification of those used to describe Kafka's China. In Kafka's text-within-a-text 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft' [An Imperial Message], the indeterminate metaphysical status of the emperor is illustrated by his sending of a message 'Dir, dem Einzelnen, dem jämmerlichen Untertanen, dem winzig vor der kaiserlichen Sonne in die fernste Ferne geflüchteten Schatten' [to you, the individual, the wretched subject, the tiny shadow who has fled before the imperial sun into the remotest distance, *BB* 272]. This message, carried by a courier with the 'Zeichen der Sonne' [sign of the sun, *BB* 272] emblazoned on his chest, cannot possibly ever reach 'you' due to the metaphysical endlessness of the distances involved, but 'you' nonetheless feel the need to dream it up (*BB* 273). Dorrigo's experiences within the similarly quasi-religious system of the Japanese Empire, by comparison, lead him to recognise not only the irrational impulses driving straight lines, but also their material power. 'To have been part of a Pharaonic slave system that had at its apex a divine sun king', as we saw in Chapter 1, has taught him 'to understand unreality as the greatest force in life' (*NR* 383).

On the level of form, as we have already seen, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* counteracts the line by adopting a circular narrative structure, a recurring pattern in Flanagan's work. This opposition is signalled within the novel itself in references to 'the great wheel, eternal return: the circle – antithesis of the line' (NR 28). For Robert Dixon, the distinction is between 'the circle as a figure for oral histories embedded in the local experience of community and place', and 'the line as a symbol of historicist narratives of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism'.⁴⁴ In keeping with Dorrigo's sensation of 'unreality' above, however – and with the 'unending book' structure described in the previous chapter – the circular narrative in this case does not appear primarily to constitute a defeat of 'the Line', but rather an entrapment in traumatic repetition, making Dorrigo's 'life [...] now, he felt, one monumental unreality' (NR 383). Instead, the true overthrowing of the Line is achieved in the novel, after the defeat of the Japanese Empire, by ecological forces. The 'Line was broken, as all lines finally are', by 'seeds germinating in mass graves', by 'tendrils [rising] up [...] around teak sleepers and tibias', and by

the heat and the clouds of rain, and insects and birds and animals and vegetation that neither knew nor cared. Humans are only one of many things, and all these things long to live, and the highest form of living is freedom: a man to be a man, a cloud to be a cloud, bamboo to be bamboo (NR 302-3).

This passage displays some of the tendency to explain all-encompassing principles that was identified in the introduction. In its nod to how 'abandonment ceded to metamorphosis' (NR 302), it resembles a less streamlined version of Ransmayr's 'keinem bleibt seine Gestalt' [nothing retains its form]. But it is also representative of a renewed interest in images of human hubris as constructions overrun by vegetation rather than, say, as a ruin or a statue half buried in the sand. Instead of the 'lone and level sands' of Shelley's 'Ozymandias', here it is 'the lone and level jungle' that stretches far away (NR 303).⁴⁵ Ghosh, by comparison, traces the decline and fall of the VOC's rule in the Banda

⁴⁴ Dixon, 'Circles of Violence', 21.

⁴⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 588. Shelley's vision of Ozymandias as 'that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare' around which 'the lone and level sands stretch far away' is lightly revamped by Flanagan as 'that colossal ruin, boundless and buried' around which 'the lone and level jungle stretched far away' (NR 303). This is one of many intertexts in the novel to

islands partly to their failure to master the nutmeg and clove trees that had brought them there. After murdering the Bandanese and gaining complete control over the market for nutmeg and mace – extraordinarily valuable at the time, and found only on these few tiny islands – the VOC officials found themselves faced with a ‘resource curse’, with value dropping partly through increased supply.⁴⁶ In response, they attempted to eradicate the trees that produced both spices on all islands bar one. The Company, as Ghosh puts it, ‘was up against a formidable opponent— trees, which measure time on a scale completely different from humans’.⁴⁷ Faced with ‘the scythes and axes of the VOC’s minions, the trees deployed a far more powerful weapon: their ability to propagate’.⁴⁸ Their seeds, smuggled out in small numbers, began to flourish in many other locations, while beleaguered employees reported back to their bosses in Europe that ‘the uprooting [of spice trees] appears to be nearly an impossible task’.⁴⁹ ‘If trees could savor *schadenfreude*’, Ghosh writes, ‘then the nutmegs of Maluku wouldn’t have had very long to wait; at the end of the eighteenth century, hollowed out by decades of corruption, and weakened by a changing geopolitical order, the VOC collapsed’.⁵⁰

The images of ‘seeds germinat[ing] in mass graves’, and of the power contained in trees’ ‘ability to propagate’, are echoed in a final story of this kind from Ransmayr’s *Atlas*. This short text, ‘Herzfeld’, is named after a Jewish acquaintance of the narrator’s, who escaped Nazi Germany and spent the rest of his life in Brazil. The story of Herzfeld’s life, told to the narrator in the few days before his death, is framed by the story of his funeral, which takes place at an ‘offenes Grab im Schatten eines turmhohen Araukarie’ [open grave in the shade

19th-century poetry, largely explained intradiegetically through Dorrigo’s penchant for Tennyson in particular. This method of co-opting the gravitas of earlier texts – one of the valences, as noted in the introduction, of the ‘omnium gatherum’ – is part of what the critic Michael Hofmann takes issue with in a scathing (and highly entertaining) review of the novel. Hofmann views the book and its reception as evidence of ‘the novel in an advanced and showy state of dissolution. It is as though the contemporary novel – like film (4-D, coming soon to a cinema near you), like theatre, like so much else – is in competition with itself, falling over itself to offer you more interiority, more action, more understanding, more vision. But the form, the vessel, is an exploded form; it is basically rubble, fragmentary junk, debris’. This view of the novel as ‘Flanagan’s Sticky Collage’ led to a heated exchange between Hofmann and the Booker committee chair Anthony Grayling in the letters pages of the *LRB*. Michael Hofmann, ‘Is his name Alwyn?’, *London Review of Books*, Dec 2014 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n24/michael-hofmann/is-his-name-alwyn>> [Accessed 10th April 2023].

⁴⁶ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 74.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 76.

of a towering araucaria, A 28]. This text, too, references the totalitarian vision of thousandfold unity discussed above: Herzfeld came to Brazil ‘zu einer Zeit [...], in der seine Heimat und mit ihr so viele Länder Europas für tausend Jahre ans Hakenkreuz genagelt werden sollten’ [at a time when his home country and with it so many other countries of Europe were to be nailed for a thousand years to the swastika (literally in German: hooked cross), A 29]. The project of a thousand-year empire, thwarted after twelve years, is juxtaposed with the germinative power of the araucaria seeds. ‘Jeder der Araukariensamen, die in dieser Stunde [...] auf das Grab [...] und den Sarg herabregneten’, the narrator points out, ‘[enthielt] die Möglichkeit eines tausendjährigen Baumlebens’ [each of the araucaria seeds that rained down in that hour on the grave and the coffin contained the possibility of a thousand-year-long tree life, A 34].

On the one hand, of course, this is exactly the image of vegetation as infinite futurity – the Holocene understanding of nature as a ‘consoling cycle of growth, decay and renewal’ – that was called into question in Chapter 1.⁵¹ The knowledge of the climate and biodiversity crises casts a dark cloud over these consoling visions of empires gone to seed. The contrast between the awareness that ‘the Amazon rainforest is nearing a catastrophic tipping point’ beyond which it will lose ‘its capacity to regenerate and sustain itself’⁵² and the image of the araucaria seeds in Brazil as ‘eine Art Ewigkeit’ [a kind of eternity, A 35] is exactly the kind of feature of the *Atlas* that Schaub has in mind when pronouncing it ‘kein anthropozäner Text’ [not an Anthropocene text].⁵³ But these images of the biosphere erasing the lines and systems imposed on it are not the full picture. On the one hand, the new extremes engendered by climate change appear as their own form of resistance to ‘human “command and control” approaches’.⁵⁴ Ghosh notes that ‘as we look at the floods, wildfires, and droughts that afflict some of the most intensively terraformed parts of the Earth — Florida, California, the American Midwest, southeastern Australia, and so on — it is hard not to wonder whether those landscapes have now decided to shrug off the forms

⁵¹ Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, 35.

⁵² Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 214.

⁵³ ‘Polemisch gefragt’, Schaub asks, ‘scheitert der Text nicht vielleicht sogar an der Herausforderung des Anthropozändiskurses für die Literatur, insofern er planetarische Veränderung vor allem im Sinne eines “Vergehens der Zeit” erzählt?’ [To put it polemically: does the text perhaps even fail when faced with the challenge the Anthropocene discourse poses for literature, insofar as it narrates planetary change primarily in the sense of a ‘passing of time’?]. Schaub, ‘Kein anthropozäner Text’, 273.

⁵⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 19.

imposed on them by European settlers'⁵⁵ – a view that accords with Flanagan's depiction of colonisation in *Gould's Book of Fish*. On the other hand, none of the totalising projects discussed here are defeated by nonhuman life alone. Instead, they include a strong element of human resistance to these imposed structures.

Resistance II: Humans

In Ransmayr's 2016 novel *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* [*Cox or The Course of Time*], the protagonist, Alistair Cox, also visits the Great Wall. The novel is set in Qing-dynasty China, and takes up the imperial theme of *Die letzte Welt*, centring on a meeting between the 17th-century emperor Qianlong – 'der mächtigste Mann der Welt' [the most powerful man in the world, C 9] – and the English master watchmaker Cox. Its central theme, perhaps unsurprisingly, is transience. The main challenge to authoritarian rule in this case is not a poem, but the dream of a *perpetuum mobile* – a clock that will outlast the emperor's rule by centuries or millennia. To this end, the novel abounds in images both of deep time and of the timescales of plants and other lifeforms.

The episode set at the Great Wall, however, plays out differently than this conceit – and the novel as a whole – might lead the reader to expect. When Cox asks to see the Great Wall in order to build a clock modelled on it, he is escorted there by a group of heavily armed and highly trained imperial guards. This is one more instance in the novel of how the 'bis auf Herzschläge, Atemzüge und Kniefälle geregeltes, höfisches Leben' [courtly life, regulated down to heartbeats, breaths and bows] of Qianlong's China appears to Cox as a 'riesiges steinernes Uhrwerk' [giant, stony clockwork, C 52] controlled and powered by the emperor himself. Just as the party of guards is approaching the wall, however, the unexpected happens: one of their horses is struck by an arrow, causing them to take up battle positions. The attacker is nowhere to be seen. The arrow is perhaps only 'das verirrte Geschoß eines Jägers' [the stray shot of a hunter], or a futile act of protest, 'nur eine Geste, ein lächerliches Zeichen' [only a gesture, a ridiculous symbol, C 138]. In the face of this

⁵⁵ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 83.

uncertain threat, they are forced to abandon the expedition and return to Beijing. Cox, astonished by this occurrence, concludes that if this single act of opposition had been enough to thwart an imperial expedition, then the arrow had effectively transformed ‘diese unvorstellbar lange Mauer in eine bis an den Horizont reichende Aschespur, die unter den Windstößen der Jahreszeit in grauen Flockenwirbeln zerstob’ [this unimaginably long wall into a trail of ash reaching to the horizon, which scattered in the season’s winds, C 140].

There are traces, here, of Kafka’s view of humans as being ‘von der Natur des auffliegenden Staubes’ [of the nature of swirling dust, *BB* 267]. The implication of Cox’s vision of the wall disintegrating into ash – a typical moment of Ransmayrian metamorphosis⁵⁶ – is that the thinking behind tyranny and stasis depends on total control; the moment this principle is opposed in even small or futile ways, its whole project is called into question. The texts of Ransmayr and Flanagan, in particular, repeatedly offer images of the human scale resisting the system scale, even where such acts appear doomed or ‘quixotic’.⁵⁷ Kafka, on a similarly abstract level, identifies ‘das menschliche Wesen’ [the human being; human nature] as being ultimately incompatible with the dream or nightmare of total unity. The human ‘verträgt keine Fesselung; fesselt es sich selbst, wird es bald wahnsinnig an den Fesseln zu rütteln anfangen und Mauer, Kette und sich selbst in alle Himmelsrichtungen zerreißen’ [cannot tolerate being bound; if it binds itself, it will soon begin to rattle madly at its bounds, tearing wall, chain and itself asunder in all directions, *BB* 267]. This is a further valence of the Babel motif in Kafka’s text, as distinct

⁵⁶ Dora Osborne argues that the ‘proliferation of fragile substances such as sand, dust, snow and ash’ in Ransmayr’s work links him to a tradition of German-language writing about the Holocaust and Second World War, including the poetic works of Bachmann and Celan and the visual art of Anselm Kiefer (Osborne, ‘Black Flakes’, 221). Ransmayr’s writing, she points out, often ‘strives to change the weighty material of history into something light and transient that will disperse and, eventually, be forgotten. But the snow, sand, dust and ash that pervade his texts function as an irreducible residue of violent history’ (Ibid, 230-1). This analysis of Ransmayr’s ‘archival anti-material’ (Ibid, 223) refers to *Der fliegende Berg* and earlier works; it is somewhat more difficult to connect to the setting and style of *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit*.

⁵⁷ In a Ransmayr text set during the dictatorship of General García Meza in Bolivia, one of the narrator’s travelling companions brandishes her fist at a fighter plane passing overhead, causing her friends to laugh: ‘Einem Kampffliedergeschwader mit der Faust zu drohen hatte etwas seltsam Rührendes, Komisches, aber auch etwas von der Kühnheit eines Kampfes gegen Windmühlen’ [To threaten a squadron of fighter planes with one’s fist had something strangely touching and comical about it, but also some of the daring of a fight against windmills, A 85]. When the pilots overhead open fire in response, this same companion appears to the narrator, once they have reached safety, as ‘eine Riesin’ [a giant, A 88]. In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Dorrego Evans – modelled on the military doctor Weary Dunlop, who led many of the Australian POWs on the Death Railway – also repeatedly tells his men and himself to ‘charge the windmill’ (*NR* 269; 274; 338).

from divine punishment for hubris or the physical difficulties of the ultimate engineering project. Here, the problem with both Babel and the Great Wall is the ‘Verwirrung der Köpfe’ [confusion of the heads] that arises when ‘sich so viele möglichst auf einen Zweck hin zu sammeln such[en]’ [so many do their best to gather together for one purpose, *BB* 267]. In a related Kafka story, ‘Das Stadtwappen’ [The City Coat of Arms], the building of the Tower of Babel fails because of the outward sprawl of the ‘Arbeiterstadt’ [workers’ city] needed to construct it, and a growing division into factions.⁵⁸ After beginning with everything ‘in leidlicher Ordnung, ja die Ordnung war vielleicht zu groß’ [in painstaking order, indeed the order was perhaps too great], humans impose the Babel myth on themselves, and come to long for the prophesied destruction of the city by a ‘Riesenfaust’ [giant fist].⁵⁹

In an ecocritical context, this version of the Babel myth could certainly be read as another version of anthropocentrism. To a certain extent, it chimes with Timothy Morton’s analysis of iterations of the Oedipus story that omit the Sphinx, leaving nothing but ‘Oedipus and his parents, Oedipus who thinks he acts autonomously, exemplifying the agrilogistic meme *We came from ourselves*’.⁶⁰ As discussed in Chapter 1, the often aphoristic form of Kafka’s writing, and its tone of uncertainty and conjecture, work against this impression, aligning the texts more with the riddles of the Sphinx than with Oedipus, whose ‘logic caus[es] the Sphinx’s ambiguous image of “man” (four legs at dawn, two legs at noon, and three legs at eve) to collapse into noncontradictory consistency’.⁶¹ Perhaps more importantly, the text is ‘*antianthropocentric*’, in Morton’s terms, in showing how difficult it is for humans to think and operate at scalar levels above the individual or at least the visible. The profound reluctance to be ‘möglichst auf einen Zweck hin gesammelt’ [gathered together as much as possible towards one aim] is, after all, among the most important factors hampering international efforts to respond to the climate emergency.

⁵⁸ Franz Kafka, ‘Das Stadtwappen’, in Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 341.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 341; 342.

⁶⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* This is not to deny, of course, the vast significance of the Oedipal in Kafka’s writerly world; I am grateful to Caitríona Ní Dhúill for pointing out this tension.

Both Kafka's version of the Babel story and Ransmayr's images of arrows and walls, however, operate on the level of abstraction that is one of the central pitfalls of the 'Anthropocene' concept. It is notable, too, that both 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' and *Cox* use their Chinese settings as a kind of projection space in which to explore concerns they deem universal.⁶² For Kafka – who never travelled beyond Europe, but who loved adventure novels and other forms of entertainment showing faraway places⁶³ – the imperial China of 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' is not least a fantasy realm in which to work out ideas about the multilingual and multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire, which was in the process of disintegrating when the text was written. Both Kafka's texts and their reception largely align him with the margins of empire, rather than its centre:⁶⁴ this is one valence of the imperial message from Beijing that cannot possibly reach its recipient in the provinces, where villagers are frequently unsure whether the Kaiser is alive or dead. Nonetheless, within the canonical structures of world literature, the 'Kaiserpanorama' [Kaiser Panorama] in which Kafka enjoyed looking at photographs of exotic settings and situations is an apt designation of how European writers have conjured one-sided ideas of the universal.⁶⁵ In this panorama, the gaze runs only in one direction. In *Cox oder Der Lauf*

⁶² There is a wealth of scholarly literature dedicated to the representation of China in Kafka's writing, including: Weiyan Meng, *Kafka und China* (Munich: Iudicium, 1986); Adrian Hsia (ed.), *Kafka and China* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996); Rolf J. Goebel, *Constructing China: Kafka's Orientalist Discourse* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997); and Robert Lemon's excellent chapter on 'Kafka's China' in *Imperial Messages: Orientalism as Self-Critique in the Habsburg 'Fin de Siècle'* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011).

⁶³ Hans Dieter Zimmermann points out that apart from short trips within Bohemia or to Germany, France and Italy, Kafka spent his life between locations in Prague '[die] alle kaum zehn Minuten Fußweg voneinander entfernt liegen' [which are all less than ten minutes apart on foot] (Hans Dieter Zimmermann, 'Kafkas Prag und die Kleinen Literaturen', in *Kafka-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Bettina von Jagow and Oliver Jahraus [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008], 165-80 [165]), while Matthias Zach notes Kafka's 'enthusiasm for colonial adventure stories and travelogues' and 'his use, or subversion, of colonial setting and Orientalist clichés' (Matthias Zach, 'Travel, Colonialism and Exoticism', in *Franz Kafka in Context*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 176-82 [176]).

⁶⁴ A key text in this regard is Deleuze and Guattari's study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [*Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, 1975; trans. Dana Polan, 1986], which picks up on Kafka's description of Yiddish literature as a 'minor literature' in a diary entry written on 25th December, 1911 (Katja Garloff, 'Judaism and Zionism', in *Franz Kafka in Context*, 208-215 [210]). Two days later, Kafka developed a brief 'schema' of minor literature, in which he included both Yiddish and Czech writing (Zimmermann, 'Kafkas Prag und die Kleinen Literaturen', 174). Deleuze and Guattari derive from this reference a general theory of minor literature as that 'which a minority constructs within a major language', and which is thus laden with political and collective value (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986], 16-17). This particular reading of Kafka's marginality is not without its critics; Ritchie Robertson, for example, rejects its basic premise by pointing out that 'Kafka does not, as used to be thought, write in a characteristically "Prague German"' (Ritchie Robertson, 'Style', in *Franz Kafka in Context*, 62-69 [62]).

⁶⁵ The Kaiserpanorama, first opened in 1880, was 'a predecessor but also competitor of the cinema' (Carolin Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 51). It was a large 'cylindrical construction [...] designed for the display of glass stereoscopic photographs which were illuminated from

der Zeit, the protagonist Alistair Cox is entranced before he has even arrived in Beijing by the sight of Ān, the emperor's concubine. Described repeatedly as a 'Kindfrau' [child-woman, C 41; 87], this woman appears to Cox as a synthesis of his wife Faye and daughter Abigail, whose death he is mourning at the outset of the novel. Here, the male gaze that projects its fears and fantasies onto women overlaps with the orientalisng gaze that views Asian settings as surfaces for projection. The question of whether and to what extent Ransmayr's writing engages in a conscious critique of this gaze will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

This issue of Eurocentrism is not only an important one for literary scholarship in and of itself, but also intersects in crucial ways with the discourse around the climate crisis. The sense that subjugating the level of human individuals to that of a single greater purpose might not be such a bad thing for tackling the climate crisis has not been lost on right-wing groups, many of which use 'ecofascistic ideas to attack immigrants and people of colour'.⁶⁶ The history of ecological thought is rife with ideas of racial superiority and mystical connections between ethnically defined populations and specific landscapes, most chillingly in the Nazi ideology of 'Blut und Boden' [blood and soil].⁶⁷ The climate crisis itself, meanwhile, is – as Ghosh points out – 'deeply rooted in histories of race, class and geopolitics', and is 'ultimately driven by the dynamics of global power'.⁶⁸ The would-be builders of Babel in Kafka's 'Das Stadtwappen' [The City Coat of Arms], daunted by the enormity of their task, focus instead on the layout of their workers' city: 'Jede Landmannschaft wollte das schönste Quartier haben, dadurch ergaben sich Streitigkeiten' [each country's team wanted to have the nicest quarters, which gave rise to disputes].⁶⁹ These squabbles become for the leaders 'ein neues Argument dafür, daß der Turm auch mangels der nötigen Konzentration sehr langsam oder lieber erst nach allgemeinem Friedensschluß gebaut werden sollte [...] So verging die Zeit der ersten Generation, aber

behind' (Ibid, 52). Viewers sat around this cylinder at individual seats, looking through a pair of binoculars, while photographs of newsworthy events and faraway locations passed them by one after another in a 'stereoscopic peep show' (Ibid, 53). The Kasierpanorama was devised by the entrepreneur August Fuhrmann, who 'employed an army of photographers who took pictures of headline-making events and exotic places [...] His project was to catalogue the sights and events of his time, an undertaking which marked, as the name of his invention suggests, the photographic equivalent of the political imperialism of his age' (Ibid, 51-2).

⁶⁶ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 226.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 223.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 158-9.

⁶⁹ Kafka, 'Das Stadtwappen', 341.

keine der folgenden war anders' [a new argument for the view that the tower, not least due to a lack of the necessary concentration, should be built only very slowly or perhaps only after a general peace treaty (...) Thus passed the time of the first generation, but none of the following ones were any different].⁷⁰ The parallels with contemporary global climate discussions – notwithstanding the option of announcing targets that nobody has any real intention of meeting – are depressingly plain. As Ghosh points out, however, this is not a problem first and foremost of 'human nature', but of historical inequity. Versions of the question 'Why should we cut back our consumption and our emissions, when they are still far below Western levels?' are voiced 'across much of the global South [...] with a strength of conviction that belies the idea that the planetary crisis can be addressed merely by "fixing" capitalism'.⁷¹ Instead, 'at the heart of the crisis lie geopolitical problems, and inequities of power, inherited from the era of colonization'.⁷² In Ghosh's view, this may on the one hand make the crisis 'all the more intractable', but it also offers grounds for hope, in that 'the conception of wealth that underlies this framing of justice and equity is fundamentally mimetic'.⁷³ It might be possible, on this view, for the 'haves' of the world to bring about change by altering the dominant narrative about what constitutes 'the Good Life'.⁷⁴

Before considering in more detail the specific historical discourses Ghosh analyses, which also find their way into the literary texts under discussion, it is worth pointing out a final iteration of the Babel motif in these texts – one that transports it into the 21st-century context. In Ransmayr's novel in blank verse *Der fliegende Berg* [*The Flying Mountain*, 2006], the Irish narrator Pádraig and his brother Liam travel to Tibet in an attempt to climb a mountain they believe has not yet been mapped or measured – a rare 'weißer Fleck' [patch of white, *FB* 45] on the world map. Liam, a computer scientist, is the instigator of the expedition, while Pádraig tags along somewhat reluctantly. The hubris of the Babel project is transposed in the text into systems of surveillance, measurement and future projection, and into lines of computer code. Liam first discovers the mountain on his computer screen at home in Ireland, where 'in seinen virtuellen Animationen' [in his virtual

⁷⁰ Ibid, 342.

⁷¹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 160; emphasis in original.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

animations] he experiences ‘die Unbegrenztheit von Herrschaft’ [the limitlessness of mastery, *FB* 80]. These computer models allow Liam not only to travel virtually around the world, but also to engage in a play with deep time:

Selbst die Zukunft der höchsten Gebirgsketten
 konnte er als in Äonen abrollende Wellen zeigen,
 die sich unter den Kräften von Erosion und Tektonik
 und deren Übersetzung in die Parameter eines Programms
 zu Wüsten oder fruchtbaren Ebenen besänftigten,
 aus denen nur noch Türme emporragten, Moscheen,
 Kathedralen (oder Verwaltungspaläste, so anmaßend
 wie das wolkenbekränzte Hochhaus von Babel).

[He could show even the future of the highest mountain ranges
 as waves that rolled out through aeons
 and under the forces of erosion and tectonic shifts
 and their translation into the parameters of a program
 smoothed themselves out into deserts or fertile plains,
 from which only towers now emerged, mosques,
 cathedrals (or administrative palaces, as presumptuous
 as the cloud-wreathed high-rise of Babel), *FB* 81].

In Liam’s projections, the lines and systems we have considered so far – ‘Straßen, | Provinzgrenzen, Schiffahrts- und Eisenbahnlinien’ [roads, | the borders of provinces, the lines of railways and waterways] – glide ‘als belanglose, fließende Muster | über den unaufhaltsamen erdgeschichtlichen Drama dahin’ [as inconsequential, flowing patterns | across the inexorable earth-historical drama, *FB* 82], which is translated into ‘Strophen, Kolonnen, Delirien im binären Code’ [stanzas, columns, deliriums in binary code, *FB* 81]. The futuristic role the Tower of Babel often takes on in the cultural imagination – as, for example, in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), released just a few years after Kafka’s death – is signalled here by the choice of the word ‘Hochhaus’ [high-rise], but is now ascribed above all to the technology of computer modelling itself.

The German word ‘anmaßend’, used in the passage to describe the Babel project, is particularly interesting in the light of our discussions of scale throughout the thesis so far. At its centre is the noun ‘Maß’ [measure]. Hubris, then, is an act of measuring up to something that is too big for you. A closely related idea is to be ‘vermessen’ [presumptuous], which – through one valence of the prefix ‘ver-’ as something done wrongly or mistakenly, plus the verb ‘messen’ [to measure] – means that you have mis-measured your own position or abilities. Through a different meaning of ‘vermessen’ – as the verb ‘to measure (thoroughly or completely)’ – this connotation of ‘Vermessenheit’ also attaches itself to Kafka’s ‘Landvermesser’ [land surveyor] K., who overconfidently takes on the Castle. Liam and Pádraig, too, pose as ‘Landvermesser’ in order to reach Tibet under the watchful eyes of the authorities in Beijing, satisfying Liam’s delight in ‘die Täuschung und Umgehung | jeder Autorität, die Verspottung tatsächlicher | oder vermeintlicher Macht’ [the deception and circumvention | of every authority, the mockery of actual | or purported power, *FB 79*].

In *Der fliegende Berg*, the ‘Anmaßung’ [presumption] of Babel consists both in the translation of the world into data and measurements, and in the view from a great height allowed by this technology, without the need to build the tower at all. The image of the lines of civilisation gliding over the surface of the planet bears clear resemblances to a moment in Sebald’s travelogue *Die Ringe des Saturn* [*The Rings of Saturn*], in which the narrator observes from a descending aeroplane how ‘eine über Jahrhunderte sich hinziehende Regulierungs-, Kultivierungs- und Bautätigkeit die gesamte Fläche verwandelt in ein geometrisches Muster [hatte]. In geraden Linien und leichten Bögen verliefen die Auto- und Wasserstraßen und die Trassen der Eisenbahn’ [activities of regulating, cultivating and building had transformed the entire surface into a geometric pattern. The roads and waterways and the paths of the railways ran in straight lines and slight curves].⁷⁵ In a view of the Babel project as simply the anthropocentrism of ‘human “command and control” approaches to environmental management’, changing the face of the planet to suit our needs – as in the process Ghosh calls ‘terraforming’ – this image would already suffice.⁷⁶ The narrator of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, however, in keeping with Sebald’s brand of

⁷⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2015), 112.

⁷⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 7; Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 49.

ennui, steps it up a level. He places the emphasis on a meaning also implicit in Liam's projections: the affront to this particular idea of human agency or control when viewed on a larger scale. 'Wenn wir uns aus solcher Höhe betrachten', the narrator thinks, 'ist es entsetzlich, wie wenig wir wissen über uns selbst, über unseren Zweck und unser Ende' [When we view ourselves from such a height, it is terrible how little we know about ourselves, our purpose and our end].⁷⁷ Instead, as we saw with Liam's models, the true control – and the real 'Anmaßung' – now lies with those who stake a claim to oversight. Sebald's passage hints at the dehumanising potential of viewing things from above in this way: seen from the height of an aeroplane, it is always 'als gäbe es keine Menschen, als gäbe es nur das, was sie geschaffen haben und worin sie sich verbergen' [as though there were no people, as though there were only that which they have made and in which they hide].⁷⁸ The view from on high, reducing the individual to a negligible unit, resembles the view of information systems themselves: 'Und doch sind [Menschen] überall anwesend [...] und sind in zunehmendem Maße eingespannt in Netzwerke von einer das Vorstellungsvermögen eines jeden einzelnen bei weitem übersteigenden Kompliziertheit' [And yet (humans) are present everywhere (...) and are increasingly bound up in networks of a complexity that far exceeds the imaginative capacity of any individual], including the 'Strom der unablässig um den Erdball flutenden Information' [current of information flowing ceaselessly around the globe].⁷⁹ The dehumanising distance of a view from above is also present in the very authority Liam believes he has the measure of when posing as a 'Landvermesser': the surveillance state of contemporary China, which appears in the novel only in the background, as a present-day counterpart to the empires of *Die letzte Welt* and 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer'.

The relationship between Tibet and China as depicted in *Der fliegende Berg* again appears to build on elements of Kafka's text. In Kafka's version, as we have seen, it is the metaphysical distances of the empire that prevent messages from ever reaching their recipient, leaving the periphery cut off from the centre. When the brothers arrive in Tibet, the language used to describe the remoteness of the Himalayas and the life of the nomads there echoes this image: where the distances of Kafka's China render Beijing 'den Leuten

⁷⁷ Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 114.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 113-14.

im Dorfe viel fremder als das jenseitige Leben' [much stranger to the villagers than the afterlife (literally 'the life beyond')], making it easier to imagine that 'Peking und sein Kaiser wäre eines, etwa eine Wolke' [Beijing and the Emperor are one and the same thing, a cloud, for instance, *BB* 274] than to picture such a city, the brothers in Ransmayr's text are also unsure of how to explain their country of origin to a nomadic man,

dem schon Lhasa auf einem anderen Stern zu liegen schien,
 der Potalapalast bloß ein Wahnbild,
 der seit Jahren verschollene Dalai Lama
 entrückt wie ein Gott . . .

[to whom even Lhasa appeared to lie on a different planet,
 the Potala palace a mere delusion,
 the Dalai Lama, vanished years before,
 as distant as a god . . . , *FB* 70-71].

While these references are to remoteness within the culture of Tibet itself, the relationship between 'der autonomen [...] Provinz Xizang' [the autonomous province Xizang (Tibet), *FB* 77] and the Chinese state gives the intertext a more sinister spin. Whereas in 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer', it is mind-boggling distance that leaves those in the provinces to obey 'der Weisung und Warnung [...], die aus alten Zeiten zu uns herüberreicht' [the guidance and warnings that reach us from ancient times, *BB* 274], and to celebrate the coronation of long-dead emperors, in *Der fliegende Berg*, it is an imposed 'Nachrichtensperr[e]' [ban on messages/news] that keeps any news from travelling in or out of Tibet, leaving the province 'trotz Hunderter im Orbit kreisender Augen [...] so stumm und geheimnisvoll, wie in einer längst begrabenen Zeit' [despite hundreds of eyes circling in orbit (...) as mute and mysterious as in a time long since buried, *FB* 78-9]. This government crackdown is in response to a revolt in Tibet which threatens to spread to the provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai and Sichuan (*FB* 78). What plays out in the novel, then, is not least the move from a 'presumptuous' view from above to the embodied, human-level perspective. Liam, contrary to the 'unlimited mastery' of his computer projections, dies climbing the mountain, shortly after saving Pádraig's life. The narrator Pádraig, meanwhile, becomes involved in the life of the nomads paid to guide them to the base of the mountain.

He falls in love with the nomad Nyema, whose husband has been killed by Chinese soldiers in the attempt to flee Tibet. An expedition that began with radically zoomed-out views of both the Himalayan mountains and the political oppression of Tibet thus ends in embodied and highly personalised encounters with both.

If Liam's computer models are an instance of Babel-like presumption, then so too, by extension, are the satellite eyes of the state, though this is not spelled out in the novel. For Ghosh, this might appear as an instance of how systems themselves can metastasise beyond their 'original' contexts, inflicting the types of violence and subjugation pioneered by European colonisers. Ghosh presents the issue of climate justice – which, he adds, is inseparable from other types of justice, and exemplifies the false novelty of the 'Anthropocene'⁸⁰ – as driven by, but not reducible to, historical inequity. The processes that subjugate Indigenous peoples and the places they live 'were set in motion by the European colonisation of much of the world', but are now 'routinely promoted in their neoliberal guise' by current world powers.⁸¹ It is these 'same settler-colonial practices', Ghosh argues, 'that are now being implemented by China, in Xinjiang; by Indonesia, in Papua; and by India, in Kashmir and in many of its forest regions'.⁸² In the next chapter, we will see how Ingeborg Bachmann attempts to represent these recurring systems indirectly, by condensing them into archetypal images like that of 'die Weißen' [the Whites].

Der fliegende Berg, meanwhile, deviates from the approach of Kafka's text not least by adopting the vantage point of those the wall is built to keep out. In 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer', the mobility of the nomads is part of what inspires the suspicion of the empire and its subjects. Since these 'Nordvölker [...] mit unbegreiflicher Schnelligkeit wie Heuschrecken ihre Wohnsitze wechselten' [Northerners (...) changed their residences like grasshoppers with a speed that could not be grasped], they may even have 'einen besseren Überblick über die Baufortschritte als selbst wir die Erbauer' [a better overview

⁸⁰ 'In imagining this era as radically new, it becomes easy also to imagine that the break with the past has created many other phenomena that are completely different from those that existed before: hence "climate justice" takes on a colouring that sets it apart from "justice" in general; and "climate migration" takes on a hue that makes it seem different from other, more familiar forms of displacement' (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 153).

⁸¹ Ibid, 167.

⁸² Ibid.

of the construction's progress than even we builders do, *BB* 264]. There it is again: a preoccupation with 'oversight' that wishes to tower high enough to make people look like insects, and is rattled when they move with a speed that 'cannot be grasped'.

Mobility as a form of resistance to systems that are anxious to maintain an 'Überblick' [overview] is also a central theme of Tokarczuk's *Flights*. Where the warring principles of stasis and metamorphosis inform many of Ransmayr's works, and where the history of defensive walls appears to Austerlitz as proof 'daß alles sich in der Bewegung entschied und nicht im Stillstand' [that everything is decided in movement and not at a standstill],⁸³ Tokarczuk's novel takes this a step further. Its original Polish title, *Bieguni*, means roughly 'runaways' or 'runners', and refers to a religious sect that believes the only way to avoid evil is to be constantly on the move. A member of this sect appears directly in the novel, including in a section also titled 'Bieguni' ['Flights']. 'Tyrants of all stripes', this character points out, have a 'deep-seated hatred for the nomads – this is why they persecute the Gypsies and the Jews, and why they force all free peoples to settle, assigning the addresses that serve as our sentences. What they want is to create a frozen order' (*F* 268). The novel itself, across its many mismatched fragments, is structured by forms of global travel.⁸⁴ Its intermittent narrator is a contemporary 'pilgrim' wandering aimlessly through airports, train stations and cities. Partly because of this peregrinatory narrator, as well as its uses of maps and diagrams, *Flights* has been widely compared to Sebald's writing.⁸⁵ This

⁸³ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 28.

⁸⁴ Representations of mobility and travel are, of course, a source of further complexity in the context of the climate crisis. While the authors at hand, particularly Tokarczuk, often seem to conceive of this mobility in metaphorical terms, the idea of travel and movement as that which makes us human is newly vexed in the light of travel's sizeable contribution to global climate emissions. This tension has recently been addressed by Michael Cronin in the Cambridge Element *Eco-Travel: Journeying in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), which asks the question: 'If much of modern travel writing has been based on ready access to environmentally damaging forms of transport, how do travel writers deal with a practice that is destroying the world they claim to cherish?' (Cronin, *Eco-Travel*, iii).

⁸⁵ The comparison has been made in reviews by Kapka Kassabova, Eileen Battersby and Joseph Krol, among many others (Kapka Kassabova, 'Flights by Olga Tokarczuk review – the ways of wanderers', *Guardian* online, June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/flights-by-olga-tokarczuk-review>> [Accessed 11th September 2023]; Eileen Battersby, 'Complex Harmonies: On Olga Tokarczuk's "Flights"', *Los Angeles Review of Books* online, April 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/complex-harmonies-on-olga-tokarczucs-flights/>> [Accessed 11th September 2023]; Joseph Krol, 'W.G. Sebald runs rings around history', *Varsity* online, Oct 2019 <<https://www.varsity.co.uk/arts/17866>> [Accessed 11th September 2023]). In a 2018 interview, Tokarczuk named *The Rings of Saturn* as 'the book I'm most ashamed not to have read', claiming it is 'one of two books by WG Sebald that I still have on my list'. Olga Tokarczuk, 'Reading Freud was my first step to becoming a writer', *Guardian* online, Aug 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/24/olga-tokarczuk-reading-freud-was-my-first-step-to-becoming-a-writer>> [Accessed 11th September 2023].

comparison, however, smooths over crucial differences in tone and effect. *Flights* is far from elegiac, and it is not at all clear to what extent its suggestion of mobility as resistance is meant seriously. In one short section set in an airport, ‘a big ad on a glass wall all-knowingly asserts:

МОБИЛЬНОСТЬ СТАНОВИТСЯ РЕАЛЬНОСТЬЮ.

Mobility is reality. (F 234)

‘Let us stress’, the rest of the section reads, ‘that it is merely an ad for mobile phones’ (F 234). This is one of many moments in Tokarczuk’s works where ideas that it would otherwise be tempting to read as structuring principles – such as that of mobility as a resistance to surveillance – are humorously undercut.

Flights is often described as a novel dealing with the twin themes of global travel and human anatomy. Along with the scenes of planes, trains and automobiles, it introduces the reader to discussions of the polymer preservation process for human bodies (F 407); Fredrick Ruysch’s innovations in preservation techniques (F 143); and the story of Chopin’s heart, smuggled back to his native Poland from France in the undercarriage of his sister’s skirt (F 328). In my view, however, the framing of the novel in terms of travel and anatomy is a case of misplaced emphasis. Instead, I would like to suggest, it is a book about two different aspects of anatomy. The first aspect is anatomy as a driver of human movement, which also entails an awareness of our evolutionary relationships to other beings. Two long episodes of the novel, for instance, are centred around the discovery of the Achilles tendon, a crucial anatomical difference between humans and other primates that allows us to cover great distances bipedally.⁸⁶ The second, related aspect is anatomy’s appearance as a scientific pursuit that turns life into specimens to be preserved, dissected and otherwise objectified. These two manifestations of anatomy correspond, on the one hand, to the principles of mobility and stasis. On the other hand, they invoke a further type of system that is worth discussing with regards both to ecological thought, and to the works of the writers considered here: the systems of knowledge production that went

⁸⁶ Daniel E. Lieberman, *The Story of the Human Body: Evolution, Health, and Disease* (New York: Pantheon, 2013), 86.

along with colonisation, disenchanting the world and reducing the life of the periphery to specimens for the observation of the centre. These systems are highlighted to great effect by correspondences between the contemporary novels we have been discussing and another Kafka story, also composed in 1917: the short text ‘Ein Bericht für eine Akademie’ [A Report for an Academy].

Resistance III: Alliances

‘Ein Bericht für eine Akademie’ is the story of Rotpeter [Red Peter], an ape captured on the Gold Coast in a ‘Jagdexpedition der Firma Hagenbeck’ [hunting expedition of the Hagenbeck firm].⁸⁷ The story is narrated by Rotpeter himself, in the form of a speech addressed to the ‘Hohe Herren von der Akademie’ [Honoured gentlemen of the Academy].⁸⁸ By the time of his speech, Rotpeter is a famous variety show act, having responded to his captivity in a novel way: by becoming human. What the academy wishes to hear about is his ‘äffisches Vorleben’ [previous ape life], but Rotpeter explains that he can no longer remember it.⁸⁹ Instead, he tells the story of how he came to be human. As in the curious case of Gregor Samsa, the transformation is not a total or straightforward one, but relies instead on a strange mismatch between thoughts and bodies. Where Gregor’s body has changed, but his thoughts remain largely the same – except when he attends to the instinctual desires of his new form, hanging from the ceiling or pressing his hot belly against the cool glass of his woman in furs – Rotpeter’s body has not changed, but he has become human in his thoughts. The decision to become human is the last true ‘ape thought’ he had, formed in response to his captivity. Encaged on a ship bound for Europe, his only sensation – ‘das damals affenmäßig Gefühlte’ [that which was felt at the

⁸⁷ Franz Kafka, ‘Ein Bericht für eine Akademie’, in Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2013), 295.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 294. The word ‘Herr’ and its derivatives will preoccupy us throughout much of the discussion to follow, particularly in Chapter 3. It has a broad meaning that encompasses the everyday ‘gentleman’ and the more explicit ‘master’ or ‘lord’, so that Rotpeter’s opening address also carries the stronger meaning: ‘High Masters of the Academy!’. The more everyday sense of the word arises from this stronger meaning, and not the other way around: ‘Herr’ is also the root of ‘herrschen’ and ‘beherrschen’ [to dominate, command or control], and of ‘Herrschaft’, a word made famous by Max Weber. The latter term is usually translated in a sociological context as ‘authority’.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

time in accordance with apeness], which he can ‘heute nur mit Menschenworten nachzeichnen’ [today only retrospectively describe with human words] – was that of: ‘kein Ausweg’ [no way out].⁹⁰ Since he cannot live without this way out, Rotpeter simply stops being an ape: ‘nun, so hörte ich auf, Affe zu sein. Ein klarer, schöner Gedankengang, den ich irgendwie mit dem Bauch ausgehegt haben muß, denn Affen denken mit dem Bauch’ [so, I stopped being an ape. A clear, beautiful course of thought, which I must have somehow concocted with my belly, for apes think with their belly].⁹¹ Now, having suffered terrible indignities and worked hard to avoid ending up in the zoo, Rotpeter lives a life with which he professes himself neither unhappy nor satisfied, perhaps because he is under no illusions about the possibility of human freedom.

The story, first published in Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude* in 1917, has often been read as an allegory of Jewish assimilation, a reading Kafka himself appeared to reject. When Buber suggested calling the story, along with the short text ‘Schakale und Araber’ [Jackals and Arabs], ‘Gleichnisse’ [parables; literally ‘likenesses’], Kafka replied: ‘Gleichnisse bitte ich die Stücke nicht zu nennen, es sind nicht eigentlich Gleichnisse; wenn sie einen Gesamttitel haben sollen, dann am besten vielleicht *Zwei Tiergeschichten*’ [I ask that the pieces not be called parables, they are not actually parables; if they are to have an overall title, then perhaps *Two Animal Stories* would be best],⁹² implying that Rotpeter is not to be reduced to a symbol for intra-human themes.⁹³ Partly for this reason, ‘Ein Bericht für eine Akademie’ is a favourite text of vital materialists like Jane Bennett.⁹⁴ What the story does make clear, in either case, is how colonial systems treated humans, nonhuman animals and natural resources alike as objects to be extracted, monetised and studied. The company that first captures Rotpeter – the Hagenbeck firm – was a real business owned by Carl Hagenbeck, who founded the famous ‘Tierpark Hagenbeck’

⁹⁰ Ibid, 297.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ruth V. Gross, ‘Hunting Kafka Out of Season: Enigmatics in the Short Fictions’, in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. James Rolleston (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), 256.

⁹³ Anne Fuchs, too, points out that although ‘Kafka’s zoo has given rise to a wide range of allegorical interpretations which take the animal as a metaphorical stand-in for human life’, this type of reading tends to ignore ‘the ontology of the animal in its radical otherness which is an essential aspect of Kafka’s world’ (Anne Fuchs, *How to Do Things with Words: Animal Ontology in Kafka’s “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”*, *Germanistik in Irland* 16 [2021], 57-66 [57]).

⁹⁴ See for instance Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 17-28; and *Vibrant Matter*, 52-3.

[Hagenbeck Zoo] in Hamburg and, with it, the modern zoo.⁹⁵ Hagenbeck was also heavily involved in the promotion of ethnological exhibitions or ‘human zoos’.⁹⁶ His twin innovations lay in replacing the visible bars of cages with less obtrusive boundaries, such as trenches, and in displaying humans together with animals from their places of origin. This created the illusion that the European viewer was being offered a window into the ‘natural’ life of a faraway place and culture: an embodied version of the Kaiser Panorama. At Hagenbeck’s park, ‘visitors could observe “exotic” animals and even peoples in their “native habitats” – the African jungles, Russian steppes, American plains, and Arctic ice – without ever encountering a bar or visible barrier and without ever leaving the comfort of their own “civilization”’.⁹⁷

This sinister collapsing of the boundaries between humans and animals, both of which become objects for the curiosity and viewing pleasure of the centre, is precisely the kind of practice Amitav Ghosh also analyses in tracing the development of the concept ‘brute’. ‘In the initial phases of the word’s transition’, Ghosh writes, ‘from Latin *brutus*, to French *brut*, to English *brute*, the word generally meant “dull, stupid, insensible” and was mainly used of animals’.⁹⁸ It was only from the 1530s on that its scope began to expand in English, ‘covering people as well as animals and objects’.⁹⁹ During the most violent period of American colonisation, ‘brute’ became ‘a term that served to merge certain kinds of humans with things whose existence was merely material, insensible’.¹⁰⁰ The word thus presents the nexus point of Ghosh’s entire argument: that the ‘planetary crisis’ arises from processes that strip the world of meaning, reducing humans, animals and everything else to the status of ‘inert resource’.¹⁰¹ Over time, as he points out, the word ‘brute’ increasingly became attached to ‘nature’: the two ideas even appear to have ‘co-evolved’, including through their appearance in Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, so that ‘it soon became common to speak of “brute Nature”’.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2002), 9.

⁹⁶ Rikke Andreass, *Human Exhibitions: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Ethnic Displays* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 13.

⁹⁷ Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, 9.

⁹⁸ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 186-7.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 187.

Ghosh connects this usage to his discussion of the discourse around evolution that emerged later, in the Victorian era. Where we might expect that Darwin's theories, in showing that 'humans are linked to other life-forms by close ties of kinship', would result in 'a sense of familial fellow feeling', this was far from being the case for most European commentators of the time.¹⁰³ Instead, the effect of Darwin's theory for many Western thinkers – contrary to Darwin's own conclusions – was to 'reinforc[e] a belief in the absolute exceptionalism and supremacy of one kind of human – White, Western Man', soon to be elevated 'over all other beings, human and nonhuman'.¹⁰⁴ Ghosh cites Tennyson's vision, in 'In Memoriam' – written ten years before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, but channelling scientific ideas that were already swirling around at the time – that it is Man's lot to 'Move upward, working out the beast, | And let the ape and tiger die', as part of the ineluctable rise of Man to the status of a "'crowning race" [...] a species that is closer to God'.¹⁰⁵ Not only did early European responses to the theory of evolution view the extinction of many other species as necessary and inevitable, but these 'other species' also included, in their eyes, 'the many intermediary forms between primates and civilized man, such as gorillas and "savages"'.¹⁰⁶ In an irony of scientific categorisation, the majority of those classified as *Homo sapiens* were nonetheless 'thought to share in the mute brutishness of "Nature"'.¹⁰⁷

These ideas bear clear resemblances to the critique of Enlightenment put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947]. Adorno was an early critic of Hagenbeck's zoos, which replaced cages with trenches and other invisible boundaries. In his view, these zoos 'verneinen die Freiheit der Kreatur um so vollkommener, je unsichtbarer sie die Schranken halten, an deren Anblick die Sehnsucht ins Weite sich entzünden könnte' [deny the creature's freedom all the more completely the more invisible they keep the barriers, the sight of which could ignite the longing for open space].¹⁰⁸ Rotpeter, with his resignation to the fact that he will never again

¹⁰³ Ibid, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 79; 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 188.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 149.

experience 'dieses große Gefühl der Freiheit nach allen Seiten' [this big feeling of freedom on all sides]¹⁰⁹ – as well as his determination not to end up in the zoo, which is 'nur ein neuer Gitterkäfig; kommst du in ihn, bist du verloren' [only a new cage: if you end up there, all is lost]¹¹⁰ – may well have been at the back of Adorno's mind here. Adorno's words, in turn, might make us think of the compulsive apple-washing through which Sebald's raccoon attempts to escape his 'falsche Welt' [unreal world]. In practical terms, this argument is complicated by a contemporary context in which zoos provide sanctuary for many critically endangered species. Nonetheless, the zoo is another of the forms of 'non-freedom' these texts are concerned with, as we will see in Chapter 4, where instances of identification with captive animals are considered in more detail.

Adorno's broader conclusion – based on Hagenbeck's zoos – that 'je reiner Zivilisation die Natur erhält und transplantiert, um so unerbittlicher wird diese beherrscht' [The more purely civilisation maintains and transplants nature, the more mercilessly it is being dominated],¹¹¹ pre-empts a good deal of contemporary ecocritical thought, including Morton's rebuttal of the idea of 'nature'. Adorno is also well aware of the status of zoos as 'Produkte des Kolonialimperialismus des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts' [products of nineteenth-century colonial imperialism].¹¹² For Ghosh, meanwhile, the 19th-century discourse of evolution and the older concept of 'brutishness' provide ample reason to connect colonialism and the Holocaust. He cites Sven Lindqvist to the effect that 'the idea of extermination lies no farther from the heart of humanism than Buchenwald lies from the Goethehaus in Weimar' – an insight that 'has been almost completely repressed, even by the Germans'.¹¹³ Ideas of extermination, in this view, are not specific to 20th-century German history, but are instead 'a common European heritage' – reaffirming and spelling out the insights of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.¹¹⁴

The idea that exterminatory violence is at the centre of European culture is common to all three contemporary authors under discussion here. Ransmayr, for instance, used a

¹⁰⁹ Kafka, 'Bericht', 297.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 302.

¹¹¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 149.

¹¹² Ibid, 149-50.

¹¹³ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 186.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

recent award acceptance speech to take aim at the statue of Leopold II which ‘am Rand des Brüsseler Schloßparks und im Herzen der Europäischen Union immer noch in den Himmel ragen darf’ [at the edge of the Palace Park in Brussels and in the heart of the European Union is still allowed to tower into the sky].¹¹⁵ The speech is framed by an encounter with an endangered silverback gorilla in the Virunga mountains, on the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It draws a visceral parallel between the treatment of Congolese workers under Leopold II and the hunting of gorillas by European colonisers in Africa. Lest it appear that the literary and theoretical texts discussed here simply invert the racist discourses that align some humans with animals, it should be specified that the emphasis of the speech is firmly on the injustices suffered by human victims of colonisation, with the gorilla appearing only at the beginning and end of the text. The complexities of comparing humans and animals in this way also form part of the discussion in Chapter 4. Whereas a common punishment for workers under Leopold II’s colonial administration was that of ‘Hände und Füße abhacken und die Gliedmaßen räuchern und einsalzen, damit sie als Drohung und Zeichen des Schreckens [...] gezeigt werden [...] sollten’ [hacking off hands and feet and having these limbs smoked and salted, so that they could be shown as a threat and symbol of terror], Ransmayr imagines that the silverback gorilla in the 21st century will recognise ‘unseren [...] europäischen Akzent, den Akzent jener hellen, wässrigen Wesen, die seinesgleichen gejagt, erschossen und geköpft, die teerschwarten Hände abgehackt und als in Salz gelegte Trophäen in ferne Hauptstädte der Kultur exportiert hatten, um sie dort präparieren zu lassen’ [our European accent, the accent of those pale, watery beings who had hunted, shot and beheaded his kind, hacked off their tar-black hands and exported them as trophies preserved in salt to distant metropolises of culture, to have them preserved there].¹¹⁶

This scathing indictment of the history of ‘die Weißen’ [the whites]¹¹⁷ is in many ways a counterpart to Ransmayr’s earliest literary text, the prose poem *Strahlender Untergang* [*Radiant Demise*]. This text, too, is a report to an academy: the long second section of the poem is a ‘Rede von einer akademischen Delegation’ [speech before an academic delegation], beginning ‘Geehrte Herren!’ [Honoured gentlemen!, *SU* 15]. In more abstract

¹¹⁵ Ransmayr, *Arznei*, 22.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 22; 31-2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

terms than the recent award speech, *Strahlender Untergang* also offers a rebuke to European scientific discourse from the Enlightenment onwards, imagined in the text as the 'old' science now being supplanted by a 'neue Wissenschaft' [new science, *SU* 16]. The old science, in line with the arguments of Ghosh and Adorno, is concerned with reducing the world to an 'Ansammlung | von Gegenständen der Beobachtung, | der Definition, [...] | Beherrschung | und Manipulation' [collection | of objects of observation, | of definition, | domination | and manipulation, *SU* 16], in order to assert the supremacy of its subject, 'der Weiße', 'der Herr der Welt' [the white man; the master of the world, *SU* 32; 22]. The 'neue Wissenschaft' [new science], by contrast, consists of confronting this subject with its own end under controlled conditions, leaving this 'pale, watery being' to dehydrate in an artificial terrarium in the desert.

In *Flights*, the same insights are present in the question of who becomes a specimen, and who does the preserving and observing. Where the image for human evolution in *Strahlender Untergang* is how '[sich] ein Vieh | plötzlich | auf[richtete]' [a beast | suddenly | stood upright, *SU* 28],¹¹⁸ in *Flights*, as I have already suggested, humanity is located in the Achilles tendon. The novel depicts the moment at which this tendon, crucial for bipedal human movement over long distances, was discovered and named (*F* 193), and dedicates three long sections to the anatomist who discovered it, Filip Verheyen (*F* 188-219). Verheyen is fixated on this part of the body partly as a result of having had his own lower leg amputated to save him from infection. At his request, the amputated limb was preserved, and Verheyen dissects and even converses with it in an attempt to understand the phantom pain that dogs him. While the connection to evolution is not mentioned in the novel, it is neatly encapsulated in an intertext to Kafka's 'Bericht', where Rotpeter tells

¹¹⁸ This image is, incidentally, very much in line with Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* [*The Metamorphosis*], which pays a great deal of attention to what is, and is not, 'aufrecht' [upright]. Things that stand 'aufrecht' in the story are often combined with animal imagery, conjuring visions of the stages of evolution. The first thing to be 'aufrecht' in *Die Verwandlung* is the woman in furs in Gregor's picture (Kafka, 'Die Verwandlung', 88), and the last – 'fast aufrecht' [nearly upright] – is the feather in the charwoman's hat (144). One of Gregor's first acts in his new body is to attempt his own miniature ascent of man, gaining 'Herrschaft' [mastery] over himself by standing upright to open the door and go to work: with great effort, he 'gab sich einen letzten Schwung und stand aufrecht da; auf die Schmerzen im Unterleib achtete er gar nicht mehr, so sehr sie auch brannten' [gave himself one last swing and stood upright; he paid no attention anymore to the pain in his lower body, no matter how much it stung, 98]. 'Aufrecht' occurs most often in the text in the passages around Gregor's death, with his family attempting to assert their humanity and his status as 'Untier' [dreadful animal, 138]: his father sits 'aufrecht' when Grete first decides Gregor is an 'es' [it] and must be gotten rid of (139); Grete stands 'aufrecht' waiting to lock Gregor in his room for the last time (141), and his parents sit 'aufrecht' in bed when the charwoman announces his death (142).

the gentlemen of the Academy: 'Ihr Affentum, meine Herren, sofern sie etwas Derartiges hinter sich haben, kann Ihnen nicht ferner sein als mir das meine. An der Ferse aber kitzelt es jeden, der hier auf Erden geht: den kleinen Schimpansen wie den großen Achilles' [Your own ape life, gentlemen, insofar as you have something of that kind behind you, cannot be further from you than mine is from me. But it tickles at the heel of everyone who walks here on earth: the little chimpanzee as well as the great Achilles].¹¹⁹ The human ape Rotpeter thus gives voice to what, for Ghosh, is implicit in the concept of 'brutes': 'an acknowledgment that humans are actually no different from other beings'.¹²⁰ The sense of the Achilles as a reminder both of human separation from and 'close kinship to' our fellow primates is one way of reading Verheyen's obsession with his amputated leg, which sticks around as an insistent phantom pain. Just as poor, reasoning Gregor Samsa, who also ends up in *Flights* as a preserved specimen (F 405), is constantly bugged by his own repressed drives, Verheyen's attempts to resolve the tickling at his heel with recourse to reason are a path to madness. This Enlightenment reason appears in the episode not least in the guise of Verheyen's 'microscope [...], first-rate, an instrument that would be the envy of many, with lenses ground by Benedictus Spinoza' (F 192).

The worldview that sees both apes and most humans as 'brutes', meanwhile – and which sees fit to fragment and extract from the life of the periphery to serve the greed and curiosity of the centre – is encapsulated in the most disturbing sections of *Flights*. They comprise three letters from the historical figure Josefina Soliman to Emperor Franz I of Austria. Though the letters themselves really existed, the versions that appear in the novel are fictionalised by Tokarczuk. Josefina's father, the historical figure Angelo Soliman, was an Austrian courtier and Freemason who moved in the same circles as Mozart and Haydn.¹²¹ Having been brought to Europe as a child slave, most likely from present-day Nigeria, he eventually became a valued member of the Viennese imperial court.¹²² After his death, Soliman's body was preserved and put on display in the imperial Wunderkammer [cabinet of curiosities], where it was presented as an object of ethnographic interest. This incident appears in *Flights* not only as evidence of how

¹¹⁹ Kafka, 'Bericht', 294-5.

¹²⁰ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 188.

¹²¹ Iris Wigger and Spencer Hadley, 'Angelo Soliman: Desecrated bodies and the spectre of Enlightenment racism', *Race & Class* 62.2 (2020), 80.

¹²² Ibid.

discourses of exterminatory violence and racial superiority sprang from ‘the heart of European humanism’, but also as an affirmation of Ghosh’s conviction that the future can only be reached through the past.¹²³ Josefine speculates that her father never spoke of his past as a slave because of ‘a terrible conviction [...]: the faster painful events are erased from memory, the faster they will lose their power over us. They will cease to haunt us. The world will become better. [...] What happened to my father’s body after his death, however, is a testament to the wrongheadedness of that conviction’ (F 148-9). Her series of letters begins by pleading with the Emperor to give her father a Christian burial. The third and final letter, written in the recognition that she will receive no reply, directly follows the aforementioned section about tyrants, nomads and staying on the move. It strikes a note of defiance: ‘So now I write to You accordingly, as to life and death’s lessee, as to a tyrant and usurper, and I no longer request but demand’ (F 272). It is Josefine herself who now vows to haunt the Emperor and the Empire: ‘I will follow you, my Lord, like a voice from the darkness, even when I die I will never let You be, never cease to whisper’ (F 272). Fittingly, the letters have now been adapted for the stage by the theatre group *Dead Centre*, whose production is running in the Akademietheater [Academy Theatre] venue of Vienna’s Burgtheater at time of writing, from April-May of 2023. The title chosen for the piece is ‘Katharsis’ [Catharsis].¹²⁴

It is in *Gould’s Book of Fish*, however, that these ideas find their fullest expression. In keeping with Dixon’s view that Flanagan’s works combine the portrayal of ‘totalitarianism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, genocide and environmental destruction’,¹²⁵ the novel envisions an alliance of Indigenous Tasmanians, convicts, nonhuman animals, the wilderness, and art: a novelistic expression of his interest in writing ‘history from below’.¹²⁶ Other works by Flanagan, it must be said, do a better job of including Tasmanian Aboriginal perspectives than *Gould’s Book of Fish* does. His 2008 novel *Wanting* tells the story of an

¹²³ Ghosh repeatedly highlights how economic and military discourses, as well as the insidious efforts of fossil fuel companies, seek to present the planetary crisis ‘as a techno-economic concern oriented toward the future’. For ‘the have-nots of the world’, by contrast, ‘in rich and poor countries alike, it is primarily a matter of justice, rooted in histories of race, class, and geopolitics’ (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 156).

¹²⁴ KATHARSIS. *Nach Geschichten aus OLGA TOKARCZUKS Unrast*.

<<https://www.burgtheater.at/en/production/katharsis>> [Accessed 14th April 2023].

¹²⁵ Dixon, ‘Circles of Violence’, 39.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 21. This idea, Dixon notes, is exemplified by E.P. Thompson’s work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) [*ibid*].

Aboriginal girl called Mathinna, who was adopted by Sir John Franklin, then governor of Van Diemen's Land, and his wife Lady Jane. Like *Gould's Book of Fish*, this later novel arose out of an encounter with visual art: a portrait of Mathinna painted by convict artist Thomas Bock, which caught Flanagan's attention because of how the girl's bare feet were deliberately covered by the frame.¹²⁷ In *Gould's Book of Fish*, in keeping the novel's picaresque view of the body, Gould's connection to Aboriginal culture arises from his sexual relationship with Twopenny Sal, an Aboriginal woman brought to the prison island as a slave by white sealers. There are parallels, here, to the gendered elements of Ransmayr's writing that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. While eleven of the twelve fish correspond to male characters, for instance – and usually to these characters as a whole – the 'striped cowfish' to which Sal is linked is painted onto her breasts in the novel by Gould before they have sex (*GB* 311). This is a baffling, albeit not entirely untypical authorial choice.¹²⁸ If the novel offers any explanation for it, it is perhaps only in its championing of the body over what it perceives as Cartesian Enlightenment thinking: Gould refers humorously to sex throughout the novel as 'dancing the old Enlightenment', after taking a shine to Voltaire's *Candide* (*GB* 133).

While the means of including it in the novel is questionable, the relationship between Twopenny Sal and Gould nonetheless corresponds to a wider interest throughout Flanagan's work in the place of Aboriginal culture in Tasmania. The novel does not equivocate about the genocide carried out by white settlers on the island, which only a tiny proportion of Tasmanian Aborigines survived. Without re-writing this history, it seeks to draw out the absurdities of racialised discourse, and to show how white convicts would have had good reason to make common cause with Indigenous Tasmanians rather than participating in their extermination. Gould also differs noticeably from the Ransmayr protagonists discussed in Chapter 3, who remain stuck in their own heads even after the

¹²⁷ Margaret Harris quotes Flanagan's explanation that 'when I was shown the painting and the person who showed me told me the story, he lifted the wooden frame off the painting, it was framed in a little oval frame, and beneath that oval frame were two bare feet. I realised that they'd used the frame to cut off that complete assertion of who she was [...] And I thought how all their lives really are a war that never ends between wooden frames and bare feet'. Harris, 'The Genealogy of *Wanting*', in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 143.

¹²⁸ Dismayed and disgruntled readers may find solace in Hofmann's merciless take-down of *Narrow Road* – including its sex and love scenes – as 'a book that says trust me, I'm sensitive, that offers you, repeatedly offers you, all the tender and sensitive things: light, and "gas-flame" eyes, and women's hands running down your "withered" thigh'. Hofmann, 'Is his name Alwyn?'

self-blindness of their gaze has resulted in calamity. Gould, by contrast, cannot seem to close himself off from the world around him, from other people and other beings. 'At the beginning', he admits, 'I only wanted to rub along with the whole rotten system' (*GB* 156); when he is tasked with painting the book of fish, his first thoughts are of the material benefits it will bring. Yet his encounters with the fish prove constantly contaminating, leaving him unsure of where he ends and they begin. Gould's affair with Sal, too, begins with certainty and ends 'in doubt, both as to who she was &, even more shockingly, as to who I was' (*GB* 314). This exchange, or symbiosis, is cast partly in terms of empathy and identification – of feeling: 'I opened myself up to everything. The more I felt and the more I poured that feeling into my fish, the more feeling I saw all around me' (*GB* 451). Similar ideas of being 'open' to the world will guide the discussion in Chapter 4, on 'Tenderness'. At the same time, Gould's sense of dissolving boundaries becomes another iteration of Rotpeter's Achilles musings, disrupting species divides. As he awaits execution, Gould thinks of the fish that 'I simply had spent too long in their company, staring at them, committing the near criminal folly of thinking there was something individually human about them, when the truth is that there is something irretrievably fishy about us all' (*GB* 443). The novel features a brief utopian interlude in which Gould, having escaped the prison island, re-encounters Sal among her own people in the rainforest. In the face of the realities of Tasmanian history, however, this moment cannot last long.

In keeping with its attempt to disrupt both species boundaries and racialised thought, the system *Gould's Book* sets itself against most vehemently – apart from the penal colony itself – is the Linnaean system of taxonomy. In a novel that features a tyrannical 'Commandant' intent on building a railway, it is striking that the true figure of opposition for Gould's worldview is the Surgeon who commissions him to paint the fish, as well as the Surgeon's correspondent in London, Dr. Cosmo Wheeler. Wheeler, a member of the Royal Academy, has been exploiting the Surgeon for some years with false promises of Academy membership in exchange for 'collecting & cataloguing specimens & sending them all back to him in England' (*GB* 145-6). Gould, who has been around the block, is quick to catch on to the fact that 'if this English natural historian was noted, it was because he was building a fair old career out of the various bits & pieces the Surgeon & his other colonial collectors were shipping back to him' (*GB* 146) – echoing the centre/periphery relationships of *Flights*

and Kafka's 'Report'. In comparison with Tokarczuk's novel, it is significant that the entire venture of the *Book of Fish* comes about because 'fish being fish, specimens of a useful nature could not easily be preserved' (GB 147). Where Dr Wheeler insists that fish are the next thing to be 'Systematised & therefore Understood' (GB 148), for Gould, it is the very impossibility of capturing or preserving the fish in either taxonomic categories or paintings that gives rise to his fascination with them: 'A fish', he decides, 'is a slippery & three-dimensional monster that exists in all manner of curves' (GB 155).

Ghosh, in his discussion of the nutmeg, also emphasises its three-dimensionality as a metaphor for its mystery, noting that 'like a planet, a nutmeg [...] can never be seen in its entirety at one time'.¹²⁹ For Ghosh, the Linnaean system has a significant part to play in denying this three-dimensionality, and in denying meaning. 'The modern gaze', he argues, 'sees only one of the nutmeg's two hemispheres: that part of it which is *Myristica fragrans*, a subject of science and commerce'.¹³⁰ This view of the world, Ghosh contends, arises both from the broader cultures that gave rise to Linnaeus's system – which won out over rival systems through 'a decisive intervention by the Spanish Empire' in the mid-eighteenth century, ordaining 'that Linnaeus's binomial system would be adopted by all its botanical expeditions' – and from the system itself, a way of smoothing out the meaning contained in names.¹³¹ Through 'the process of consistent naming, all things were to be made comparable so that they could be turned into "useful resources"'.¹³²

The power of names, and the ways in which acts of naming confer or deny meaning, is important for all of the works at hand. Janina Duszejko in Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is particularly concerned with giving people, animals and things the right name, as will see in Chapter 4. Her version of vitalism is linked to Gould's partly through the prism of William Blake, whose works Duszejko is helping to translate into Polish, and who appears in *Gould's Book* as a not-yet-famous engraver friend of the protagonist's in London (GB 56; 150). The Achilles tendon features in *Flights* not only because of its links to human evolution, but also because it has a name that conjures

¹²⁹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 95.

¹³² *Ibid*.

meanings and invites associations. The novel does not transport us back to the moment when Verheyen first notices the tendon, but the moment at which he first speaks its name. When Verheyen asks his friend and student Willem van Horssen whether he can identify this piece of soft tissue, van Horssen is unsure, but hazards a guess: 'It's the *musculus soleus*, a component of it' (F 193). Verheyen 'looks at him for quite a while, as though looking for words', before announcing: 'From now on it is the Achilles cord' (F 193). This name is what captures the young van Horssen's imagination, opening up 'fairy-tale images in his mind, as though he were looking at Italian canvases peopled by full-blooded nymphs and gods' (F 194). The third-person narrator picks up van Horssen's enthusiasm and runs with it, wondering whether 'Filip Verheyen has happened on the trail of a hidden order' of bodily mythology, a 'reflection of the great and the small, the human body joining within itself everything with everything – stories and heroes, gods and animals, the order of plants and the harmony of minerals?' (F 194). Here, again, we have the omni-level of connecting 'everything with everything'.¹³³ It contrasts with the passage immediately preceding it, where mapping the body appears as a kind of imperial project: 'White patches get covered with the network of a drawing. One discovers, and names. Conquers and civilizes. A piece of white cartilage will from now on be subject to our laws' (F 193). Names appear as a means of counteracting this process of disenchantment, giving rise to the suggestion that 'maybe we ought to take our names in that direction – the Artemis Muscle, the Athens Aorta, Hephaestus' Malleus and Incus, Mercury Spirals' (F 194).

In *Der fliegende Berg*, the nomads are not only alienated by the idea of measuring mountains in metres, but also refuse to use the English name 'Everest' for the mountain they call '*Chomolungma [...]*, | deren Name doch | *Himmlische Mutter der Täler* bedeutete [...] | Namen waren Heilig' [*Chomolungma (...)*, | whose name meant *Heavenly Mother of the Valleys* | Names were holy, FB 123-4]. This is an idea the Irish brothers are au fait with; they already reject the name 'Everest' due to its Englishness, and its status as a reminder that while English land surveyors were busy designating 'ein überirdisches, gleißendes Ding in den Wolken | mit der Inventarnummer *Peak XV*' [a transcendent, gleaming thing in the clouds | with the inventory number *Peak XV*], Ireland was suffering 'unter seinen

¹³³ It is hard not to be reminded, here, of the modernist heyday of encyclopaedic omniscience. As opposed to T.S. Eliot's lament of 'I can connect | Nothing with nothing', the passage has some of the exuberance of a Joycean mythical method (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and other poems* [London: Faber, 1999], 34).

englischen Herren | [die] katastrophalst[e] Hungersnot seiner Geschichte' [the most catastrophic famine in its history | under its English masters, *FB* 129]. Pádraig and Nyema, who acts as the brothers' interpreter with the other tribespeople, fall in love partly through acts of naming and swapping words, in a manner that carries hints of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980);¹³⁴ they

wußten dabei manche Worte für Käfer, Fische,
Vögel und Raubtiere [...]
nur in unseren Muttersprachen

und taufte Wolke für Wolke, ohne zu wissen,
ob, was wir uns zuflüsterten, der Name
für ein and dasselbe Tier in zwei verschiedenen Sprachen
oder zwei Namen für zwei Tiere
zweier verschiedener Welten waren.

[knew all the while some words for beetles, fish,
birds and beasts of prey (...)
only in our native languages

and christened cloud after cloud, without knowing
whether what we whispered to each other was the name
for one and the same animal in two different languages
or two names for two animals
of two different worlds, *FB* 193].

Gould and Twopenny Sal, similarly, hide from the cruel everyday life of the penal colony to swap words that bear the traces of their cultures. While

¹³⁴ *Translations*, too, conjures an alliance of minoritised languages and classical mythology against the disenchanting forces of a land surveying project.

over us brutal westerly winds cut across the island, in the tea-tree we had us our snug
[...] Here we traded words.

My favourite: Moinee.

Her favourite: Cobber (*GB* 184).

Where Sal prefers to hear stories of London, Gould is particularly taken with tales of ‘how Van Diemen’s Land was made, by the god Moinee striking the land & creating the rivers, by puffing away & blowing the earth up into mountains’ (*GB* 184). Flanagan’s text, by contrast with Ransmayr’s, quickly offsets any earnestness with Sal’s designation of the prison island as ‘Moinee’s piss pot – *cobber*’ (*GB* 184). Both passages, however, support the view put forward by Robin Wall Kimmerer, that ‘names are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world’.¹³⁵

The Linnaean system is championed in *Gould’s Book of Fish* by the Surgeon, who praises the ‘revolution in the affairs of man’ it brings about: ‘No more thinking that the natural & human worlds are entwined, but a scientific basis for separation of the two, & human advancement on the basis of that scientific difference forever after’ (*GB* 140). The Surgeon’s apparent conviction that ‘if he could only smash the mystery of the world up into enough fragments & ship them all back to Mr Wheeler to catalogue, then the mystery would disappear & all would be knowable’ (*GB* 146) is also evident in the title of the work the original fish sketches are intended for, ‘*Systema Naturae Australis*’ (*GB* 149). This title marks the undertaking as one more piece in the grand project of Linnaeus’s own *Systema Naturae* (*GB* 152). As with the Wunderkammer in *Flights*, then, here we have forms of collecting and preserving that are part and parcel of the acts of fragmenting and killing. The Wunderkammer as an expression of the centre gazing at the periphery is matched by the Surgeon’s opinions on ‘how Bentham’s principle of the panopticon [...] might profitably be extended to natural history’ (*GB* 152) – an attempt, as Gould thinks to himself, ‘to recreate the natural world as a penal colony’ (*GB* 150).

This project is driven to its logical conclusion when Dr Wheeler in London is beaten to publication by a rival Academy member, and abandons his interest in fish. Instead, he

¹³⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 208; cf. Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 93.

writes to the Surgeon about the 'UP-AND-COMING FIELD' – as the Surgeon's characteristic speech-in-capitals has it – of 'PHRENOLOGY, PARTICULARLY IN REGARD TO VANQUISHED & INFERIOR RACES—SCIENCE POISED TO MAKE GREAT ADVANCES [...] FROM SUCH STUDY OF SKULLS BUT FOR WANT OF GOOD SPECIMENS' (GB 261). After resorting to paying convicts to murder Aborigines in order to collect their skulls, the Surgeon himself is killed and eaten by his enormous pet pig, Castlereagh. Knowing he will be a suspect in this death, Gould hides the Surgeon's skull among the specimens being shipped to England, marking it according to the system as skull MH-36 (GB 285). Several months later, the colony receives a copy of 'Sir' Cosmo Wheeler's 'CRANIA TASMANIAE', along with cuttings of reviews pronouncing that '*one has only to look at the hideous depravity, the ovine set, and the generally regressive shape of skull MH-36 to understand why Crania Tasmaniae is one of the great scientifick achievements of our age*' (GB 346). Gould's own story, meanwhile, ends with a reversal of Rotpeter's 'Ausweg' [way out]. Where the captured Rotpeter sees that his only way out is to become a human, the human Gould escapes execution by becoming a fish: 'With an agony that no human can ever understand & no fish can ever describe, I forced my body down, far, far, far from the light' (GB 447). Where Rotpeter cannot remember or describe his ape memories beyond the explanation that 'Affen denken mit dem Bauch' [apes think with their bellies], Gould relates how 'we fish understand each other with a complete profundity only those unburdened by speech & its complications could understand. It is then untrue that we neither think nor feel' (GB 450).

This rejection of distinctions between human and animal, biosphere and politics, thwarts attempts to separate the elements of resistance back out from one another. They are allied around their incompatibility with, and opposition to, systems built by and for the 'command and control' approach to the world. This opposition also has a bearing on how these authors structure their works, and how they conceive of creativity more broadly. For Tokarczuk, the metaphors of mobility and movement arise partly from her identity and experiences as a Central European writer. In an essay published in Polish as 'Fantom Europy Środkowej przegląda się w literaturze. Czy istnieje powieść środkowoeuropejska?' ('The phantom of Central Europe is reflected in literature: Does the Central European novel exist?'), she tells a story meant to sum up the historical and metaphysical condition of

Central Europe.¹³⁶ The story suggests that her own region of Kłodzko Land ended up in Poland after the Second World War by chance. At the Yalta conference, when the Allies were drawing up their boundaries, Stalin happened to be leaning on the map, supporting himself with his thumb. A secretary, too frightened to ask him to move the thumb, outlined it instead, thus seizing the territory for Poland. While the story is clearly intended as an illustration, this sense of being under the thumb of powers that can arbitrarily re-draw the lines of one's world may inform Tokarczuk's conviction that 'to be creative is [...] to be on the move'.¹³⁷ She admires the work of Stanley Kubrick, 'every time telling something different in a different way', and seeks to do the same in her novels.¹³⁸ Gould gives voice to Flanagan's authorial rejection of linear narrative by expressing his preference for Pliny's *Observations* over Linnaeus's *System Naturae*, both of which he is able to pilfer from the Surgeon's drawer. In Pliny's book, Gould discovers 'that man, far from being central in this life, lived in a parlous world beyond his knowledge' (*GB* 153), making him the notable exception to Gould's conviction that 'You make a straight road like the Romans & you are lucky to get three words: *Veni, Vidi, Vici*. You have a crooked goat path like the Greeks all over the Acropolis and what do you get? The entire damn *Odyssey* & *Oedipus Rex*, that's what (*GB* 190-1).¹³⁹ Ransmayr's distinctive use of free verse – which he dubs 'der Flattersatz – oder besser: *der fliegende Satz*' [the ragged margin (literally in German: fluttering sentence) – or better: *the flying sentence*, *FB* vi] – in works that portray such lines and systems, meanwhile, could be read optimistically, as a breaking up and disruption of imposed lines; or, more sceptically, as a way of drawing attention to the ways in which authors and texts, too, draw lines, point the way, program. With this in mind, it is worth considering one final form of resistance to lines and systems – the resistance of readers.

¹³⁶ Olga Tokarczuk, 'Fantom Europy Środkowej przegląda się w literaturze. Czy istnieje powieść środkowoeuropejska?' <https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no30_ses/p17-36.pdf> [Accessed 14th April 2023]. In reading the essay, I first compared machine translations into English and German, then consulted with Polish-speaking literary scholars. Thanks are due in particular to Dr Karolina Watroba and Dr Kasia Szymanska, who discussed this essay with me – as well the idea of Central Europe more broadly – in a conversation available here: <<https://soundcloud.com/tlrhub/the-hublic-sphere-looking-east-looking-west-should-we-change-how-we-talk-about-eastern-europe>> [Accessed 14th April 2023].

¹³⁷ Michael Cronin, 'Olga Tokarczuk interview: "Irish and Poles have many things in common"', *The Irish Times*, Oct 2018. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/olga-tokarczuk-interview-irish-and-poles-have-many-things-in-common-1.3642311>> [Accessed 14th April, 2023].

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ 'Ovid!', Ransmayr might retort.

Resistance IV: Readers

For Sabine I. Gözl, 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' is indeed a text about ideology, interpellation and control, but not in the way that I have outlined here. Instead, Gözl reads it as an enactment of a writing system which, in alliance with the gendered and Eurocentric systems of literary canons, 'conscripts' the reader into its service.¹⁴⁰ In a remarkable 'contrastive' close reading of 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' with Ingeborg Bachmann's later story 'Der Kommandant' [The Commander], Gözl uses Kafka's text to analyse the process of reading itself, which is, she argues, 'an encounter between two apparatuses: one linguistic, figurative, textual, the other organic and embodied'.¹⁴¹ 'When I begin to read', Gözl writes, 'I simultaneously perform and am subject to an invasion—an *Einfall*'.¹⁴²

This is, we remember, exactly how Kafka came on the scene here in the first place: through the idea of books that could 'bite and sting', or perhaps even 'smash' the frozen sea inside the reader, causing them to channel the book's effect on them back into the external world. Gözl's reading turns the screw of this argument by asking what the reader's own position is in this biting and stinging, and to what extent they must accept the role of the frozen sea. With recourse to neuroscience, which treats the reading brain as a system of its own – one that is set up to minimise 'free energy', entropy and vertical 'spikes'¹⁴³ – she reads 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' as a map of the reading and writing systems that Kafka, and the masculine Western canon more broadly, are intent on upholding. This system is at home in the status quo, and is more than happy in the knowledge that reading brains are set up to minimise resistance. 'Only a self-forgetful reader', as Gözl puts it, 'is a good soldier'.¹⁴⁴ Kafka's text and Bachmann's, she argues – with meticulously close reference to each – are allegories of two different ways of reading, with 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' serving as the perfect 'blueprint for the mechanisms by which European literature has been generating readers' oblivion to themselves'.¹⁴⁵ The evidence

¹⁴⁰ Sabine I. Gözl, 'Dear K.: Group S. Is Reading Now. Kafka, Bachmann, and Two Ways to Use A Glass Ceiling', 9. Pre-print cited with author's permission.

¹⁴¹ Gözl, 'Dear K.', 1.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16; 18.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

can be found in how each text establishes its borders; uses indexicals, such as ‘here’ or ‘there’; shows a vacant centre of power – in Kafka’s case, the absent emperor and unlocatable ‘Stube der Führerschaft’ [room of the high leadership, *BB* 268]; and culminates in a scene of reading, which in Kafka’s version includes a direct address to the reader: the emperor has sent *you* a message. The Empire needs *you!*¹⁴⁶ ‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’, Gözl argues, works from the outset to make the reader accept their place in the empire, viewing the nomads as the enemy; and to read ‘here’ as referring to the representational space of Kafka’s China, rather than pointing ‘*out of* the text and into the place and time where I am, reading this text right *now*’.¹⁴⁷ The latter way of reading ‘here’ allows the reader to ‘insist on our own irreducible and categorical *unrepresentability*’, an insistence without which ‘the text will read (and script) me’.¹⁴⁸ Indexicals, then, are ‘both the lifeline and the Achilles’ heel of the empire of writing’.¹⁴⁹ If the author can get you to read ‘here’ only in terms of their fictional representational space, they have won. You (and indeed I) have lost, becoming ‘a free resource for the self-organizing proliferation of the empire that feeds on [our] labor, churning out printed matter to be shelved in libraries under the keyword of “Kafka, Franz”’.¹⁵⁰ Gözl argues that this is why Kafka’s emperor so slyly addresses his never-arriving message to *you*: ‘As long as “you” sit at your window dreaming up messages, his empire will survive. If this reader turns away, the empire falls’.¹⁵¹

Gözl’s reading complicates the argument of the thesis so far in several interesting ways. For one thing, the ‘grand overview’ that we have been concerned with in terms of narration is one she ascribes instead to the reader: if they succeed in ‘catastrophising’ the text, the critically conscious reader will find themselves above it, looking down. This, for

¹⁴⁶ Not pertinent to Gözl’s analysis, but interesting for readings of Kafka’s China as a version of his Habsburg context, is the manifesto ‘An meine Völker!’ [To my peoples!] that was displayed around the empire on the orders of Franz Josef I in July 1914, to announce the Austro-Hungarian entry into the war. This message – from the pen of the long-serving Emperor who appeared to many of his subjects to embody the dual monarchy, and ultimately spelling its end – shapes the writing context of ‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’ in 1917. At around the same time (1916-17), Kafka composed his only drama fragment, ‘Der Gruftwächter’ [The Tomb Warden], in which the titular tomb warden must wrestle undead Habsburgs back into their graves each night.

¹⁴⁷ Gözl, ‘Dear K.’, 8. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32; 30. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Gölz, is why Kafka tries to turn the willing reader against the ‘Nordvölker’ [Northerners]: because, imagined on a vertical axis, when a reading ‘consciously situates itself “here” — in the time of reading—it moves *the entire pre-existing representational space “South”*.¹⁵² This is also why, in her reading, a legion appears marching alongside the protagonist in Bachmann’s story ‘only [...] *once the sky clears*’.¹⁵³ These ‘faceless legions in the sky’, as Gölz envisions them, are made up of readers: they ‘exist in the *vertical* dimension: above the text’.¹⁵⁴ Put differently, Gölz’s insistence is on rejecting ‘immersion’ in a fictional universe – an argument perhaps more familiar in the realm of theatre and visual or physical media than that of texts. The rejection of immersion in favour of critical reflection recalls Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect], for instance, or Walter Benjamin’s discussion of aura. In Benjamin’s analysis, the painter is a ‘Magier’ [magician] who creates an illusionary whole; the ‘Kameramann’ [camera-man] who breaks the spell does so by acting like a ‘Chirurg’ [surgeon], cutting up the illusion and exposing its mechanisms.¹⁵⁵

As I argued in Chapter 1, however, the contemporary authors discussed here are interested in Kafka’s versions of insides and outsides – and his ideas about how texts affect readers – not as ends in themselves, but in service of change and action in the physical world, where events of real urgency are currently unfolding. How are we to square the circle of this imperative with Gölz’s view? The texts considered here are, in almost all cases, much more elaborate structures than ‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’, with complex forms and framing devices that could be seen either to mitigate Kafka’s interpellative strategies, or to bolster them. To take just the example of *Gould’s Book*, we have a novel stuffed with allusions – signalled and otherwise – to texts and authors of the Western canon. These draw attention, on the one hand, to the novel’s artifice; but they also serve to ‘conscript’ both the novel and the reader, in Gölz’s terms, into this pre-existing army. In the Sid Hammet framing device, Kafka’s ‘you’ also makes an appearance. Here, the face ‘hovering above’ which might serve as the avatar of the reader is Hammet’s face, staring in at the weedy seadragon: ‘I put my face to the glass, stared closer’ (GB 43) As we will

¹⁵² Ibid, 10; emphasis in original.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 15; emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid; emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin, ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit [Zweite Fassung]’, in *Walter Benjamin. Gesammelte Schriften I.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 496.

discover in the novel's ending, this seadragon is the very fish Gould has become in order to escape execution. 'What was it trying to tell me?', Hammet wonders,

I felt accused, guilty [...] Or was the seadragon saying to me in some diaphanous communication beyond words: *I shall be you*.

And shall I, I wondered, be you? (*GB* 44; emphasis in original).

Sure enough, Hammet and the weedy seadragon are soon embroiled in a body swap, with Hammet 'falling, tumbling, passing through glass and through water into that seadragon's eye while that seadragon was passing into me, and then I was looking out at that bedraggled man staring in at me, that man who would, I now had the vanity of hoping, finally tell my story' (*GB* 45). Gözl might be inclined to read this as the moment of (gendered) conscription, in which the text reveals that it is in search of embodied readers who will go on telling its story; it is a parasite in need of a host. Where the reader watches this first encounter, as it were, from behind glass, the ending of the novel sees the fish Gould preparing to hop into his next body, noticing from within his tank how 'Sid Hammet stares at me too long [...] I shall be you. I am ascending from the night, rising, rolling, passing through glass' (*GB* 456). This second 'I shall be you' could be read as a direct interpellation of the reader, who is to be infected in turn, to become the bedraggled figure (*man*, Gözl insists) who goes around telling stories of fish.

Even this understanding is muddled, however, by the way the novel closes its own loop, revealing that Gould and Sid Hammet have been stuck in a great wheel of their own; the fish Gould knows it is 'only a matter of time before I am gazing out of that neon-lit tank I once so intently stared into' (*GB* 455). It becomes increasingly hard to make head or tail of. If this is the writing apparatus of Kafka's penal colony, which inscribes the subject's fate on their body, then it is also using its own version of the elaborate script the machine writes in so that its meaning cannot immediately be understood. In Kafka's story, this script consists of 'labyrinthartige, einander vielfach kreuzende Linien, die so dicht das Papier bedeckten, daß man nur mit Mühe die weißen Zwischenräume entdeckte' [labyrinthine lines crossing each other in multiple places, and which covered the paper so densely that

one could discover the white spaces between only with effort].¹⁵⁶ In response to the Officer's instruction to read this script – 'Es ist doch deutlich!' [But it is clear!] – the Traveller of Kafka's story replies politely: 'Es ist sehr kunstvoll, aber ich kann es nicht entziffern' [It is very artful, but I cannot decipher it].¹⁵⁷

This is not – or not only – meant as a slight against *Gould's Book of Fish*, which really has succeeded in producing at least one bedraggled man who cares a bit more about fish, along with more shelf fodder to be filed under 'Flanagan, Richard'. There are good reasons, particularly in the context of this thesis, to push back against Gözl's reading of Kafka – to resist her model of reader resistance. Many of the possible objections to her method are pre-empted within the method itself. Gözl emphasises, for instance, that 'both the text and we ourselves are deeply embedded in a given literary culture long before we read any first sentence', leaving our reading brains 'stuffed with automatisms, citations, emotions, conditioned responses and a wealth of associations with other texts we have read'.¹⁵⁸ When she points out soon afterwards that 'our brains are not the only source of illusions. Philosophy and literary theory find that language, writing, and figurative language are, as well',¹⁵⁹ she is at the same time highlighting the material her own reading brain is stuffed with, and is trained to spot in the texts she reads. As opposed to my reading brain – currently stuffed with Ghosh and Morton – Gözl's reading brain, full of a particular tradition of theory, is optimised to read texts as enactments of certain elements of deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion. This is not to reduce the brilliance and complexity of Gözl's reading, which really does stand head and shoulders above the legions of deconstructionists dutifully un-building walls. But it serves to reveal the particular parameters of her reading, which depends in part on the selection of two texts that are primarily 'about' command and control, vacant power centres and acts of transmission and reading. Is this type of reading still possible in the same way when considering texts that are 'about' trees or animals, for instance? This question will be considered in more depth in Chapter 4, where reading animals as metaphors and symbols rather than as real

¹⁵⁶ Kafka, 'In der Strafkolonie' 158. Gözl, by contrast, views Bachmann's literary method as a way of turning the text into the object of Bachmann's greatest enthusiasm: 'the "white, unmarked sheet of paper on which what is still to be gained also appears inscribed" ("das weiße, unbeschriebene Blatt, auf dem das Hinzuzugewinnende auch eingetragen scheint")'. Gözl, 'Dear K.', 19.

¹⁵⁷ Kafka, 'In der Strafkolonie', 159.

¹⁵⁸ Gözl, 'Dear K.', 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

referents is shown to be one of the paths of least resistance that the ecocritical reading brain seeks to diverge from.¹⁶⁰

Gölz's decision to read the text and brain as 'rival systems', meanwhile – a combative language that also informs her insistence on 'contrastive' reading – at times feeds into a kind of 'survival of the fittest' view of the reading process, which is seen to produce winners (usually the text and Author) and losers (usually the reader, except for the few Nietzschean *Überleser* [super-readers]). This is particularly noticeable when juxtaposed with the ecocritical emphasis on co-operation and symbiosis, arising from and feeding into changed understandings of biology – such as the biological 'postmodern synthesis' of Lynn Margulis mentioned in Chapter 1¹⁶¹ – and social relations. While Gölz's reading sets itself against the mindset of mastery she locates in the masculine Western canon, her zero-sum theory of reading sometimes appears to rest on its fundamental premises.

Ghosh considers the idea of human social evolution and socialisation as essentially competitive when discussing 'Malthusian' responses to the climate crisis, for instance, which prop up the very same inside/outside, us-and-them logic as the wall in Kafka's text. Among the founding principles of this type of thought are the image of society as a 'lifeboat', liable to be sunk if too many people board, and the related concept of the 'tragedy of the commons', both put forward by Garrett Hardin.¹⁶² More recent work in economics, including that of Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, shows that 'humans often respond to scarcity and crisis with strategies of cooperation and sharing. Indeed, the ability to cooperate is now regarded by some scientists as a crucial evolutionary advantage'.¹⁶³ Ghosh, with his novelist's reading brain, sees this through the lens of *Lord of the Flies*, which exemplifies how 'English literature [...] has long been a leading disseminator of the

¹⁶⁰ This is also, arguably, what distinguishes the texts under discussions here from earlier forms of metafiction, a long tradition of writing theorised by Patricia Waugh in her seminal work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001). While the novels analysed here match Waugh's description of texts where 'language soon becomes a "prisonhouse" from which the possibility of escape is remote' (Ibid, 4), the works she analyses often seem to take delight in the fact that their attempts to represent the material world 'can only dissolve into metalingual mutterings' (Ibid, 8). By contrast, the novels of Flanagan, Ransmayr and Tokarczuk are often acutely aware of the need to break free of the 'prisonhouse' of language in order to grapple with material realities, while recognising the apparent impossibility of this task.

¹⁶¹ McFall-Ngai, 'Noticing Microbial Worlds', M64.

¹⁶² Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 175-6.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 176-7.

ideology of morbid individualism'.¹⁶⁴ He points out that when, only eleven years after the novel's publication, its theory made contact with reality – with 'a group of six teenage schoolboys [...] stranded on a desert island for fifteen months' – the boys 'cooperated, established rules, and looked after each other'.¹⁶⁵ But the schoolboys 'were Tongan, not English' and therefore had not learned from Golding that they were meant to compete.¹⁶⁶ *Lord of the Flies*, then, is a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', in the same way that students of neo-classical economics appear to be 'markedly more selfish, more prone to dishonesty, and less willing to cooperate than their peers in other fields', because they have been taught that this is how their brains work.¹⁶⁷ This leads Ghosh to conclude that *Lord of the Flies* remains canonical not because it is insightful, but due to its presentation of 'an image of human nature that Western elites *want* to believe because it is a product of the same imaginaries on which their worldview is founded'.¹⁶⁸ This would not be news to Gölz, of course, who takes up arms against this very process of indoctrination – the way in which writing 'hijack[s] our brains'¹⁶⁹ – and against this method of canon formation. Gölz's choice of metaphors, nonetheless, still appears shaped by the system her reading wishes to dismantle.

Instead of text and brain as rival systems, why not imagine text and brain as symbionts? In the current thesis, arising from a discourse concerned with how life 'is symbiosis "all the way down"',¹⁷⁰ it seems strange to worry that the text might be a parasite (or a virus) that needs the reader to act as its host. If we are getting used to the idea of everything being 'entangled', or that we ourselves are 'monsters', why not imagine reading in this way too? Part of the problem, as Gölz sees it, might be that the text itself gets to emerge unscathed from this exchange, whereas it is the reader who must be changed, who is supposed to have been acted upon: self-forgetful readers are those who are 'unable to understand that the wall is actually in their own heads, protecting the text against their very selves'.¹⁷¹ Well, then: how about the symbiosis of text and text that was hinted at in the introduction? If I

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 177.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 178.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 177.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 178.

¹⁶⁹ Gölz, 'Dear K.', 17.

¹⁷⁰ Tsing et al., 'Bodies Tumbled Into Bodies', M5.

¹⁷¹ Gölz, 'Dear K.', 12.

put two texts together and watch how they interact in my reading, am I still being programmed by them? Do they still remain walled off from one another, morbidly individual? Or does the exchange result in a new, third thing, a collaboration or correspondence?

Some of these ideas, including that of reading as a collaboration, have been explored in more detail by Karolina Watroba in her quite different attempt to dismantle the towering heft of another modernist text and author: Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* [*The Magic Mountain*]. In *Mann's Magic Mountain: World Literature and Closer Reading* (2022), Watroba argues not only that it is perfectly fine for readers' minds to wander during the long philosophical discussions between Settembrini and Naphta, but also that Mann himself was out of his depth with these ideas, and knew he did not really 'get' them.¹⁷² Instead, the debates and their philosophical allusions function as a surface, a kind of 'erudition effect'.¹⁷³ One way of framing what Gözl's reading of Kafka opposes, as I have suggested, is through the idea of 'immersion' in a text, which she places in binary opposition to critical reflection. The indexical 'here', in her reading, points us into the hallucinated world of the fictional text, or back out into our own moment of reading – but it remains 'Either, or'.¹⁷⁴ 'The incompatibility of these two modes of reading', Gözl claims, 'is total. To construct one – readerly self-awareness or a fictional world – is to deconstruct the other'.¹⁷⁵ Watroba, by contrast, picks up on the many metaphors of immersion in Mann's novel, and shows both how they match up with reports of the pleasure readers find in the book, and how they stand in tension with more forbidding sections like the lengthy philosophical debates. With reference to a wide range of intertexts and readers' self-reports, she demonstrates that immersion is by no means the path of least resistance for readers at all times, and is only one of many modes the reading mind switches between in any given sitting. Watroba, then, takes a quite different approach to putting Mann in his

¹⁷² Karolina Watroba, *Mann's Magic Mountain: World Literature and Closer Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 138.

¹⁷³ Watroba, *Mann's Magic Mountain*, 149. Despite their differences of approach, Watroba describes the model of erudition Mann's novel could be seen to uphold, and which generations of scholarship have underpinned, in terms that chime with Gözl's: 'The idea of learning and erudition that emerges out of *The Magic Mountain* is that it always exists somewhere else. In a different book, in a different time, in a different place. It is accessible to somebody else, just not you'. *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁷⁴ Gözl, 'Dear K.', 9.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

place than Gözl does. She analyses, for instance, the difference between what generations of critics have shelved away about the Settembrini-Naphta debates under the name ‘Mann, Thomas’ – usually consisting of chasing up the allusions to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer et al. – and how readers discuss these passages on a Goodreads forum intended as a kind of *Magic Mountain* reading support group. These readers, engaging in a collaborative form of reading alongside the solitary version, offer suggestions for approaching the text that reveal the patchwork nature of the reading experience itself, as well as offering truly original interpretations that give the lie to any idea of the academy having all the answers.¹⁷⁶

This ties in with another reason to resist being conscripted too willingly into Gözl’s reading. In suggesting that ‘text and brain’ are ‘rival systems’ that ‘conspire not so much against us, but against each other [...] And they have left traces on each other that we can detect’,¹⁷⁷ she adopts the position of a Freudian hermeneutics of suspicion, insisting both that your brain is trying to trick you, and that it can be outwitted by the right analyst, the right detective. Repeatedly, Gözl describes Kafka’s method in terms of ‘precision’,¹⁷⁸ characterised in one instance as ‘surgical’.¹⁷⁹ Her own reading, meanwhile, pits scalpel against scalpel, cutting its own lines through the text in the manner of Benjamin’s ‘Chirurg’ [surgeon]. This is one of the modes of analysis recently discussed by Leahy, as part of a survey of theories of reading that starts with Freud and spirals back to Freud via the main approaches of the past few decades, all marked by the gesture: ‘Ich kann dich lesen’ [I can read you].¹⁸⁰

Leahy’s study proffers several useful alternative pathways. She considers, for instance, Bruno Latour’s argument that critique – now, in Latour’s view, a spent force – must be revived by switching its focus from ‘matters of fact’ (meaning, essentially, the ‘iconoclasm’

¹⁷⁶ One reader, in a series of comments on the Goodreads forum over several days, produces a memorable interpretation of the philosophical debates in terms of the circular and layered ‘Baumkuchen’ the characters are eating. ‘A full-on immersion in the story world’, Watroba argues, ‘complete with vivid impressions of the kind of food that the characters are eating, has not precluded this reader’s “reflective thought”, but rather enabled it’ (Watroba, *Mann’s Magic Mountain*, 153). This is admittedly not the level of reflection Gözl has in mind.

¹⁷⁷ Gözl, ‘Dear K.’, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 12; 22; 24; 26.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁸⁰ Caitríona Leahy, ‘Making Sense. In and of Doron Rabinovici’, *Austrian Studies* 29 (2021), 15.

of deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion) to ‘matters of concern’ (meaning, not least, climate change).¹⁸¹ Another useful framework is that of ‘presence’, as suggested by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and anticipated in Susan Sontag’s call for an ‘erotics’, rather than hermeneutics, of literature.¹⁸² Gumbrecht’s philosophy might provide quite a different view of the densely ornamental script in Kafka’s penal colony: in rejecting ‘metaphysics’ as that which seeks meaning behind or beneath a surface, this surface – and the way in which an embodied subject is attuned to it – becomes a kind of end in itself.¹⁸³ This understanding of presence is one way of parsing Morton’s view that ‘all art is ecological’, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Viewed in this light, a text like *Gould’s Book of Fish*, insisting on its own physical presence through features like its coloured ink, is the thing that can’t be perceived all at once – the ‘slippery & three-dimensional monster that exists in all manner of curves’ (GB 155) – and Gözl, to put it polemically, becomes the Surgeon keen to dissect it. A Benjaminian surgeon, certainly, intent on curing the reader or viewer; but one who does so by treating the ‘presence’ of the artwork as a parasite, and killing it off. Leahy navigates a path between Gumbrecht’s approach and Gözl’s by fleshing out the latter’s concept of ‘conscription’, which she sees as useful for two related reasons: ‘Firstly, conscription acknowledges [the] insistence that all things are written things – scribed, inscribed and circumscribed; secondly, it acknowledges the tension within [...] texts between the forces of attraction, compulsion and resistance’.¹⁸⁴ These remarks are made with regards to works by the contemporary Austrian writer Doron Rabinovici, but in the light of our discussion so far, it is clear that they might equally be applied to the works of Flanagan, Ransmayr and Tokarczuk.

¹⁸¹ Latour’s view does not necessarily run contrary to Gözl’s, whose reading is about reading rather than about deconstructing ‘facts’. The ‘matter of concern’ Gözl aims at in critiquing gendered structures of reading and writing is, implicitly, the gendered forms of injustice these structures underpin. Nonetheless, Latour’s challenge to critique does appear to be a call for a different approach: ‘Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it?’ Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 232; cf. Leahy, ‘Making Sense’, 26.

¹⁸² Leahy, ‘Making Sense’, 26.

¹⁸³ Gumbrecht’s study is written in opposition to a worldview, which it traces back to the early modern period, in which it ‘becomes more and more conventional to think of the world of objects and of the human body as surfaces that “express” deeper meanings’. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 25-6.

¹⁸⁴ Leahy, ‘Making Sense’, 29.

Conclusion

Whichever way we slice and dice it, it is overwhelmingly clear that the contemporary novels discussed here share Kafka's guiding interest in 'die Organisation des Lebens und der Arbeit in der menschlichen Gemeinschaft' [the organisation of life and work in human community].¹⁸⁵ This concern appears, on the one hand, in the form of systems that seek to 'dra[w] "general lines" in the fabric of the whole',¹⁸⁶ and to impose unity, totality, and stasis. On the other hand, it crops up through the various forces that resist these efforts. These forces range from physical obstacles to the unwillingness of humans (including human readers) to be bound; but they reside above all in the principle of metamorphosis itself, which defies both dreams of stasis and the imposition of rigid boundaries. In doing so, the knowledge that 'nothing retains its form' can help to direct attention towards lines of thought that do not bear up to scrutiny, such as the attempts throughout history of 'White, Western Man' to cordon himself off from the rest of the world.

This latter consideration raises a crucial element of Gözl's 'contrastive reading' that has not been sufficiently discussed here: the aspect of gender. Gözl's reading places gender at the heart of the difference between Kafka's text and Bachmann's. She traces with rigour and determination the use of gendered nouns in the German original of each text – a project that extends far beyond this one reading, calling instead for a widespread attempt to 'shine the spotlight of our attention on those particles. Only then can we learn to deactivate their effects, and ultimately to rewrite that apparatus'.¹⁸⁷ While Bachmann has often been read in 'correspondence' with a whole host of canonical male writers, Gözl points out that these intertexts are usually read as cases of unproblematic influence, a view she definitively rejects. While she praises Sigrid Weigel's foundational scholarship on Bachmann's wider intellectual context, for instance, Gözl points out that Weigel still presents the affinity between 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' and 'Der Kommandant' 'in terms of a filiation, with Kafka in the role of a "godfather" ("hat Pate gestanden")'.¹⁸⁸ This misses what appears to Gözl as 'the most important feature of Bachmann's work: her

¹⁸⁵ Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka', 420.

¹⁸⁶ Campbell et al., 'Climate Change Is Not A Problem', 726.

¹⁸⁷ Gözl, 'Dear K.', 24.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

utterly focused and flawlessly theorized critical rewriting of the poetics of Kafka, Celan, and Benjamin, to cite but a few'.¹⁸⁹

In the next chapter, I suggest a further comparative (and contrastive) reading between texts by Ransmayr and Bachmann, centred not least around their approach to gender. The parallels between these texts – Bachmann's novel fragment *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*], and Ransmayr's 2021 novel *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*] – are strong enough to suggest that Bachmann did indeed stand as godmother for Ransmayr's recent work. The contrast is not a case of a later writer critiquing an earlier one, but a question of context, with Ransmayr adopting characteristic features of Bachmann's writing in the new context of the climate crisis. Like 'Der Kommandant', the texts to be analysed in Chapter 3 are detective stories and halls of mirrors, some of which appear designed to prompt a reflection on the reader's own complicity in a climate-disrupted world. It is a chapter in which more than one protagonist will find himself, as Götz puts it, 'alone in the "hall of mirrors," search[ing] in vain for the perpetrator of a transgression which (the reader knows) he himself has committed'.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

3. Mastery

The darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir, which is a strange loop: the detective is a criminal. In a strong version of noir the narrator is implicated in the story [...] Ecological awareness is the moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal.

-Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 9.

It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story [...] The killer story.

-Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 33.

Chapter 1 considered the ways in which writing about the climate crisis contorts itself in attempting to show the 'big picture'. These contortions of form, which aim to narrate on mind-boggling scales, to disrupt the insides and outsides as well as the beginnings and endings of texts, and to extend omniscience to nonhuman animals and objects, often seemed to owe a particular debt to the aesthetic experiments of Franz Kafka. Chapter 2 elaborated on the types of causality, violence and justice that the authors and texts analysed here seek to represent: the violence of systems set up on a scale that disregards the individual, and designed to treat all elements of the biosphere, including humans, as resources to be extracted, exploited and used up. One of the central difficulties so far, then, has been that of representing the vast, seemingly impersonal forces that drive environmental destruction, and of linking these larger forces to causes and effects on the visible, personal scale.

If the various tyrants and emperors we encountered in Chapter 2 already appeared as embodiments of the systems they presided over, this chapter will discuss more radical – and more complex – attempts to personify this attitude of domination. In doing so, it will

draw on another literary forebear whose work pre-empted many of the central problems of this thesis: namely, the Austrian poet and novelist Ingeborg Bachmann. Ransmayr's work, I will contend, echoes Bachmann's in ways that have not yet been addressed by criticism, particularly with regards to the theme of gendered domination, which has long been overlooked in his work. After outlining and aligning some early visions of 'mastery' in their respective oeuvres – the prose poem *Strahlender Untergang* [*Radiant Demise*], and Bachmann's story 'Unter Mördern und Irren' [Among Murderers and Madmen] – the chapter will consider the echoes of Bachmann's novel fragment *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*] in Ransmayr's 2021 novel *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*]. The underlying correspondence between these texts, I will suggest, is their concern with an attitude of mastery and its relationship to murder in a broad sense. Both writers seek out highly condensed, aesthetic images and allegorical modes in portraying attitudes of superiority and domination. These images and archetypes, meanwhile, are ultimately used to draw lines of connection between gendered violence and exploitation of other kinds, including – in the case of *Der Fallmeister* – the violence of the climate crisis.

Introducing: Ingeborg Bachmann

Like Kafka, Ingeborg Bachmann was a stylistic outlier during her life; like his, her works continue to reveal their significance and prescience as time unfolds. Although Bachmann achieved early acclaim as a poet in the wake of the Second World War, and continued to receive official accolades throughout her life, her decision to abandon poetry in favour of fiction in her thirties was met with dismay and a good deal of condescension by the literary establishment of the day.¹ Her prose works, characterised both by their philosophical ambition and, in many cases, by a propulsive, associative style, were dismissed by prominent critics like Marcel Reich-Ranicki as confused and ultimately shallow.² This

¹ The initial negative reception to Bachmann's prose is outlined by Lina Fisher in *Gender and Style in the Translation and Reception of Ingeborg Bachmann's 'Todesarten' Texts* (PhD dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2014), 78-81. <<https://core.ac.uk/reader/41994070>> [Accessed 17th March 2023].

² This profoundly misogynistic reaction to Bachmann's prose is on full display in Reich-Ranicki's review of her final published work, the story collection *Simultan* (1972). Branding Bachmann a 'gefallene Lyrikerin' [fallen poetess] – with all the attendant connotations – Reich-Ranicki dismissed *Malina* as 'ein trübes Gewässer, das manche deshalb – und nur deshalb – auch für tief hielten' [murky water, which some people believe for this reason – and no other – to be deep]. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, 'Am liebsten beim Friseur: Ingeborg Bachmanns

hostility extended from her first story collection, *Das dreißigste Jahr* [*The Thirtieth Year*, 1961], to her only published novel, *Malina* (1971), which appeared shortly before her death in 1973. As the contemporary fiction read in the course of this research shows, however, Bachmann's literary vision was to prove prophetic on multiple levels. In the German-speaking context, *Malina* was re-evaluated as a feminist classic in the late 1970s and 80s.³ More recently, the English translation by Philipp Boehm, long neglected and difficult to obtain, has experienced a resurgence in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Reprinted as a Penguin Modern Classic in 2019, the novel received belated rave reviews in the English-speaking media, which saw in it 'a portrait, in language, of female consciousness, truer than anything written since [Sappho]'.⁴ In continental Europe, *Malina* has been named as an influence by another successful export, Elena Ferrante.⁵

While this 'rediscovery' might elicit the occasional eye-roll from German-speaking critics, for whom Bachmann has remained a canonical figure since the 1970s, its timing is unsurprising. A crucial feature of Bachmann's writing is its close attention to the many ways in which women are subjugated, silenced, exploited and written out of history by men. Her keen eye and vivid images for this type of violence are central to the project that became her *Lebenswerk*: a planned cycle of novels under the title *Todesarten* [*Ways of Dying*]. At the time of her death, only *Malina*, as the first novel in the cycle, had been completed and published; two earlier fragments, based on the female protagonists

neuer Erzählungsband *Simultan*' <<https://www.zeit.de/1972/39/am-liebsten-beim-friseur>> [Accessed online 24th February 2023].

³ This feminist re-appraisal, as well as its limitations as a way of reading Bachmann's work, are outlined in detail by Sara Lennox in *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters: Feminism, History, and Ingeborg Bachmann* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

⁴ Rachel Kushner, 'Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* Is the Truest Portrait of Female Consciousness Since Sappho'. *The New Yorker* online, 22nd May 2019. <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/ingeborg-bachmanns-malina-is-the-truest-portrait-of-female-consciousness-since-sappho>> [Accessed 24th February 2023]; cf. Rachel Kushner, 'Introduction', in Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*, trans. Philip Boehm (London: Penguin, 2019) vii-xii (vii).

⁵ Ferrante counts Bachmann among the writers 'who have worked with the most dedication and engagement', and who have 'confronted with suffering, I would say with anguish' a fundamental problem: that 'writing is a cage and we enter it right away, with our first line' (Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing*, trans. Ann Goldstein [London: Europa Editions, 2022], 73). This insight, which chimes with Leahy's detailed reading of the problem of beginning in *Malina* (cf. Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 17-40), also reflects the concerns of Chapter 1, and aligns with the analysis to follow in this chapter. Ferrante has named *Malina* among her 40 favourite books by female authors, a list that was widely publicised (Sian Cain, 'Elena Ferrante names her 40 favourite books by female authors', *Guardian online* (2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/21/elena-ferrante-names-her-40-favourite-books-by-female-authors>> [Accessed 3rd March 2023]).

Franziska Ranner and Fanny Goldmann, remained unfinished. Both have been published posthumously in several different forms in the intervening decades.⁶ Bachmann conceived of the cycle as ‘ein[e] einzig[e] groß[e] Studie aller möglichen Todesarten’ [a single great study of all possible ways of dying; or ‘all possible types of death’]⁷ – a staggeringly ambitious undertaking which, in practice, is usually understood somewhat more narrowly. The most radical and most resounding innovation of *Todesarten* consists in the connections it draws between the violence of patriarchy and the violence of genocide, as well as the aesthetic techniques used to convey these parallels. *Todesarten*, at least as it has usually been received, is in many ways an aesthetic and philosophical elaboration on one of Bachmann’s most famous soundbites: that fascism begins in the relationship between people, and particularly in the relationships between men and women.⁸

Bachmann, in other words, was among the first German-speaking writers to pioneer a philosophy and aesthetic of what has lately been theorised as ‘multidirectional’ thinking.⁹ This might appear to those familiar with her work as a simplistic and belated term for her literary approach; yet it is useful in identifying one of the central ways in which Bachmann’s writing anticipates contemporary fiction concerned with the climate crisis. In Chapter 2, we saw how the idea of multidirectional memory and the writers commonly aligned with it are often linked to Walter Benjamin’s conceptions of history. Flanagan, as we have seen, is a trained historian whose texts have often been read along Benjaminian lines;

⁶ In the first edition of Bachmann’s collected works, they appeared as *Der Fall Franza* and *Requiem für Fanny Goldmann* [*The Case of Franza* and *Requiem for Fanny Goldmann*]. The 1995 edition of the *Todesarten* project arranged the material differently, publishing the two fragments as *Das Buch Franza* and *Requiem für Fanny Goldmann*; this edition was the basis for Peter Filkins’s 1999 English translation. The more recent Salzburg edition of Bachmann’s works affirms her authorial preference for *Das Buch Franza* as a title, and incorporates the material around Fanny Goldmann into the more extensive *Das Buch Goldmann* [*The Book of Goldmann*]. The significance of the various alternative titles for the *Franza* fragment is discussed in more detail below.

⁷ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden: Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum (Munich: Piper, 1991), 65; cf. Áine McMurtry, *Crisis and Form in the Later Writing of Ingeborg Bachmann* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012), 67.

⁸ ‘Ich habe schon vorher darüber nachgedacht, wo fängt der Faschismus an. Er fängt nicht an mit den ersten Bomben, die geworfen werden, er fängt nicht an mit dem Terror, über den man schreiben kann, in jeder Zeitung. Er fängt an in den Beziehungen zwischen Menschen. Der Faschismus ist das erste in der Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einer Frau’ [Even before this I was thinking about it, where does fascism begin. It doesn’t begin with the first bombs that are dropped, it doesn’t begin with the acts of terror that one can write about in every newspaper. It begins in the relationships between people. Fascism is the first thing in the relationship between a man and a woman]. Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 144.

⁹ This connection has been noted by Tessa Wegener, who analyses *Das Buch Franza* through the lens of Rothberg’s study in ‘Blurred Spaces and Belated Shock: The Poetics of Multidirectional Memory in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *The Book of Franza*’, *Women in German Yearbook*, Vol. 30 (2014), 1-22.

Bachmann, meanwhile, views historical subject matter not least through the lens of philosophy, having offered in her doctoral thesis a critique of the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Where Flanagan responds to Benjamin with a vision of history as a circle or spiral, encompassing ideas of reincarnation, and cultivates an aesthetic of dissolving boundaries in which everyone is, on some level, everyone else, Bachmann's approach is both more mysterious and more precise. If the analysis in the first half of this thesis took place under the sign of Kafka, the argument of the second half will unfold increasingly under the sign of Bachmann.

The focus here will be on the aspects of Bachmann's work that echo most resoundingly through contemporary writing about the climate crisis. In particular, I will consider the use of archetypes, character triads and vivid, non-realistic images to make visible the large, impersonal forces and patterns of behaviour that seem to these writers to be at the root of the trouble. Chapter 4 and the epilogue will locate Bachmann-esque ideas and techniques in the work of Tokarczuk, Ursula K. Le Guin and others. While we might be less surprised to encounter correspondences to Bachmann in the work of these female heirs and peers, this chapter argues more counter-intuitively that Bachmann's thoughts are also at the heart of Ransmayr's literary oeuvre.

In stark contrast to Bachmann, her compatriot Ransmayr is not a writer who has been seen to show much interest in issues of gender. While the two authors have been compared before, such analyses usually focus on the historical and high-philosophical aspects of their work.¹⁰ Female experience and female characters, meanwhile, are largely absent from Ransmayr's writing except where they serve the male gaze; a frustrated critic of his celebrated 1995 novel *Morbus Kitahara* went so far as to call its main female character, Lily, 'eine Männerphantasie in einer Qualität, wie ich es selten gelesen habe [...]

¹⁰ Caitríona Leahy offers a detailed and compelling comparison of works by both authors in terms of suicide and disappearance, processes of metamorphosis more generally, and the philosophical difficulties inherent in writing history, in *'Der wahre Historiker': Ingeborg Bachmann and the Problem of Witnessing History* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007); see for instance 102-110; 122-36; 192. Dora Osborne compares the preoccupation of both authors with fragile materials like dust, sand, ash and snow, which she convincingly links to ideas of the archive and the commemoration of National Socialism (Osborne, 'Black Flakes: Archival Remains in the Work of Christoph Ransmayr and Anselm Kiefer', in *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2-3 [2011], 221-33). The two authors encounter each other again more recently, but less directly, in Yvonne Zivkovic's study *The Literary Politics of Mitteleuropa: Reconfiguring Spatial Memory in Austrian and Yugoslav Literature after 1945* (Rochester: Camden House, 2021).

eine Art Barbarella im Bärenfell' [a male fantasy to a degree that I have rarely seen (...) a kind of Barbarella in bearskins].¹¹ Most other critics ignore the question of gender altogether in their discussions of Ransmayr, focusing instead on themes more commonly associated with his work: time, metamorphosis, or counter-factual history, to name just a few. In spite of this prevailing view, I will argue that a concern with gendered violence and domination along Bachmann-esque lines has long been central to Ransmayr's work, a fact which criticism has consistently overlooked. His recent foray into the genre of 'cli-fi' with the 2021 novel *Der Fallmeister* helps to shed new light on this longstanding preoccupation. By transposing many textual elements of a particular *Todesarten* text – the fragment *Das Buch Franza* – into a climate-disrupted future, the novel also highlights the ways in which Bachmann's approach has been inherited by climate-concerned fiction more broadly.

Like the texts analysed in Chapter 2, *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister* constitute attempts to represent the attitude of mastery: the worldview that allowed the founding fathers of the climate crisis to think of themselves as 'the subduers of everything they surveyed'.¹² The comparison is prompted by a wealth of textual evidence, suggesting that Ransmayr's latest novel deliberately transposes Bachmann's aesthetic method into the context of ecocide and environmental destruction. What they seek to represent, indeed, resembles the drive to what Ghosh calls 'omnicide': a mixture of entitlement, solipsism and cruelty in which desire is intimately bound up with destruction. Ghosh's version of this concept is analysed in more detail in Chapter 4. For Bachmann and Ransmayr, depicting such an idea means drawing bold and often unsettling parallels between different types of violence and victimhood: notably, in the case of *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*, between sexual violence, genocide, and environmental destruction. Before analysing the correspondence between these two key texts in more detail, it is worth tracing how the attitude of mastery is figured in some of the earliest prose works by both authors.

¹¹ The critic in question was Elke Schmitter, on *Das Literarische Quartett* 39 – 19.10.95, online recording, YouTube, 24 Sep 2014 <<https://youtu.be/e7YN-YT4v6U>> [Accessed 27th June 2022].

¹² Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 37.

Origins and Archetypes

With *Strahlender Untergang*, as we saw in Chapter 2, Ransmayr offered his first and pithiest vision of the ‘Herr der Welt’ [master of the world]. The figure he describes – a white European, male, master of the universe, the vaunted creation of the ‘alte Wissenschaft’ [old science] – is a retrospective view of this version of mastery from its imagined endpoint.¹³ The moniker of ‘Herr der Welt’ is from the get-go a bitterly ironic one. And yet, as we have seen, this image is also an accurate portrait of the structures underpinning the Anthropocene: it is ‘seine [...] Spielformen | der Organisation, | seine Art, | Werte und Unwerte voneinander zu trennen’ [his forms | of organisation, | his way | of separating the valuable from the worthless, *SU* 33] that have colonised the world, such that ‘wo er nicht selbst herrscht, herrscht man in seinem Sinn’ [where he himself does not rule, others rule in his spirit, *SU* 33]. The move of desiccating this protagonist under artificial conditions in the desert plays on several tropes of human origins. In pointing to the prehistoric evolutionary moment in which ‘sich | ein Vieh | plötzlich | auf[richtete]’ [an animal | suddenly | stood upright, *SU* 28], as well as the Herr der Welt’s ‘Fellreste da und dort, | Rudimente von Krallen an Fingern und Zehen’ [vestiges of fur here and there, | rudiments of claws on fingers and toes, *SU* 22], this moment of disappearance in the desert seems designed to mirror a moment of emergence. One of the many possible criticisms that could be levelled at such an origin story for humankind is its attachment to ‘Man’ in the abstract – a Man who seems to come into being without sexual reproduction, to be born self-sufficient, detachable not only from social and ecological contexts, but also from Earth itself.¹⁴ This hubris is also the target of irony in *Strahlender Untergang*. Where Judith Butler points out that ‘dependency is, as it were, written out of the picture of the original man; he is somehow, and from the start, always and already upright [...] without

¹³ The ending of this version of mastery is, of course, very much only imagined. In placing this specific figure at the centre of a thought experiment about death and disappearance in the abstract, *Strahlender Untergang* could be read as bespeaking a simultaneous fear and fantasy about the ending of a patriarchal and Eurocentric world order. It shows some of the characteristics of what Leahy analyses, with regard to 9/11 as spectacle, as ‘a culture held in thrall by the very idea of its own death’ (Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 145).

¹⁴ Ghosh picks up on an image from John Gillespie Magee’s canonical American poem ‘High Flight’, a copy of which was deposited on the moon in 1971, to critique the Earth-alienated mindset that sees humanity’s future in the colonisation of other planets. The image is that of escaping ‘the surly bonds of earth’. ‘Rarely’, Ghosh writes, ‘does anyone stop to ask: what exactly is “surly” about the Earth’s bonds? Or why should the planet be thought of as a home from which humans would be fortunate to escape? What can be said of such a view except that it spills over from mere contempt for the Earth into an active hatred for it?’ (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 78).

ever having been fed when he could not feed himself',¹⁵ Ransmayr gives us a version of Man alone against the elements as certain death. Rather than technoscientific progress, *Strahlender Untergang* envisages a symmetry of rise and fall, with the supposed progress of the 'old science' exposed as so much vanity. Notably, however, the text still speaks above all in the voice of the abstracted 'Herr der Welt' as he marches towards his inexorable fate. For Ransmayr, as we will see in the case of *Der Fallmeister*, the only viable option appears to be a critique of mastery from within.

The same concern both with mastery in the abstract and with its origins can be detected in Bachmann's fiction from her earliest prose works. The sentence which, as I have argued, could serve in some respects as the epigraph to *Todesarten* – that fascism 'fängt an in den Beziehungen zwischen Menschen' [begins in the relationships between people]; it is 'das erste in der Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einer Frau' [the first thing in the relationship between a man and a woman] – already suggests this search for an origin. Bachmann's turn of phrase is not entirely intuitive, and presents something of a stumbling block for translation. The phrase 'das erste' means literally 'the first', in the sense of the 'the first thing'. It is rendered in Peter Filkins's published translation as 'the primary element',¹⁶ conveying the abstraction associated with the absence of a specific noun in German phrases of this kind. This helps to draw our attention to a tension within Bachmann's claim. While she suggests that fascism 'begins' in the relationships between people – that these are its origin point – she does not say, as this would lead us to expect, that it 'first' arises in the relationship between a man and a woman. Instead, it is 'das erste', the primary element, implying a structure that precedes the relationship, that is always already inherent in it. These two different views, I would like to suggest, are the two levels on which Bachmann's prose operates. Her writing, which is always restlessly in search of the causes for already-existing effects, finds these on the one hand in recognisable and realistic social settings; and on the other hand, on an underlying level of myth and archetype. These two levels are perhaps most clearly on display in the story

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 37; cf. 30-39; 49. Ghosh, too, takes issue with 'the "state of nature" – that much-beloved conceit of Western philosophy' (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 177).

¹⁶ Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Book of Franza & Requiem for Fanny Goldman*, trans. Peter Filkins (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), viii.

‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ [Among Murderers and Madmen], from Bachmann’s first prose collection *Das dreißigste Jahr* [*The Thirtieth Year*].

‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ is worth pausing over here both as evidence of how Bachmann’s concerns mirror those of the thesis so far, and as a way in to the later novels that will be the central focus of this chapter. The story sees Bachmann wrestling with an early idea of multidirectional memory, and conjuring up a symbolic desert space that links *Strahlender Untergang* to *Das Buch Franza*, with its setting in the deserts of Egypt, Libya and Sudan. Like *Das Buch Franza*, the story is a vision of the self-appointed masters of the universe; yet, as its title suggests, it is also a story concerned with murder. Themes of crime and guilt have accompanied us since Chapter 1, in the form of ‘Anthropocene horror’ and other representations of complicity; they will only increase in importance as the thesis goes on. *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister* both begin as pseudo-detective stories, and each can be read – as Bachmann puts it in her preface to *Franza* – as ‘the story of a crime’.¹⁷ ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ anticipates both works in its preoccupation with murder – with good and evil, even – as well as in the aesthetic abstraction of its approach.

The text tells the story of a night on the town in Vienna in the decade ‘after the war’, and centres on one particular ‘Herrenrunde’ [circle of men, E 159] – a phrase that at first suggests the more everyday sense of the word ‘Herr’ as man or gentleman, with its stronger meaning of lord or master lurking in the background. The narrator is among their number, though the story is also prone to the slippages and unmarked switches of perspective that characterise Bachmann’s early prose style: it begins with a paragraph of third-person narration, and the first-person narrative is interrupted again soon afterwards to offer a glimpse of the women confined to the home while their husbands carouse. Some of the men in this mismatched group were enthusiastic supporters of the Third Reich, others opponents, albeit not especially active ones. The narrator, younger than most of his companions, belongs to the latter faction, and discusses privately with his fellow objectors in the course of the evening what it means to sit at the table in this company. In an adjacent room, a soldiers’ reunion is taking place, with German nationalist songs being

¹⁷ In her preface to the *Franza* fragment, Bachmann writes: ‘Todesarten, unter die fallen auch die Verbrechen. Das ist ein Buch über ein Verbrechen’ [Ways of dying also include crimes. This is a book about a crime, TA 341].

sung ever more loudly as the evening goes on.¹⁸ The story culminates in an encounter with a stranger who has joined the group while the narrator was absent. This stranger confesses that from an early age, he has known he was a murderer, but never found anybody to murder. Once conscripted into the military, he had found himself unable to fire a gun under these circumstances – to shoot at an ‘Abstraktion’ [abstraction, *E* 185] like the Russians or the Americans – and as a result was charged with cowardice, then committed to a psychiatric hospital. This murderer, then, has never killed anyone. The story is met with bemusement and unease by the drinkers, and the stranger gets up to leave. On his way out, he is killed by the former soldiers next door, and is found dead by the narrator’s group shortly afterwards. Having checked the body for signs of life, the narrator sees the blood on his hand when he returns home the next morning. He imagines that this blood will protect him from acting upon his own feelings of rage or vengefulness – ‘never again’ – just as the murderer himself ultimately remained innocent. The story ends on a note of uncertainty, however, casting doubt on this resolution: ‘Wer aber weiß das? Wer wagt das zu sagen?’ [But who knows this? Who dares say it? *E* 186]

The story hinges on questions of innocence, guilt and complicity – on what it means to be a murderer, and what it means to be a victim. These questions are ubiquitous in German-language writing about the Holocaust; their relevance to the conditions of the Anthropocene formed part of our discussion in Chapter 1. More novel than the questions themselves, however, is the complex aesthetic Bachmann brings to bear on them in the story. Like *Strahlender Untergang*, this aesthetic offers a view of mastery from within. Like the later texts, meanwhile, it operates on a level of abstraction that allows for a broader application of its symbols and structures to contexts not directly accounted for in the text.

In contrast to *Strahlender Untergang* and other works by Ransmayr, which are generally more interested in constructing poetic physical universes than detailed social worlds, ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ is on the one hand a study of a social milieu. This is an important strand of Bachmann’s writing, which, it could be argued, became more observational and

¹⁸ Lennox highlights the exact historical context that lends the story its urgency, noting that ‘in 1954 a number of former Nazi generals visited Austria to hold demonstrations and meetings of “Old Comrades’ Associations”, at which, dressed “in uniform [...]”, they advocated a new German *Anschluss* of Austria’ (Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters*, 307).

less condensed or associative over time.¹⁹ The planned cycle of *Todesarten* is often characterised as a Proustian undertaking, while the stories of Bachmann's last published volume, *Simultan* [*Simultaneous*; known in English as *Three Paths to the Lake*], take a more recognisably realist approach to the central ambition of representing Austrian lives, especially women's lives. In 'Unter Mördern und Irren', this realist level is shaped by the pragmatic pressure to move on from the ideological divides of the war, forget the past and accept new realities. When confronted in the bathroom by a member of his own faction, who cannot fathom why they are sharing a table with wartime perpetrators, the narrator retorts: 'Damals, nach 45, habe ich auch gedacht, die Welt sei geschieden, und für immer, in Gute und Böse, aber die Welt scheidet sich jetzt schon wieder und wieder anders. Es war kaum zu begreifen, es ging ja so unmerklich vor sich, jetzt sind wir wieder vermischt, damit es sich anders scheiden kann' [Back then, after 45, I too thought the world was divided, and forever, into good and evil, but the world is already dividing itself differently, again and again. It was almost impossible to grasp, it happened so imperceptibly, now we are mixed together again, so that it can be divided differently, *E* 173]. Pragmatism also entails acknowledging the shades of difference within each grouping. Friedl, the narrator's ally, points out that the members of their oppositional group vary greatly in their views and hopes: 'wir wollen und denken doch jeder etwas anderes. Nicht einmal die anderen sind gleich, Haderer und Ranitzky sind so sehr verschieden' [but we each want and think something different. Not even the others are the same, Haderer and Ranitzky are so different from each other, *E* 174]. What's more, the question of victimhood and virtue, and the drawing of ethical lessons from the crimes of the war, are both dismissed as laughably idealistic. The victims, Friedl declares, are 'zu nichts [...] Wer weiß denn hier nicht, daß man nicht töten soll? Das ist doch schon zweitausend Jahre bekannt' [all for nothing (...) Who here does not know that one should not kill?²⁰ That's been known for two thousand years, *E* 177].

¹⁹ In her editorial notes to *Das Buch Goldmann* [*The Book of Goldmann*], Marie Luise Wandruszka points to Bachmann's own view of a 'Bruch' [break or rupture] in her prose style from *Das dreißigste Jahr* to *Malina*. Although the latter text is far from straightforwardly narrated and includes, many 'Elemente, [...] die noch den ganzen Anspruch haben, der aus der Lyrik kommt' [elements (...) which still have the whole ambition that comes from poetry], Bachmann argues that it nonetheless places the emphasis on how details build and form a whole rather than attempting 'aus dem einzelnen Satz ein Kunstwerk zu machen' [to make an artwork out of the individual sentence] (Ingeborg Bachmann, *Das Buch Goldmann*, ed. Marie Luise Wandruszka [Munich: Piper, 2017], 315).

²⁰ The German phrasing here matches the biblical 'thou shalt not kill'.

This resignation to social givens, however, remains constantly at odds with an opposing element of the text, which shows the characters in an abstracted, symbolic or spiritual realm ruled by the logic of myths and dreams. If the strange figure who knows himself to be a murderer, yet has never killed anyone, appears as a kind of critique of abstraction – highlighting the absurdity of murderousness without content, while the actual killers at the table would deny charges of murder with recourse to social context – then the opening paragraphs of the story offer quite different versions of abstraction. Rather than logical or ethical principles, these versions arise from processes of association and ‘Verdichtung’ [condensation], creating a mythic underbelly for the text.

On the social surface level, one clue to this associative understanding is the discussion of being, or not being, a Jew. As the usual ‘Herrenrunde’ gathers, missing one or two of its regulars, their friend Mahler comments darkly to the narrator and Friedl: ‘Wir sind heute nur drei Juden’ [We are the only three Jews today, *E* 161]. This is a strange comment, as immediately signalled in Friedl’s reaction: ‘Friedl starrte ihn verständnislos [...] an [...], wohl weil er dachte, daß er doch gar kein Jude sei, und Mahler war es auch nicht, sein Vater vielleicht, sein Großvater – Friedl wußte es nicht genau’ [Friedl stared at him (...) uncomprehendingly (...), no doubt because he thought that he wasn’t a Jew at all, and Mahler wasn’t either, his father perhaps, his grandfather – Friedl didn’t know exactly, *E* 161]. The characters in question, that is, are not Jewish in any straightforward sense. Instead, Mahler is pointing to a loose, associative truth. In the us-and-them thinking of fascism – and of the ringleaders of the group, who on the night of the story cannot seem to drop the subject of their wartime experiences, enthusiastically recounted – the narrator’s faction does not fully belong among the ‘Herren der Welt’ [masters of the world]. Something about them is off. Mahler’s comment, then, does hit on a truth of sorts, exposing the arbitrariness of the concept ‘Jew’ as constructed in Nazi ideology. By using Jewishness as a kind of metaphor, however, it also obscures crucial differences in a manner that will become more pronounced in *Das Buch Franza*.

At first, this version of association or metaphor might appear to be context-specific. In a text that explicitly defines itself as a post-war story – ‘Nach dem Krieg’, the narrator tells

us early on, 'dies ist die Zeitrechnung' ['After the war' – this is how we reckon time, *E* 159]²¹ – the symbolic adoption of Jewish identity, whatever its pitfalls, has a certain transgressive shock value. As opposed to other prominent figurative alignments with Jewish identity, such as Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy',²² the infringement matches what appears to be at issue in the story: it invokes a recent past that the characters are at pains to smooth over, as well as pointing to the unsettling flux of 'in' and 'out' groups, goodies and baddies. Yet any sense of this figurative approach to identity being contained within its immediate context is belied by the vivid images that precede Mahler's comment, and which recur throughout the story. These images show the men of the story in terms that match their own self-aggrandisement – as 'titans' and 'demigods', for instance – but also, more mysteriously, as hunters in a primordial desert space.

The opening of 'Unter Mördern und Irren' reverses, so to speak, the bone-spaceship match-cut of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.²³ After establishing the setting as a modern Vienna of 'Kaffeehäuser und Restaurants' [coffee houses and restaurants, *E* 159], it empties out this world into a primeval hunter-gatherer space: 'Wir kommen geradewegs aus den Redaktionen und den Bürohäusern, aus der Praxis und den Ateliers und treffen uns, heften uns auf die Fährte, jagen [...]' [We come straight from the editorial rooms and the office blocks, from the practices and studios, and meet, take up the trail, hunt (...), *E* 159]. Both levels, both 'worlds' – the realist and the mythical – are held in play. Immediately after the

²¹ Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 84.

²² Along with the relationships between their poetry and prose, and the ways in which their biographies and early deaths have shaped reception of their writing, there are also meaningful comparisons to be drawn between Bachmann and Plath in terms of their aesthetics. As we shall see, many of the *Todesarten* texts resemble 'Daddy' in condensing the figures of the violent patriarch and cold-hearted Nazi into nightmarish images of 'der Vater', while the musing of Plath's lyrical I that 'I may be a bit of a Jew' chimes both with 'Unter Mördern und Irren' and the later pronouncements of Franza. Like Bachmann, 'for some readers, [Plath] is guilty of metaphoric excess, of irresponsibly exploiting the power of analogy', particularly in poems like 'Daddy', 'which yoke together historical and psychic events in highly unstable metaphoric conjunctions' (Christina Britzolakis, 'Ariel and other poems' in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 107-23 [108]). Bachmann's version of this aesthetic seems wider-ranging, however, and its emphasis – whether on the suffering self or the system that gives rise to it – is arguably more difficult to locate. For more on the connections between Bachmann and Plath, see Annette Burkart, 'Kein Sterbenswort, Ihr Worte!'. *Ingeborg Bachmann und Sylvia Plath: Acting the Poem* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2000), including pages 225-232 on 'Daddy'.

²³ In the opening 'Dawn of Man' sequence of Stanley Kubrick's film, it is the first use of a tool – a bone wielded by an ape in what is also the first murder – that gives rise to the human species. This idea is communicated both in the sequence's title, announced via the title card, and through a famous match-cut that skips from this bone to a spaceship, suggesting an underlying continuity (see Fig. 5.1 on page 263 of this thesis). As we will see in the epilogue, Kubrick's film provides a useful foil for Ursula K. Le Guin and other ecologically oriented writers, who seek to deconstruct this version of an origin myth for *Homo sapiens*.

narrator names his companion and their specific locale – the ‘Kronenkeller’ [Crown Tavern], aptly chosen for these Herren der Welt – this postwar Vienna dissolves again into a mythic landscape:

An dem Abend kam ich mit Mahler in den ›Kronenkeller‹ in der Inneren Stadt zu unserer Herrenrunde. Überall waren jetzt, wo es Abend in der Welt war, die Schenken voll, und die Männer redeten und meinten und erzählten wie die Irrfahrer und Dulder, wie die Titanen und Halbgötter von der Geschichte und den Geschichten; sie ritten herauf in das Nachtland, ließen sich nieder am Feuer, dem gemeinsamen offenen Feuer, das sie schürten in der Nacht und der Wüste, in der sie waren.

[In the evening I went with Mahler to our men’s circle at the Kronenkeller in the centre of town. Everywhere, now that it was evening in the world, the taverns were full, and the men talked and opined and told stories like wanderers and martyrs, like the titans and demi-gods of history and stories; they rode up into the night land, settled down by the fire, the shared open fire that they stoked in the night and the desert in which they were, *E* 159].

This passage appears to walk us through various levels of abstraction, from the literal or realistic via simile into metaphor. One way of viewing the process is as a stripping back, from ‘Geschichte’ (history – the postwar era in Vienna) via ‘Geschichten’ (stories – of titans and demigods) to what appears as an ‘origin’: the fire, the night and desert. This reading is reinforced by the presence, within both words, of ‘Schicht’ – layer – suggesting layers of geology, of time, or of experience. *Das Buch Franza*, as we will see, is focalised at first through Franza’s brother Martin, a geologist who will later become a historian: Bachmann’s preface to the fragment tells us that he ‘sich zuletzt umentschließen wird, die Zeitalter zugunsten des Zeitalters aufgibt und Historiker wird’ [in the end will change his mind, give up the ages in favour of the age and become a historian, *TA* 341]. While Martin’s journey to the desert is for the purposes of geological study, Franza wishes to accompany him in order to sift through the layers of her own past. This later intertext sheds some light on the choice of a metaphorical desert space in ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’. As Aidan Tynan points out, the desert often figures in Western modernism as the site of the new and of

rebirth; it 'retains the trace of everything that might populate it and thus manifests infinite possibility'.²⁴

The version of stripping back that the passage carries out could be read in even more total terms, however. In a lecture introducing undergraduate students to aspects of aesthetics, Caitríona Leahy argues that literature in general enacts a process of emptying out the world before filling it back in with those objects it wishes to pay attention to. Another way of framing this process, Leahy suggests, is as illumination of given objects in surrounding darkness.²⁵ Both versions seem apt as descriptions of the aesthetic process Bachmann makes explicit here. In what follows, we will have cause to discuss in more detail the role of the aesthetic itself within the story. What appears as a point of departure, meanwhile – both through its prehistoric imagery, and through its place at the beginning of the text – is at the same time a vision of an ending: it is 'Abend in der Welt' [evening in the world, *E* 159]. The men we encounter around this fire, notably, are themselves storytellers, 'talking and opining and narrating'. That their status as hunters is inseparable from this storytelling is hinted at in the opening lines of the text: 'Die Männer sind unterwegs zu sich, wenn sie abends beieinander sind, trinken und reden und meinen. Wenn sie zwecklos reden, sind sie auf ihrer eigenen Spur' [The men are on the way to themselves, when they are together in the evening, drinking and talking and opining. When they talk without purpose, they are on their own trail, *E* 159].²⁶

What we have here, then, is another iteration of the book-as-world, world-as-cage nightmare outlined in Chapter 1 – a version of what Timothy Morton calls a 'strange loop'.²⁷ The example Morton offers of this condition, which represents the uncanny aspect of 'ecological awareness occurring to "civilized" people at this moment', is Alice's attempt to leave the Looking Glass House: 'She sets off through the front garden, yet she finds herself returning to the front door via that very movement'.²⁸ In the opening of 'Unter Mördern und Irren', the sense of being trapped in a loop is created by implicating the act

²⁴ Aidan Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 3-4.

²⁵ The introductory lectures in question were given at Trinity College Dublin in 2021-22.

²⁶ I am grateful to Caitríona Leahy for pointing out the significance of the phrases 'unterwegs zu sich' and 'auf seiner eigenen Spur' in this passage, both of which inform the reading that follows.

²⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

of narration in the crime. If we go back to the beginning, searching for an origin story that might make visible the root of the trouble, and find ourselves there already telling the stories that led to our point of departure, then stories – far from illuminating something outside ourselves, a ‘way out’ of the loop – are part and parcel of the ‘cause’ we are in search of.

I have said ‘we’ – implying that ‘we’ go in search of an origin, and find ‘ourselves’ there telling stories – but that is not quite right. As with *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*, the attitude of mastery is not entirely universalised – one of the greatest pitfalls of the term ‘Anthropocene’ – but is narrowed down at least in terms of gender; it is, from the outset, coded male. It is ‘the men’ who are ‘unterwegs zu sich [...], auf ihrer eigenen Spur’ [on the way to themselves (...), on their own trail]. The slippages in both tense and narrative voice throughout the opening pages of ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ are telling, perhaps allowing glimpses of an ‘outside’ to this loop of tale telling and tail chasing. As we saw in Chapter 2, Sabine Gölz has argued convincingly that Bachmann’s stories enact a critique of the structures of reading and transmission imagined in the works of Kafka and other male authors. On a less granular level than Gölz’s analysis, the restless switches in narrative perspective here between viewpoints ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the circle of men in the passage may point, at the very least, to a reluctance about speaking from within such perspectives and traditions. As we will see, this reluctance is also reflected in *Das Buch Franza*, which has been read as a failed attempt to narrate female experience from a male perspective.

The ‘outside’ of the men’s stories is glimpsed not only on the formal level of perspective, however. It is also given a vivid image to match that of the night and the desert. This image is that of ‘das blaue Wild’ that the men hunt: the blue game, or, more simply, the blue deer. While the German word ‘Wild’ is used to refer to any animals targeted by hunters – and indeed, the transformation of anything ‘wild’ into ‘quarry’ or a ‘game’ is exactly what is at issue in this chapter – the proximity to the common word ‘Rotwild’ [red deer] suggests the latter translation, also chosen by Michael Bullock in his published version.²⁹ The connotations of ‘Wild’ as precisely that which remains other to the men, meanwhile, are

²⁹ Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year*, trans. Michael Bullock, 83.

pivotal to the story. Bachmann adopts this phrase from the poems of Georg Trakl, where it recurs frequently – often in combination with night or blackness – but remains highly ambiguous.³⁰ In turn, the image is inserted into the world of Bachmann's story without explanation, where it takes on a crucial significance. It is 'das blaue Wild' that these men about town are on the hunt for:

Wir kommen geradewegs aus den Redaktionen und den Bürohäusern, aus der Praxis und den Ateliers und treffen uns, heften uns auf die Fährte, jagen das Beste, was wir verloren haben, wie ein Wild, verlegen und unter Gelächter. In den Pausen, wenn keinem ein Witz einfällt oder eine Geschichte, die unbedingt erzählt werden muß, wenn keiner gegen das Schweigen aufkommt und jeder in sich versinkt, hört hin und wieder einer das blaue Wild klagen – noch einmal, noch immer.

[We come straight from the editorial rooms and the office blocks, from the practices and studios, and meet, take up the trail, hunt the best that we have lost, like a deer, awkwardly and amid laughter. In the pauses, when nobody can think of a joke or a story that needs to be told, when nobody can assail the silence and everyone sinks into themselves, now and again someone hears the blue deer lament – once more, still, *E* 159].

Here, again, we have the move from post-war specificity via simile – 'Wie ein Wild' [like a deer] – to something more mysterious and irreducible. While the first-person narration is signalled in the first two sentences of the passage, it is no longer clearly marked in the third. This is appropriate for a realisation that cannot fully rise to consciousness, that the men's speech is produced to suppress. These men are hunters in a double sense. They are on the trail of the blue deer, 'das Beste, was wir verloren haben' [the best that we have lost], searching for the lost element that would set things right, restoring their worlds to wholeness. This role of the blue deer is emphasised in a later reference to how the men 'jagten das blaue Wild [...], und solange es nicht zurückkehrte, blieb die Welt ein Wahn' [hunted the blue deer (...), and as long as it didn't return, the world remained a madness,

³⁰ Versions of the phrase ('Blaues Wild' and 'ein blaues Wild') occur in the poems 'An die Schwester', 'Elis', 'Passion', 'Sommersneige', 'Nachtseele', 'An Luzifer', and 'Am Abend'. Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*, ed. Walther Killy and Hans Szklemar (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1971), 32-3; 48-9; 68-9; 75; 107-8; 186-7; 189-90.

E 172]. The form their search takes, however, is a hunt. Were they to find what they are seeking, they would kill it. Worse still, the sentence hints that this has already happened. The men's speech and their stories are one long concealment of this fact – so much noise drowning out the truth of the blue deer's lament. In their bluster, on their quest, they are tracking down the cause of their loss, which is themselves: they will find not the blue deer, but only the traces of its killers. It is in this sense that these hunter-storytellers are 'auf ihrer eigenen Spur'; 'unterwegs zu sich' [on their own trail; on the way to themselves, *E* 159].

The relationship of the hunters and the blue deer is mysterious and difficult to untangle. It is connected to the frequent mention of 'world' and 'worlds' in the story. On one reading, the blue deer appears to represent something like the men's innocence, even their soul. This reading would conceive of the 'two worlds' mentioned by the narrator as something approximating the visible or material and spiritual realms. 'Alle operierten', the narrator observes,

[...] in zwei Welten und waren verschieden in beiden Welten, getrennte und nie vereinte Ich, die sich nicht begegnen durften. Alle waren betrunken jetzt und schwadronierten durch das Fegefeuer, in dem ihre unerlösten Ich schrien, die bald ersetzt werden wollten durch ihre zivilen Ich, die liebenden, sozialen Ich mit Frauen und Berufen, Rivalitäten und Nöten aller Art. Und sie jagten das blaue Wild, das früh aus ihrem einen Ich gefahren war und nicht mehr zurückkehrte, und solange es nicht zurückkehrte, blieb die Welt ein Wahn.

[Everyone operated in two worlds and was different in both worlds, divided and never reunited selves that could not be allowed to meet. Everyone was drunk now and swaggered through the purgatory in which their unredeemed selves were screaming, which would soon be replaced by their civilian selves, the loving, social selves with wives and professions, rivalries and hardships of all kinds. And they hunted the blue deer, which had left their one self early and had not returned, and as long as it did not return, the world remained a madness, *E* 171-2].

In its wider context within the story, what is at issue in this passage is the gap between the men's wartime experiences and their post-war social personae. Those who seem

fearless to the narrator, who is younger than his companions and fought only in the last year of the war, talk about their wartime terror and despair; those who seem scrupulous boast about looting and theft. These experiences take place and are spoken of only in a 'Männerwelt' [world of men] that places itself outside of conventional morality, a world of 'Mutproben, Heroismus, Gehorsam und Ungehorsam' [tests of bravery, heroism, obedience and disobedience]; a 'Männerwelt, in der alles weit war, was [...] für uns tagsüber galt, und in der keiner mehr wußte, wenn er sich rühmte und wessen er sich schämte' [world of men, in which everything that applied to us during the day was far away, and in which nobody knew anymore what he was proud of and what he was ashamed of, *E* 171]. Like Dorrigo Evans in Chapter 1, the men are trapped in the 'falsche Welt' [wrong/unreal world] of wartime trauma: they have left some important part of themselves behind in the war, and are no longer sure 'ob diesem Ruhm und dieser Scham noch etwas entsprach in dieser Welt, in der wir Bürger waren' [whether this pride and this shame still corresponded to anything in this world, in which we were citizens, *E* 171]. Unlike Dorrigo, however, these men are history's perpetrators, the would-be heroes of a genocidal regime. The idea that the blue deer that has split from their selfhood is something akin to the soul is supported both by its role in Trakl's poetry – where it appears in one instance explicitly as a soul³¹ – and by the later self-assessment of the 'murderer' figure that by the time he arrives at the front, he has 'keinen Fetzen mehr von einer Seele an mir' [not a scrap of soul left about me, *E* 183]. There is an irony to this statement, of course, especially since this appears to be the reason the murderer cannot bring himself to murder. His lament for the loss of 'Seele' [soul] and description of the battlefield as 'das größte Schlachthaus, das Sie sich denken können' [the biggest slaughterhouse you can imagine, *E* 183] recall the dashed hopes of the Expressionists amid the industrialised killing of the Great War. Leahy quotes the ebullient words of Gerrit Engelke shortly before departing for the front in 1914, which neatly pre-empt the terms of the story: 'Und dann kam der Krieg [...] Wir fühlten: wir haben wieder Seele. [...] Wir verloren die Welt und die Seele. Aber in diesem segnenden Kampf wollen wir wiedergewinnen die Welt und ganz unsere Seele!' [Then came war (...) We felt: we have soul again. We lost the world and the

³¹ The poem 'Nachtseele' begins: 'Schweigsam stieg vom schwarzen Wald ein blaues Wild | Die Seele nieder' [Silently from the black wood a blue deer | The soul climbed down, *Ibid*, 107]. Another poem, 'Herbstseele', sees a blue soul emerging from fish and game: 'Bald entgleitet Fisch und Wild | blaue Seele' [Soon out of fish and game slips | blue soul, *Ibid*, 60].

soul. But in this consecrating battle we want to win back the world and wholly our soul!).³² As Leahy notes, however, ‘the redemptive narrative of [the Expressionists’] imagining was soon confronted with the reality of [...] mass-produced and [...] meaningless death’.³³ The murderer’s attention to the element of ‘soul’ and rejection of this ‘slaughterhouse’ nonetheless form part of his ultimate innocence, so that by the end of the story, the narrator recognises him as ‘nur ein Opfer’ [only a victim, *E* 186].

Another way of picturing the gap between the visible everyday self and the condition of the soul is in the form of portraits. Where Oscar Wilde had imagined Dorian Gray’s moral degradation becoming visible only in the painting hidden in the attic, while the face he presented to the world remained innocent, ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ introduces us to individual members of the ‘Herrenrunde’ through the conceit of portrait sketches. One by one, they are drawn with quick pencil strokes by a ‘Bettelzeichner’ [beggar artist, *E* 164] in the tavern, who seems in each case to capture something unflattering or uncomfortable in his depiction. Of the first subject, Haderer, for instance, the narrator notes that ‘Von dem Bettelzeichner so hingestrichelt auf das Papier, sah er aus wie ein maliziöser Tod oder wie eine jener Masken, wie Schauspieler sie sich noch manchmal für den Mephisto oder den Jago zurechtmachen’ [sketched onto the paper like that by the beggar artist, he looked like a malicious Death or like one of the masks that actors still sometimes fashion for themselves to play Mephistopheles or Iago, *E* 164]. Descriptions of these portraits are interspersed with accounts of the men’s professions, everyday personae and positions in society, suggesting that art has the capacity to make visible the gap between public selfhood and something like the soul. This was also the implication of Gould’s quest to paint people as fish in Chapter 1; in ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’, the effect is somewhat starker.

This is not the only way of interpreting the blue deer and the ‘two worlds’ in which the men operate, however. In its double estrangement from the men – both as ‘Wild’ and in its impossible, non-mimetic appearance – ‘das blaue Wild’ could be seen to represent otherness in and of itself. Along with the split in selfhood, the concept of ‘Welt’ in the story

³² Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 49.

³³ *Ibid.*

represents not least entrapment and isolation within one's own head. 'In jedem Kopf', the narrator tells Friedl, 'ist eine Welt und ein Anspruch, der jede andere Welt, jeden anderen Anspruch ausschließt' [in every head there is a world and a claim that excludes every other world, every other claim, *E* 174]. This imprisonment within one's own head gives rise to a sense of antagonism and incomprehension both towards the world at large – 'Ich verstehe diese Welt nicht mehr!', the narrator notes, 'das sagten wir uns oft in den Nächten, in denen wir tranken und redeten und meinten' [I don't understand this world anymore! – we often said that to each other in the nights in which we drank and talked and opined, *E* 178] – and towards others, manifesting in the inability or unwillingness 'in einer Welt [zu] leben' with them [to live in a world; or 'in the one world']. 'Schlechterdings konnte man mit einem Mann wie Friedl auch nicht in einer Welt leben', the narrator thinks, and still less with his other companions; 'Auch mit Mahler konnte ich manchmal nicht in einer Welt leben, den ich am liebsten hatte' [In the end you couldn't live in a world with a man like Friedl either; sometimes I couldn't even live in a world with Mahler, whom I liked the most, *E* 178]. The necessity of living in a world together, however, is associated by the narrator with wholeness, as opposed to the 'separated and never reunited selves' brought about by the loss of the blue deer. 'Ich denke', he tells Friedl, 'daß wir alle miteinander leben müssen und nicht miteinander leben können [...] Aber wir brauchen einander alle, wenn je etwas gut und ganz werden soll' [I think that we all have to live with each other and can't live with each other (...) But we all need one another, if anything is ever to become good and whole, *E* 174]. This sentiment can certainly be read against the grain: in a post-war context, the idea that anything can be made 'gut und ganz' by conciliation among gentile Austrians sounds like an endorsement of repression and suppression. As we saw earlier, however, the text has its sights set on broader patterns, and presents the 'othering' of Jews as both arbitrary and changeable. The type of otherness at issue here is more fundamental, more abstract.

A reading of the blue deer as the archetypal other is suggested not only by the German noun 'Wild', but also by the men's way of relating to it. 'Das blaue Wild' is the object of their desire, even longing: it is 'das Beste, was wir verloren haben' [the best (thing) that we have lost, *E* 159 – the same type of abstract noun as 'the first (thing)']. At the same time, as I have suggested, it is the victim of their crime. When the men fall silent, it can be

heard 'klagen – noch einmal, noch immer' [lamenting – once more, still, *E* 159]. The impulse to destroy the object of desire is one that both Bachmann and Ransmayr place at the heart of their visions of mastery; as we shall see, it is particularly prevalent in *Der Fallmeister* and its antecedents in Ransmayr's earlier novels. Here, as in the later novels, the crime is born not least out of a failure to pay the right type of attention: to listen to and hear the other over the din of the self.

'When you experience beauty', Timothy Morton writes, 'you experience evidence in your inner space that at least one thing that isn't you exists'.³⁴ 'Das blaue Wild' is undoubtedly beautiful: it is a beautiful phrase, a beautiful image. Morton characterises the experience of beauty as 'an evanescent footprint in your inner space – you don't need to prove that things are real by hitting them or eating them. A nonviolent coexisting without coercion'.³⁵ While Bachmann and Ransmayr might agree with the reading of beauty as the evidence of something other than oneself, they take a less optimistic view of how people – and particularly men – respond to such an experience. Morton concedes that 'beauty is sad because it is ungraspable; there is an elegiac quality to it. When grasped, it withdraws, like putting my hand into water'.³⁶ Both Austrian writers, meanwhile, imagine would-be masters whose primary impulse towards otherness is to coerce, possess and dominate it, and who destroy the ungraspable, longed-for other in the process. These figures are then left once again 'in ihrem Wahn' [in their delusion], trapped in their heads, longing for a way out that they have themselves foreclosed.

This reading of 'das blaue Wild' has potentially far-reaching implications. On the one hand, the climate and biodiversity crises, and the types of historical exploitation of both humans and the biosphere that gave rise to them, would seem to support a more pessimistic view of the response to things 'outside' the self. In reading 'das blaue Wild' in an ecological context, meanwhile, its dual status as an image both of nature and of art adds to the complexity. Bachmann, as we saw at the very outset of this thesis, never actively sought to address ecological themes in the conventional sense. For her, an image like 'das blaue Wild' functions as a reference of art to other art, and as a metaphor for

³⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 149.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

human concerns: the conscience, the victim, the other, the soul. Both in its many animal metaphors, however – considered in more detail in Chapter 4 – and its drive towards analogy and abstraction, her conception of mastery and murder can easily be extended to encompass the destruction of the biosphere. This broader understanding of a project like *Todesarten* is entirely in keeping with Bachmann's logic, as evinced in her seemingly impossible aim of compiling 'a single great study of all possible ways of dying'.³⁷ In the analysis of *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*, meanwhile, we will see how Ransmayr appears to transpose human character triads from Bachmann's work into a cli-fi context, where they become an allegory for environmental violence and ecocide.

In Morton's view, drawing a distinction between art and animals is meaningless in terms of the beauty experience, which they see as the model for ecological thinking. For Morton, both are to be understood only relationally: both in their unknowable otherness, and their inseparable entanglement with the self. In arguing that 'all art is ecological', they suggest that the coexistence entered into in appreciating an artwork is the same type of coexistence involved in ecological thought. 'Your indifference to ecological things', Bachmann might be happy to hear, 'is exactly the sort of place where you will find the right kind of ecological thinking'.³⁸ The connection, as Morton perceives it, has to do with definitions of beauty in terms of uselessness or superfluousness: '*You don't know why you should care*: isn't that what we are all feeling when we experience something beautiful? Reasons for being nice to other lifeforms abound, but around them there is a ghostly penumbra of feelings of appreciating them for no reason at all'.³⁹ At the same time, the fact that art clearly does something with us – that it affects us – affirms its symbiotic, ecological status.

The notion of the aesthetic as somehow 'letting things be' is one that would certainly appeal to the writers considered in the next chapters. The rejection of use value and championing of uselessness, which will recur in Tokarczuk's eco-thriller *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, has clear potential as a means of resistance to the instrumentalising logic outlined in Chapter 2. Morton, who points out the self-deceiving

³⁷ Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 65.

³⁸ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 125.

³⁹ *Ibid*; emphasis in original.

'for its own sake' of the utility-oriented system he calls 'agrilogistics' – 'a for its own sake that agrilogistics itself regards as superfluous or evil or evil because superfluous' – nonetheless insists that 'it would be a grave mistake [...] to try and get rid of the "for its own sake," which is nothing other than the intrinsic loop form of being, let alone of ecological being'.⁴⁰ We have already seen how art is figured in texts by Ransmayr and Flanagan as a mode of resistance to the line and the system. 'Das blaue Wild', meanwhile, draws attention to its status as art both through its allusion to other artworks – in the form of Trakl's poetry – and its non-mimetic colour, which recalls the paintings of 'Der blaue Reiter' [The Blue Rider] produced by several of Trakl's Expressionist contemporaries. The 1913 painting *Tierschicksale* [Animal Fates] by Franz Marc – who, like Trakl, was to become a casualty of the Great War one year later – features a blue deer in the centre, in an uncharacteristically dark version of the many colourful animals in Marc's paintings, most famously three tranquil blue horses. As opposed to the representational sketches of the 'beggar artist', then, 'das blaue Wild' evokes the type of art that the Third Reich cordoned off from itself, rejecting it as 'entartet' [degenerate]. In the master plan of fascism, paintings of blue animals are as foreign as Jews. The ambiguity of 'das blaue Wild' – its rejection of logical, non-contradictory sense – is part of what recommends it as the other, which for Morton is both animals and art.

In the universes of Bachmann and Ransmayr, however, there is no space for the type of coexistence Morton envisages. While an art object may outlast those who seek to suppress or exploit it, as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* does in Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* [The Last World], it is always being instrumentalised in one way or another, always drawing the attention of rulers who seek to bend it to their will. Art 'for its own sake', or the Schillerian idea of the aesthetic experience as inherently moral that Morton's work newly tends towards, is discredited for them by the merging of culture and barbarism made visible in the Holocaust. The narrator of 'Unter Mördern und Irren' also cannot share a world with Steckel, for instance, who has returned from forced emigration after 1945, and 'für den Kunst ein Argument war' [for whom art was a valid argument, E 178]. Morton, too, is aware that the loop of the "'for its own sake" [...] is why we suspect the aesthetic. The cry of "We have to do something!" [...] means "At all costs we must interrupt the loop"', an impulse

⁴⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 53; 156. Emphasis in original.

which, in Morton's 21st-century context, they oppose: 'One needs to delve *further into* the loop form [...] Let's interrupt the violence that tries to straighten the loop'.⁴¹ For the 1968 left-wing student movement in Germany, by contrast, the 'blaue Blume' [blue flower] of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and other Romantic texts became a salient image of the 'antiaufklärerisch[e] Irrationalität der Germanistik, für ihre nationale Fixierung auf *deutsche* Literatur der Vergangenheit und für die nationalsozialistische Vereinnahmung der Romantik' [the anti-progressive irrationality of German literary studies, of its national fixation on *German* literature of the past, and of the National Socialist co-optation of Romanticism].⁴² Their opposition to postwar German Studies culminated in the motto: 'Schlagt die Germanistik tot. Macht die blaue Blume rot' [Knock German Studies dead. Turn the blue flower red].⁴³ The rehabilitated status of art for art's sake in Morton's version of ecological thinking is nicely summed up by a further iteration of this blue flower in Philip K Dick's novel *A Scanner Darkly*, where it becomes a satire on extractivist ways of thinking. The discovery that the blue flower – which interrupts fields upon fields of corn – contains active chemical components suddenly becomes a reason to care about it: 'A little blue flower, so strangely not part of a recognizable agrilogistic plan, which was to shrink flowers and maximise juicy, substance-producing kernels'.⁴⁴

For Bachmann, the aesthetic entanglement of an image like 'das blaue Wild' has a different emphasis than the 'for its own sake'. It points to an awareness that the effect of art – the way it affects its viewer or reader – is not given, but created, such that to interact with an art object is also to interact with the mindset that shaped it. This is a version of the critical awareness that Götz brings to her reading of Kafka. The idea of 'das blaue Wild' as something purely outside the self is belied by the reference to how '[es] früh aus dem einen Ich gefahren war und nicht mehr zurückkehrte' [it had departed the one self early

⁴¹ Ibid, 156-7; emphasis in original.

⁴² Thomas Anz, "'Schlagt die Germanistik tot ...': Kontroversen zur Literaturwissenschaft um 1968 und ihre Folgen' <<https://literaturkritik.de/schlagt-die-germanistik-tot-kontroversen-zur-literaturwissenschaft-um-1968-und-ihre-folgen,25173>> [Accessed 8th April 2023]. I am grateful to Caitríona Leahy for pointing out this connection.

⁴³ Ibid. Morton would no doubt enjoy Anz's observation that '[es] zu den Paradoxien der nicht gerade dichtungsfreundlichen Studentenbewegung um 1968 gehört, dass sie ihre Proteste gerne mit Versen und Reimen artikulierten und in Szene setzten' [one of the paradoxes of the student movement around 1968, which was not exactly well disposed towards poetry, was the fact that it liked performing and articulating its protest in verses and rhymes]. Anz, 'Schlagt die Germanistik tot'.

⁴⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 157.

and would not come back, E 172]. Rather than merely standing outside of the men and acting upon them, it has also *emerged from* them. 'Das blaue Wild' is the by-product, the remainder, of their entry into the 'world of men': it is the other created by their cordoning off of themselves as 'Herren der Welt' [masters of the world]. In this regard, 'das blaue Wild' appears as a synthesis between a view of the aesthetic experience as edifying or 'ecological', and the ecocritical commonplace that the stories we tell ourselves have been the root of the trouble all along.

It is in this sense that 'das blaue Wild' constitutes perhaps the most complete example of what I have been calling an 'archetype'. This word refers both to something original, ancestral and prior to reason, as in the Jungian understanding of archetypes as images hard-wired into the collective unconscious; and also to an aesthetic device that functions as a trope or shorthand. Archetypes, then, are both inevitable and deliberate, both given and created. In its vivid colour and animal symbolism, 'das blaue Wild' evokes the cave paintings that match the hunter-storytellers by their fire. 'The first subject matter for painting', as John Berger points out, 'was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal'.⁴⁵ In its written form, it is the duality of 'das blaue Wild' as both animal and artificial image that makes it so compelling. In much the same way that visions of human origins seem to hold a particular fascination in the Anthropocene discourse, cave art is a recurring subject in writing of this kind. In his collection of 'Dankereden' [award acceptance speeches], *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit* (2019), Ransmayr imagines himself as a palaeolithic cave man who has aged out of hunting and now acts as community storyteller by the fire. When the younger men embark on hunting expeditions, he stays behind to tell stories imagining their adventures while a group of women daub 'flüchtende Antilopen' [fleeing antelopes] on the walls.⁴⁶ In Ransmayr's text, this scarred hunter-storyteller is then transported into the present day and becomes Ransmayr himself, accepting the award, collapsing the gap between both moments in the manner of *2001*. Robert Macfarlane engages repeatedly with cave paintings in *Underland*,⁴⁷ while for Le Guin, as we will see in the epilogue, the way in which 'the mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind' is

⁴⁵ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 5.

⁴⁶ Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 11.

⁴⁷ See for instance Macfarlane, *Underland*, 4; 17-18; 274-9; 418.

exactly the state of affairs that must be challenged. As with Bachmann's suggestion of 'das erste' [the first thing], the idea of the blue deer as cave art both affords it the authority of something primordial and original, as old as humanity itself, and thwarts this authority by raising the question of a 'before' this before. 'No search for origin', Berger writes, 'can ever be fully satisfied. The intercession of animals in that search was so common precisely because animals remain ambiguous'.⁴⁸

'Das blaue Wild', then, both is and is not something separate from the men, evidence of a world outside their heads. It is both an animal other and a reminder that animals are always also metaphors. While it acts upon them the way that, for Morton, an aesthetic object should, affecting them, making them unsure, it is also part of the loop as trap, a loss of their own making. The men have become the hunters by separating themselves off from the blue deer; it is part of the story of mastery they are telling. In what follows, we will have cause to think more about the dual nature of archetypes – as prior truths, and as misleading creations – and about what it means to tell stories of hunting the blue deer. To develop these thoughts further, I will now turn to a comparison of *Das Buch Franza* [*The Book of Franza*] and *Der Fallmeister* [*The Fall Master*], where the conceptions of mastery presented in 'Unter Mördern und Irren' and *Strahlender Untergang* play out allegorically between triads of human characters.

Clues and Points of View

In keeping with the desert imagery of 'Unter Mördern und Irren', both *Das Buch Franza* and *Der Fallmeister* respond to the imperatives of their respective political contexts in a displaced fashion. The setting, in Ransmayr's case, is a projected future; in Bachmann's, it is the space of projection that the protagonist Franza finds in the deserts of Egypt, Libya and Sudan. Like the shorter texts we have just discussed, both texts are concerned above all with structural, archetypal modes of understanding. In seeking to represent the afterlife of fascism, Bachmann's novel fragment draws controversial connections between gendered violence, colonialism, and the suffering inflicted on animals. Ransmayr's novella,

⁴⁸ Berger, *About Looking*, 6.

meanwhile, is less interested in the cli-fi dystopia of its setting than in the patterns of thought that have given rise to it, which play out – following Bachmann – on the level of family relationships and functions. To begin with, it might be useful to outline some of the textual evidence that marks *Der Fallmeister* as a conscious response to *Das Buch Franza*. These range from character triads centred around mixed-up roles within the family to specific images and motifs.

The *Franza* fragment traces the nervous breakdown and partial recovery of Franziska Ranner, who is suffering ever more intensely from a ‘Krankheit des Damals’ [sickness of the past, TA 372], showing symptoms in her own life of the suppressed horrors of the Nazi death camps. As a gentile Austrian woman, her connection to the victims of the Holocaust comes through her husband Leopold Jordan, a prominent psychiatrist who carried out experiments on camp inmates; along with psychoanalysing Franza against her will, Jordan has been putting her to work writing up the results of these illegal studies. Jordan’s forcible analysis of Franza is one of several important elements contained in the alternate title *Der Fall Franza* [*The Case of Franza*], chosen by Bachmann’s editors for the fragment’s first posthumous publication in 1978. The title was amended to *Das Buch Franza* in the 1995 critical edition, purportedly in line with the author’s intentions.⁴⁹ The significance of the German word ‘Fall’ [case; fall], however, remains central to the story. In what follows, the various currents of meaning that converge in the word will preoccupy us in the case of both texts.

The third-person narrative is focalised at first through the figure of Franza’s brother Martin Ranner, a geologist. When Franza disappears from Vienna, he goes in search of her in their childhood home in Carinthia, finding her in their fictitious home village of Galicien.⁵⁰ At Franza’s insistence, he allows her to accompany him on a research trip

⁴⁹ Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche make this argument based on Bachmann’s correspondence in: *Ingeborg Bachmann: »Todesarten«-Projekt. Kritische Ausgabe, Band 2*, ed. Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche (Munich: Piper, 1995), 393. Other critics have maintained that the title remains an open question, most recently Heidi Schlipphacke, who refers to it impartially as ‘the *Franza* fragment’ (Schlipphacke, ‘Postmodernism and the Place of Nostalgia in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Franza* fragment’. *The German Quarterly* 79.1 (2006), 86-7). I will refer to it here primarily as *Das Buch Franza* or the *Franza* fragment, while seeking to acknowledge the multiple possibilities in play.

⁵⁰ This name is almost certainly a nod to the ‘Galizien’ of Joseph Roth’s novels. Cf. Leo A. Lensing, ‘Joseph Roth and the Voices of Bachmann’s Trotts: Topography, Autobiography, and Literary History in “Drei Wege zum See”’, *Modern Austrian Literature* 18 (1985), 65.

through Libya, Sudan and Egypt, where she seeks to escape the past thrust upon her by Jordan, but re-encounters it in the guise of another camp doctor whom she recognises from the experiment reports. The text culminates in Franza's rape at the hands of a stranger at the base of one of the pyramids, after which she bashes her head violently against the tomb wall, inflicting an injury that proves fatal. After her death, the reader lingers briefly with Martin as he struggles to piece together what has happened.

In *Der Fallmeister*, meanwhile, the journey takes us through a climate-disrupted future, what Ransmayr has called a 'mögliche Zukunft' [possible future].⁵¹ The most important feature of this world is that freshwater has become the most precious resource, far more valuable than oil or money. As part of the wars that are waged over the resource, nation states have disintegrated into ever smaller 'Kleinstaaten', 'Zwergstaaten' [mini-states; dwarf states, *FM* 40; 102] and principalities, such as the principality of Bandon where the narrator has grown up.⁵² As is often the case in Ransmayr's works, this setting combines elements of the contemporary and futuristic with elements that appear ancient. Of particular interest, in light of the discussion of origin stories above, is the correspondence between the 'Weißer Fluss' [White River] where the narrator grows up and Ancient Mesopotamia. It is in Mesopotamia, as Morton reminds us, that both agriculture and agricultural religion were born; in Ransmayr's novel, the narrator's father has dubbed a sandbank in the river '*Mesopotamien [...] Stromabwärts links sollte gemäß dieser Taufe der Euphrat dem Meer entgegenströmen, rechts der Tigris, und in der Mitte lag der Garten Eden, das Paradies*' [*Mesopotamia (...)* According to this christening, the Euphrates would flow downriver on the left towards the sea, on the right the Tigris, and in the middle lay the Garden of Eden, Paradise, *FM* 60]. This overlaying of future and past indicates that we are in the mode of allegory, suggesting something like Morton's view that 'what happened in Mesopotamia happens "now", which is why it [makes] sense for *Dark Ecology* to refer to us as Mesopotamians'.⁵³

⁵¹ 'Christoph Ransmayr – Eine kurze Geschichte vom Töten', *LiteraTour Podcast*, podcast episode, ServusTV, 26 August 2021 <<https://servustv.castos.com/podcasts/19831/episodes/christoph-ransmayr-eine-kurze-geschichte-vom-toten>> [Accessed 31st August 2022]

⁵² 'Bandon' usually strikes German-language reviewers as a made-up word, but readers familiar with Ireland will recognise it as the name of a town and river in West Cork, where Ransmayr lived for many years.

⁵³ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 39.

In interviews, Ransmayr has stated that he made various attempts at writing the book from 1988 onwards, conceiving of it as something of a magnum opus, but was defeated both by the scale – originally to be 400-500 pages – and by his reluctance to draw too heavily on biographical details.⁵⁴ And indeed, for anyone familiar with the author's biography, the Bandon of the novel looks strikingly similar to Ransmayr's home village of Roitham am Traunfall, where his great-grandfather was the last person to hold the title of 'Fallmeister' [Fall Master].⁵⁵ This was the name given locally to the sluice-keeper who guided boats safely past the waterfall, which was referred to at the time as the 'Großer Fall' [Great Fall], a moniker which also finds its way into the fictional text. In the novel, it is the narrator's father who holds the post of Fallmeister. As sluice-keeper, he causes the deaths of five people in an apparent accident before disappearing, a year later, in what looks to be a suicide. The narrator, remembering his father's fits of rage and wish to restore a past world, comes to believe that the accident was intentional, and that the Fall Master has faked his own death. Determined to bring him to justice, the narrator sets off in search of both his father and his sister Mira, the only companion of an unhappy childhood, for whom he harbours incestuous longings. As a 'Hydrotechniker' [hydro-technician, *FM* 48], the narrator is one of very few people with travel privileges in this cli-fi dystopia. His travels take him to Cambodia and eventually to the North Sea, where Mira now lives with a warlord husband in an attempt to escape their childhood home. The narrator's lifelong obsession with his sister arises not least from the rare bone disease she suffers from, a so-called 'Glasknochenkrankheit' [glass-bone disease] that makes her especially vulnerable to serious injury. The day before he is scheduled to leave, the narrator sexually assaults Mira, fatally injuring her in the process. In doing so, he not only inherits the titular role of Fallmeister — having been appointed as his father's replacement — but also becomes the subject of the novel's subtitle: 'Eine kurze Geschichte vom Töten' [A short story about killing].

Taken in isolation, this narrative is bound to produce misgivings: there is good reason to recoil from such a plot, particularly if it seems calculated to shock rather than illuminate. In spite of this, the critical response to *Der Fallmeister* has been characterized not by

⁵⁴ *LiteraTour Podcast*, 26 August 2021.

⁵⁵ Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 46-7.

aversion, but above all by bafflement – the sense that the extremes to which the story goes are not in service of anything in particular. If we align the novella with Bachmann's *Todesarten* project, however – and, in particular, with the similarly unsettling ending of *Das Buch Franza* – a clearer and more compelling picture emerges.

The textual links that suggest this alignment are too many and too overt to be overlooked. They range from the seemingly trivial or coincidental to the fundamental. When Franza and Martin arrive in the desert, for instance, they are struck by the newfound value of water, which is suddenly 'begehrter als Kaviar und Gold, als Diamanten und Grundstücke, kostbarer als Monatsgehälter und Versicherungen' [more coveted than caviar and gold, than diamonds and plots of land, more precious than monthly salaries and insurances, *TA* 428]. As if in response, Ransmayr conjures up a world where freshwater is the ultimate commodity. Where Franza comes to view her marriage to Jordan as a 'Blaubartehe' [Bluebeard marriage, *TA* 400], the warlord Mira has eloped with – treated with great suspicion by Ransmayr's narrator – sports 'meerblau gefärbtes Haar' [hair dyed sea-blue, *FM* 93]. As we shall see, this is just one example of how ciphers of guilt – and specifically, signifiers of murder – are passed around between triads of characters across both works.

A few of the resemblances could be explained partly in terms of a shared literary ancestry. One central example is the prominence of Ancient Egypt and its relationship to the incest motif in both texts. Where Franza and Martin are shown standing at the grave of Tutankhamun, Ransmayr's narrator first seriously contemplates incest after learning that Tutankhamun had married his own sister [*TA* 436; *FM* 102]. Where this narrator comes to think of Mira and himself as 'Pharao und Pharaonin' [pharaoh (*male*) and pharaoh (*female*)], Franza and Martin – whose relationship is not overtly incestuous – repeatedly recite to one another a line adapted from Robert Musil's poem, 'Isis und Osiris': 'Unter hundert Brüdern dieser eine' [Among a hundred brothers this one, *TA* 397; 469].⁵⁶ Musil, for his part, claimed that the myth of Isis und Osiris contained 'in nucleo' his unfinished novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, whose protagonist Ulrich also hovers on

⁵⁶ Sigrid Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann: Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1999), 204.

the threshold of incest with his estranged sister Agatha.⁵⁷ Along with a darkly satirical side of *Der Fallmeister*, which casts incest as the logical conclusion of ever smaller and more separatist states,⁵⁸ the status of Musil in Austrian literature could go at least some way towards explaining this discomfiting strand in both texts. Clearly, though, there is also much more going on.

Some of the most striking similarities have to do with perhaps the trickiest problem of this comparison: namely, the problem of perspective. Various echoes between the texts serve to highlight the distance of both brother characters from Franza and Mira, and their inability to perceive their sisters clearly. Both brothers recall a youth in which their sisters, who are four and five years older respectively, appeared to them as mythical beings associated with the rivers of their childhoods. When Martin tries to recall Franza, he remembers her as 'eine mythische Figur, die ihn aus der Gail zog' [a mythical figure who pulled him out of the Gail, *TA* 357], referring to an incident in which Franza saved him from drowning. The image is vivid, although he cannot have seen it with his own eyes: 'und obwohl er sie ja nicht laufen gesehen hatte, meinte er sie jetzt zu sehen, noch Jahre später, seine barfüßige Wilde, die ihr Junges aus dem Wasser zog' [and although he had not seen her running, he thought he saw her now, years later, his barefoot savage pulling her young out of the water, *TA* 356]. Noteworthy here is not only the doubling up of sister and mother figures – an example of the split or double identities which are so prevalent in Bachmann's work – but also the use of possessive pronouns. The narrator of *Der Fallmeister* speaks of Mira almost exclusively in these terms. For him, Mira is transformed by her disease into 'einem Märchenwesen, einer Fee' [a storybook being, a fairy, *FM* 26]. His central memory of his sister, too, is one of questionable veracity: a consensual sexual encounter in and by the White River of their childhood and adolescence. Although the narrator is obsessed by this memory, Mira's subsequent behaviour gives him no indication 'ob ich mit meinem Begehren in einer Phantasie oder in der wirklichen Welt gefangensaß' [whether, with my

⁵⁷ Bettina von Jagow, 'Liebe und Tabu: Zum Kulturtransfer des Isis-Osiris-Mythos in die Moderne: Ingeborg Bachmanns *Der Fall Franza* und Robert Musils *Isis und Osiris*', *Orbis Litterarum* 58 (2003), 116-34 (131).

⁵⁸ The narrator notes 'daß die Zwergstaaten des europäischen Kontinents, die jeder für sich auf Einzigartigkeit und Überlegenheit beharr[en] und weder Fremde noch Zuwanderer [...] duld[en], sich folgerichtig aus dem eigenen Erbgut in die Zukunft verlängern [müssen]' [that the dwarf states of the European continent, each of which insists on its uniqueness and superiority and tolerates neither foreigners nor migrants, must thus sustain themselves into the future drawing only from their own gene pools, *FM* 102].

desire, I was trapped in a fantasy or in the real world, *FM* 108]. The evidence of the rest of the text suggests that this encounter is most likely a fantasy on the part of ‘dem Musterbeispiel eines unzuverlässigen Erzählers’ [a textbook example of an unreliable narrator].⁵⁹

In both texts, the rushing of the river becomes a symbol for this type of uncertainty: for the failure of each brother focalising figure to perceive their sister accurately. When Franza attempts suicide while still in the Gailtal, Martin searches desperately for her, and ‘fing ihren Namen zu rufen an, aber hier war das Wasser zu laut, er hörte sich nur selber rufen’ [began to call her name, but the water was too loud here, he could only hear himself calling, *TA* 393]. Again, *Der Fallmeister* appears to take this isolated image and run with it. The novel’s narrator is deafened throughout the text by the roar of the waterfall by which he grew up and by other currents, realising finally ‘daß es vor allem ich war, ich allein, der gegen das Getöse der Wellen [...] Erinnerungen schrie’ [that it was above all I, I alone, who was shouting memories against the roar of the waves, *FM* 151]. When he attacks his sister, it is the ‘Tosen des Wassers in meinem Kopf’ [roar of water in my head, *FM* 163] that drowns out her protests. There are echoes, here, of the men of ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’, whose own talking and opining and narrating serves to block out the cries of the blue deer they claim to be in search of.

Among the other images in both works that highlight the gap in understanding between sister and brother is that of shedding skin. On the Ranner siblings’ trip through the desert, Martin repeatedly tries to ascertain what exactly has precipitated Franza’s crisis. She cannot communicate it to him, pointing instead to her skin, which is peeling from the sun: ‘Es ist nur schwer zu erzählen [...] ich häute mich, [...] siehst du, es wird alles besser, ich bekomme eine neue Haut’ [It’s just difficult to tell it (...) I’m shedding my skin (...) you see, it will all get better, I’m getting a new skin, *TA* 399]. Franza wishes Martin to see that she is already growing and recovering from a trauma that he has not yet even understood, though unfortunately this recovery turns out to be only skin deep. For the narrator of *Der Fallmeister*, meanwhile, Mira ‘schien die Welt, an die ich mich [...] erinnerte, [...]

⁵⁹ Denis Scheck, in *Lesenswert-Quartett 18.03.2021*, online recording, YouTube, 26 March 2021 <<https://youtu.be/tgAQyS2Xsp4>> [Accessed 20th July 2022].

abgestreift zu haben wie Schlangen ihre Haut abstreifen, ohne sie zu zerreißen: [...] alles unversehrt. Aber leer.' [seemed to have (...) shrugged off the world I (...) remembered just as snakes shrug off their skin, without tearing it: everything intact. But empty. *FM* 156].

Here, surely, is a point where the comparison must give us pause. There is a clear difference between the examples offered here in terms of subtlety and complexity, with Ransmayr's version of each motif considerably blunter and more basic. His narrator directly links the shedding of skin to snakes, for instance, repeating age-old gender tropes, while the sexualised image of Mira emerging from the river has become a laughable male fantasy, a nymph-like being of the kind Bachmann was at pains to give a voice to and allow to talk back in stories like 'Undine geht' [Undine goes]. It is very possible, then, that comparing this novel to a work by Bachmann is simply giving it far too much credit when it comes to issues of gender. Yet the extremity of *Der Fallmeister's* plot makes it nearly impossible to overlook the ways in which gendered violence and domination have always been central to Ransmayr's literary vision. Many *Feuilleton* reviewers, among whom Ransmayr is usually a predictable favourite, have responded with bafflement or aversion to the book. It has led the critic Insa Wilke, for instance, to distinguish between two strands of Ransmayr's work:

Es gibt bei Christoph Ransmayr ja immer zwei Textsorten [...] Die einen Texte – *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* haben Sie genannt, *Cox [oder Der Lauf der Zeit]* haben Sie genannt [...] Das sind Bücher, mit denen kommt man zurecht, die kann man einordnen. Und dann gibt es immer wieder Bücher, mit denen kommt man nicht zu Rande. *Morbus Kitahara* ist zum Beispiel so ein Buch [...] und ich musste sehr stark an *Morbus Kitahara* denken bei diesem Buch, weil es ein so düsteres Buch ist und eben, genau, man kommt nicht zu Rande.

[With Christoph Ransmayr there are always two types of text (...) One kind – you mentioned *Atlas of an Anxious Man*, you mentioned *Cox [or The Course of Time]* (...) Those are books, you can get a grip on them, you can categorize them. And then every so often there are these books you can't get a handle on. *Morbus Kitahara*, for example, is that kind of book (...) and I was reminded of *Morbus Kitahara* very strongly

with this book, because it's such a dark book and just, exactly, you can't get a handle on it].⁶⁰

The comparison is telling. Criticism on *Morbus Kitahara* has tended to focus on its status as Austrian fiction after Auschwitz, but on the level of plot, it is also a 'Geschichte vom Töten' [story about killing], the story of a crime, as Bachmann might say – a story of femicide. In the novel's denouement, the protagonist Bering shoots and kills Lily, whom he has lusted after unrequitedly throughout the text.

Here, again, the question of perspective helps to evaluate the correspondence between the novels, and to test its limits. The same events told from a different perspective could constitute a feminist text or a patently un-feminist one: an example of 'Todesarten' or a story about killing. Significantly, the case of *Das Buch Franza* highlights an interest on Bachmann's part in how the meaning of her texts could be adjusted with just such shifts in perspective. The focalising figure for much of the fragment is not Franza, but Martin. Tellingly, perhaps, the text increasingly slips out of his perspective and into Franza's, which some critics have noted as an aesthetic shortcoming of the fragment, and a reason why Bachmann may have abandoned it in favour of *Malina*. 'Die Dialektik des männlichen und weiblichen Prinzips in der Geschwisterbeziehung', writes Mireille Tabah of the fragment, 'legt dabei nahe, daß der Versuch, die Geschichte einer Frau aus männlicher Sicht zu vermitteln [...] sich für Bachmann als immer schwieriger und schließlich als unmöglich erwiesen hat' [The dialectic of the male and female principles in the sibling relationship suggests that the attempt to tell the story of a woman from a male perspective proved, for Bachmann, ever more difficult and in the end impossible].⁶¹ In particular, the rape that leads to Franza's death is focalised entirely through her perspective, with Martin completely absent. Tabah posits that the failure of the attempt to narrate from Martin's point of view was a key reason why Bachmann set the fragment aside, having 'schockartig begriff[en], "daß es so nicht geht"' [suddenly grasped 'that it will not work this way'].⁶² *Malina*, by contrast, the only published part of the prose cycle, has been read by Sara

⁶⁰ Insa Wilke, in *Lesenswert-Quartett* 18.03.2021.

⁶¹ Mireille Tabah, 'Zur Genese einer Figur: Franza', in 'Text-Tollhaus für Bachmann-Süchtige?': *Lesarten zur Kritischen Ausgabe von Ingeborg Bachmanns Todesarten-Projekt*, ed. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 1998), 91-106 (91-2).

⁶² *Ibid*, 92.

Lennox as an origin story for why ‘there could be no female narrator for *Todesarten*’.⁶³ At first glance, this analysis is puzzling. Why would this be? Why tell this story from any other perspective than a female one?

The case of Ransmayr, meanwhile, is also more complex than it has been made out to be. Books that are among his more popular, crowd-pleasing works, such as 2016’s *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* [*Cox or The Course of Time*] or the 1988 bestseller *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*] – not, that is, the openly disturbing works that one ‘cannot get a handle on’ – also contain instances of rape and non-consensual sex, committed in each case by the protagonist. As we shall see, the themes of sexual predation and gendered violence are particularly prominent in *Die letzte Welt*, where the relationship between the protagonist, Cotta, and the mythical figure of Echo pre-figures the dark turn of *Der Fallmeister*. In both *Die letzte Welt* and *Cox*, the narrative briefly switches into the perspective of the female character being assaulted, which in each case is perhaps the most important way that the character’s view of themselves and the world around them is relativised. It goes without saying that this is an extremely troubling way for a female point of view to be incorporated into the text, and it is difficult to imagine this pattern being overlooked if the genders were reversed. It does, however, suggest that the perspective in these works may not be only a lazy default on the part of a male author, but might also constitute a choice that is intended to serve a purpose. This purpose, moreover, has to do with questions that concern Bachmann very much – with the relationship between being a victim and being a perpetrator, with culpability and complicity, and with mastery.

Cases and Falls

Along with *Das Buch Franza*, the other title Bachmann’s unfinished novel has been known by is *Der Fall Franza* [*The Case of Franza*]. The multivalence of the German word ‘Fall’ – which, combined with one of the terms for mastery, makes up half the title of Ransmayr’s novella – is well rehearsed, not least with regards to Bachmann’s writing.⁶⁴ As well as its

⁶³ Sara Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters*, 157.

⁶⁴ The many potential meanings and offshoots of ‘Fall’ are memorably explored by Caitríona Leahy with regards to both *Franza* and *Malina* in Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 198-209.

connotations of crisis and downfall, this title most obviously evokes the type of ‘case’ that might be studied by Leopold Jordan. There are clear echoes, for instance, of ‘Der Fall Dora’ [Freud’s ‘case of Dora’], and it is certainly no accident that the psychiatrist who claims to hold the cure appears as the central killer of the piece. This telling role reversal is what necessitates a further case surrounding the first, resulting in a Fall within a Fall. The first case that we encounter is the mystery of Franza’s disappearance. The private investigator on the scene is, of course, Martin, who stands in the Jordan household ‘wirklich wie ein Detektiv’ [really like a detective, TA 350]. Martin’s function within the narrative lies not least in upholding this framework of a ‘Kriminalrätsel’ [crime puzzle, TA 356]: he alerts the reader from the outset to the need for suspicion, and is left to puzzle out Franza’s story after its end. The *Franza* fragment, then, is ‘a detective novel in which the goal is to root out evil and expose it to the world’.⁶⁵

Ransmayr’s protagonists, too, are very often detectives of one kind or another. The unnamed narrator of his first novel-length work, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* [*The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*, 1984], becomes obsessed with the disappearance of his acquaintance Josef Mazzini. Just as Martin seeks to reconstruct his last encounter with Franza, trying to recall where everyone was standing and wishing ‘die Fäden zwischen alle [zu] hängen, weiße Genauigkeitsfäden’ [to hang the threads between everyone, white threads of precision, TA 351], the narrator of *Schrecken* seeks to force ‘biografische Details, Auskünfte und Namen wie in ein Kreuzworträtsel in einen Zusammenhang ein’ [biographical details, pieces of information and names into a nexus of meaning, as though into a crossword puzzle].⁶⁶ Mazzini, that is, ‘wurde für mich zum *Fall*’ [became for me a case; became my *fall*].⁶⁷ Here, too, both meanings are present, since the case can never be closed. By the end of the novel, the narrator finds himself stuck in the story, surrounded by the notes, maps and images he has pinned up all over the walls. This is the first instantiation of an important Ransmayr motif that runs right up to *Der Fallmeister*: the duck/rabbit Gestalt switch that reverses inside and outside, other and self. Amid the ‘papierenen Meere’ [paper oceans] of the maps and notes that suggest endless expanse, the narrator is in fact trapped in a room, talking to the walls. This narrative pattern pre-

⁶⁵ Schlipphacke, ‘Postmodernism and the Place of Nostalgia’, 83.

⁶⁶ Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*; emphasis in original.

empties ideas like ‘Anthropocene horror’ and the other forms of entrapment discussed in Chapter 1. The new twist on this characteristic Ransmayr ending offered in *Der Fallmeister* helps to sharpen this analysis, particularly in its many apparent nods to Bachmann.

A key feature that Ransmayr adopts in the novel, for instance, is the type of character triad that we see in the texts of *Todesarten*. This is invariably a triad with too many identities to go around, so that Franza morphs, as Sigrid Weigel notes, ‘zwischen der Tochter-Geliebten im Verhältnis zu Jordan [...] und der Schwester-Mutter im Verhältnis zum Bruder’ [between the daughter-lover in relation to Jordan (...) and the sister-mother in relation to her brother].⁶⁸ As Weigel points out, most elements of the novel fragment were already present, in first-person form, in the earlier ‘Wüstenbuch’ [Desert Book] fragment. The main innovation of *Franza*, then, lies in transposing these motifs into the character triad of Franza, Jordan and Martin, suggesting that this character constellation is of central importance.

The master of the triad is Jordan, who claims authority for himself through his profession – imprisoning Franza within the ‘Käfig seiner Notizen’ [cage of his notes, *TA* 407]⁶⁹ – and asserts himself as lord and master in his role as Franza’s husband. Franza’s place within the Jordan household is clear; Lennox, for instance, notes that ‘the sites at which Bachmann locates Franza are significant: sipping coffee in the Café Herrenhof, strolling through the Herrengasse, Franza has agreed to acknowledge men as the masters’.⁷⁰ Jordan’s patriarchal status is also conveyed more archetypally through his appearance as a ‘father’. Martin notes that Jordan has exactly the same black warts on his face as their late father, leading him to fear that Franza ‘einen Vater geheiratet hatte’ [had married a father, *TA* 360]; the fragment is also the earliest Bachmann text where ‘the father’ appears in dreams as the ‘Mörder’ [murderer], later a central motif in *Malina*. Fathers loom large as the central villains of *Todesarten*, appearing as the source both of damaging relationships with men in the present and of the crimes of the recent past. The most vivid image for this is the nightmare graveyard that gives Sara Lennox’s book its name, the ‘Friedhof der Töchter’ [graveyard of the daughters, *TA* 412] in *Franza*, which

⁶⁸ Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften*, 516.

⁶⁹ Cf. Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 203.

⁷⁰ Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters*, 163.

becomes, in *Malina*, the ‘Friedhof der ermordeten Töchter’ [graveyard of the murdered daughters, *TA* 175]. *Der Fallmeister*, in turn, takes up the same triad: a scientist brother in search of a missing sister and a father figure deemed murderous and tyrannical. Where the opening sentence of *Das Buch Franza* is an accusation against Jordan – who, as Martin thinks, ‘ihm die Schwester zugrunde gerichtet [hatte]’ [had destroyed his sister, *TA* 344] – *Der Fallmeister* opens with the claim ‘Mein Vater hat fünf Menschen getötet’ [My father killed five people, *FM* 7] and features the distinctly Bachmann-esque conclusion: ‘Und mein Vater? Ein Mörder, dachte ich, ein Mörder’ [And my father? A murderer, I thought, a murderer, *FM* 87].

If Ransmayr’s version of the tyrannical patriarch seems somehow more ham-fisted, less sinister, than Leopold Jordan or the father in *Malina*, it is perhaps no accident. For although the character triads in both texts bear striking similarities to one another, the target of critique has shifted by the time of the later novel. Much of the subtlety of *Franza* derives from Jordan’s role as psychoanalyst, for instance. In Bachmann’s text and context, the view of one-sided analysis as an act of violence – an imposition on and occupation of the other – still has the character of revelation. By Ransmayr’s time of writing, the patriarch as villain has become a much more predictable trope, particularly in the German-speaking post-war tradition. Ransmayr’s innovation is to use this trope as a red herring, while shifting readerly suspicion – and, as the story unfolds, readerly horror – onto the narrator. By the time of his attack on Mira, this narrator has not only inherited the ancestral title of ‘Fallmeister’ (*FM* 128), but it is also clear that the novella’s subtitle, ‘Eine kurze Geschichte vom Töten’ [A Short Story of Killing], in fact refers to him.

If we think about the context for each of these allegorical critiques, the difference starts to make a certain amount of sense. In Bachmann’s literary universe, the central, all-encompassing concern is the afterlife of fascism as it aligns with patriarchy. Especially for an Austrian or German writer, the father is the perfect nightmare encapsulation of this paradigm, as both the patriarch and the embodiment of the recent past. *Der Fallmeister*, by contrast, marks itself out immediately through its climate-disrupted setting as a work of Anthropocene fiction. In this context, the great crime that literature is rushing to bring to light is not one of the recent past, but one that is still unfolding all around us. And so it

is perhaps appropriate, at least on a temporal level, that the familiar set-up is subverted; that the killer turns out not to be the ancestor but the contemporary, even the self.

This model of guilt or crime is in keeping with a long history of Bachmann-esque themes and motifs in Ransmayr's work, which have been consistently overlooked. These themes are particularly visible in the novel that established the author's reputation, 1998's *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*]. As outlined in Chapter 2, *Die letzte Welt* is a homage to or reimagining of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Set in an 'Unzeit' [un-time] that overlays or jumbles together elements of ancient and modern settings, the novel sees the Roman protagonist Cotta – another detective figure – arrive in Tomis by the Black Sea, where the historical Ovid died in exile. Cotta is in search of Naso – a version of Ovid, derived from the poet's full name, Ovidius Publius Naso – and, in particular, in search of his great lost work *Metamorphoses*, which has remained the subject of intense speculation in Rome in the years since Naso's banishment. Although the name Cotta is taken from one of the historical Ovid's friends, this Cotta has never met Naso, and is essentially a protagonist of Ransmayr's own invention. Upon arriving in Tomis, Cotta is treated with suspicion by the eccentric townspeople, who claim not to know Naso's whereabouts and who – unbeknownst to Cotta – are all Ovidian figures: Lycaon, Tereus, Procne, Cyparis, Echo, and many more.

The novel unfolds in an episodic structure, with Ovidian tales being re-told in various guises as 'stations' of sorts on Cotta's quest to find Naso and journey towards understanding. Some of the stories are re-imagined directly in the novel; others are shown as films in the town square by the travelling projectionist, Cyparis, or woven as tapestries by the blind weaver, Ariachne. Others still are recounted to Cotta by Echo, who is the first of the townspeople to speak openly about Naso, and the only one to remember any of his tales. The novel includes a glossary – an 'Ovidian repertoire' – briefly outlining the figures as they appear in *Metamorphoses*, complete with quotes, as well as summarising their role in Ransmayr's re-imagining; these aspects are divided into the columns 'Alte Welt' [Old World] and 'Letzte Welt' [Last World]. Cotta does not succeed in finding Naso or the sought-after manuscript of *Metamorphoses*, but collects enough fragments and clues to lead him, by the end of the novel, to a realisation of his fate. When he witnesses the

transformation of Philomela, Procne and Tereus, which he recognises from these fragments, Cotta is faced with the horror of being trapped in the world of a book. As is so typical of Ransmayr's protagonists, his 'case' has become his 'fall'. The novel ends with Cotta calling out to the rocks as he makes his way to Naso's abandoned house in search of the fragments of his own story, and replying '*hier!*, wenn ihn der Widerhall des Schreies erreichte; denn was so gebrochen und so vertraut von den Wänden zurückschlug, war sein eigener Name' [*here!* when the reverberation of his cry reached him; for what bounced back from the walls in such broken and familiar form was his own name, *LW* 254].

As is no doubt clear from this summary, there is a lot going on in *Die letzte Welt*. It is no surprise that a whole host of articles and book chapters have been dedicated to topics like apocalypticism, eschatology, postmodernism and metamorphosis as they appear in the novel.⁷¹ What is surprising, however – particularly given the resonances of the closing lines – is the lack of scholarly attention paid to Ransmayr's iteration of the story of Echo. This section is at the centre of the text, spread over several chapters right in the middle of the book. It is also, I believe, central to the overall implications of *Die letzte Welt*. In Cotta, as the novel's ending makes clear, we have yet another male detective 'on his own trail'; another storyteller talking over the truth while on the way to himself.

The relationship between Cotta and Echo appears as the original of the narrative twist repeated in *Der Fallmeister*. If the constellation 'narrator-Mira-father' mirrors that of 'Martin-Franza-Jordan', then it also closely matches the triad 'Cotta-Echo-Tereus'. Tereus, the town butcher in Tomi, is the obvious baddie of *Die letzte Welt*. Where the father in *Der Fallmeister* is characterised above all by his fits of rage – in which he could, so the narrator imagines, 'jeden Verursacher seines Zorns [...] in den Tod *brüllen*' [*shout* to death anyone who provoked his rage, *FM* 29-30] – Tereus, too, is 'jähzornig' [rageful], and is frequently to be found shouting down his fellow townspeople; he is first introduced as 'der Schlachter, der selbst die Stiere überbrüllte' [the butcher, who outbellowed even the bulls,

⁷¹ A few fairly representative examples are: Levan Tzagareli, 'Besonderheiten des eschatologischen Chronotopos in Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 43.3 (2010), 55-75; Doris McGonagill, 'Journey into the Unknown: Memory, Identity, and Narrative in Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*', in *Belief Systems in Austrian Literature, Thought and Culture*, ed. Michael Boehringer, Allison Cattell and Belinda Kleinhans (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2017), 194-215; Erik Schilling, 'Der zweite Tod des Autors? Metamorphosen der Postmoderne in Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*', *Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie*, 4.1 (2012).

LW 26; 11]. Where Tereus is openly abusive towards his wife Procne, whom he treats ‘wie ein ihm zur Schlachtung anvertrautes Tier’ [like an animal entrusted to him for the slaughter, LW 27], Fallmeister Sr. is branded a ‘Teufel’ [devil, FM 30] by Jana, the narrator’s mother. Tereus’s status as a monster – and as self-appointed master – is confirmed above all by the denouement of *Die letzte Welt*, which retells the story of Philomela. As in the Ovidian source material, Procne’s sister Philomela has been raped and imprisoned by Tereus, who has cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling her story. The centrality of speechlessness, along with Tereus’s longstanding double life, makes the Ovidian story of Philomela an apt mythic antecedent to the *Todesarten* texts.⁷²

The artistry of Bachmann’s prose, as we have already seen, often lies in splitting such mythic patterns into multiple levels. The butcher (or hunter) and the blue deer (or the nightingale) are glimpsed in nightmares, visions and other incursions into the narrative, while the everyday guise of the killer is much less readily recognisable. This is also, to a certain extent, how *Die letzte Welt* functions. If the violated Philomela, barred by brute force from speech and testimony, is the bluntest possible version of a Bachmann myth, there is another character in the novel who comes closer to the versions of speechlessness that shape *Todesarten*. This is the figure of Echo, who searches for a way of speaking in a language that is not her own, who loves a man with eyes only for his own reflection, and who eventually vanishes into the walls.

Ransmayr’s version of the Echo myth corresponds to many of the visions of mastery and domination discussed in this chapter so far. Again, the structure of mastery is sounded out here only from within. Like ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’ and *Der Fallmeister*, *Die letzte Welt* seeks to emphasise the complicity and capacity for crime of characters who exempt themselves by accusing others, and who are frequently blinded by their own projections or deafened by their own narration. Where Tereus is feared and abhorred in Tomis, Cotta seems more the sensitive sort. Indeed, much of the section featuring Echo circles around the question of whether Cotta is unique or typical. Perhaps tellingly, the chapter in which

⁷² Without expressly spelling out this link, Caitríona Leahy’s *Der wahre Historiker* offers a reading of Philomela and Procne as twin versions of bearing witness: Philomela whose body ‘bear[s] witness to her violation’, but who is unable to give voice to her all-too-immediate experience, and Procne, who tells her sister stories of all the time that has passed while she was missing, in order to restore memories of a life beyond her trauma and integrate the all-consuming event into this wider narrative (Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 131).

Cotta first visits Echo's cave begins: 'Cotta war einer von vielen' [Cotta was one of many, *LW* 127]. It is an unexpected proposition on first reading. Cotta, after all, is the novel's protagonist: it is he who has made it to Tomi, unlike Naso's many other admirers. Because he is the protagonist, meanwhile, we as readers are primed to expect a particularly rich inner life behind his often stony exterior. This is an assumption that Echo seems to share: as we will see, the realisation that this Roman is indeed 'nur einer von vielen' [only one of many] constitutes for her a 'Schmerz der Enttäuschung' [pang of disappointment, *LW* 133].

This Echo is a sexualised figure, tailor-made for the male gaze; she is 'von einer berückenden Schönheit' [of enchanting beauty] and is thus the object of many a 'gaffender Blick' [ogling gaze, *LW* 92]. Her status as male fantasy is marred only by a skin condition consisting of a patch of stony scales that migrates continually across her body, and causes her unbearable shame. Echo gratifies the sexual desires of the many men of Tomi who visit her cave, and – crucially – remains silent about their most secret longings, foremost among them the wish 'sich [...] in Säuglinge, in Herren oder in Tiere zu verwandeln' [to transform into infants, lords or animals, *LW* 92]. In contrast to the figure in Ovid's myth, overcome with longing for the beautiful Narcissus,⁷³ Ransmayr's Echo shows no sign of possessing her own sexual drives; she tolerates ('ertrug') her fate at the hands of unappealing sexual partners, including Tereus (*LW* 136). These encounters appear driven not by desire on her part, but by a form of resignation: she 'gab sich [Tereus] und jedem mit einem Gleichmut hin, als entrichte sie [...] damit den unabdingbaren Preis für ein Leben im Schatten und Schutz der eisernen Stadt' [gave herself to Tereus and to each of them, as though by doing so she was paying the inevitable price for a life in the shade and protection of the town of iron, *LW* 136]. This is an early example of a striking fact about sexuality as it appears in Ransmayr's writing: it is generated almost exclusively by male characters, projected onto and endured by female characters, and emerges most often in violent and guilt-laden forms. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the episode in Echo's cave follows a chapter dedicated to Cypris, the projectionist, taking place 'in der ersten Nacht nach dem Verschwinden des Filmvorführers' [in the first night after the disappearance of the projectionist, *LW* 132]: Echo, too, is figured above all as a surface for projections and

⁷³ 'When she saw Narcissus wandering the countryside, | She flushed with love and followed him secretly. | The more she followed him, the hotter she burned | For his proximity.' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Robinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 76.

impressions.⁷⁴ As Leahy notes, Echo ‘stores and gives expression to all that is directed at her, and thus assumes the function of memory, or paper, in a world where nothing is retained’.⁷⁵ Echo’s status as surface is also pointed to by her patch of flaking, scaly skin, which has its counterparts in *Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*. In keeping with Fallmeister Jr’s anger at Mira’s (metaphorical) shedding of skin, Cotta, too, sees his lust for Echo turn suddenly to disgust when he touches her scaly section of skin, a ‘verwüstetes Stück Haut [...] dürr und kalt’ [a section of ravaged skin (...) desiccated and cold, *LW* 134]. If Echo is surface, she is primarily surface to be looked at, a smooth projection surface for the gaze. More tactile features, or signs of permeability between the inside and outside of bodies – of growth, rebirth or shapeshifting – are anathema to Cotta and several of Ransmayr’s other protagonists, who are frequently more comfortable observing than participating in bodily entanglement. In a text so much about ‘bodies changed | Into new forms’⁷⁶ – and in view of the transgressive, transformative desires Echo’s male visitors bring with them to her cave – it is striking that ‘der Gedanke an eine Echse’ [thought of a lizard] evoked by Echo’s patch of scales arouses disgust that ‘traf [Cotta] wie ein Schlag, unter dem seine Begierde zersprang’ [hit Cotta like a blow, shattering his lust, *LW* 134].

The relationship between surface and interiority, then, is a second crucial element of the episode in Echo’s cave. Leahy, with her Bachmann glasses on, posits that Echo’s body ‘retains the secrets of all the men of Tomi, becoming a storehouse of all that is hidden’.⁷⁷ Giorgio Manganelli, by stark contrast, reads Echo as ‘ein völlig passives Wesen, [...] die von den männlichen Figuren [...] unendlich geschändet werden kann, ohne aber davon innerlich berührt zu sein’ sein’ [an entirely passive being, who can be endlessly defiled by

⁷⁴ Projection is a running theme in *Die letzte Welt*, from the yearly excitement around Cyparis’s films to the ‘Episkop’, or slide projector, that becomes a source both of wonder and danger in Fama’s shop. As Sarah Annes Brown points out, ‘Ransmayr’s Philomela does not weave her dreadful tidings but points to Tereus’ house, “a blank wall framed in ivy and wild grape”, as though creating, if not a picture, a kind of *tabula rasa* on which Procne can project her own worst fears – only the border is yet in place’ (Sarah Annes Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* [London: Duckworth, 1999], 224-5). What this reading does not spell out is that the wall of Tereus’s house is precisely the surface used as a screen for Cyparis’s films: ‘Alljährlich entstand [...] auf Tereus’ Mauer unter den Handgriffen des Liliputaners eine Welt [...]’ [every year, through the handiwork of the Lilliputian, a world arose on Tereus’s wall, *LW* 21]. In the light of Philomela’s story, this detail appears as a modified version of Plato’s cave, in which the reality worth attending to is not out of sight behind the backs of the viewers or outside the space they inhabit, but hidden in plain view, disguised only by their own projections.

⁷⁵ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 129.

⁷⁶ *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Robinson, 5.

⁷⁷ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 130.

the male characters without being internally touched by it].⁷⁸ Between these two readings runs a divide named perspective. Manganelli's allusion to defilement or violation is, we must assume, a reference to Cotta's attack on Echo. Having listened to her re-tellings of stories she heard from Naso – the man whom Cotta, as pseudo-detective, is obsessively in search of – Cotta sexually assaults Echo in the silence at the end of her narration. This action, which criticism almost invariably glosses over, lies at the dark heart of the novel and – as *Der Fallmeister* makes clear – at the heart of much of Ransmayr's oeuvre.

It is not only the act of violence in and of itself that proves programmatic for the rest of Ransmayr's works, but also the way it is framed within the narrative. Cotta, we read, '[fiel] wie ein vor Begehrlichkeit grob und atemlos gewordener Freier über [Echo] her' [fell upon (Echo) like a suitor turned rough and breathless with desire, *LW* 132] – a telling turn of phrase that seems to place us within the mode of free indirect discourse, and within Cotta's own reasoning. On multiple occasions in the novel, Cotta seeks to distinguish himself from Echo's male visitors, including Tereus, and responds with contempt or indignation to their leering assumption that: 'Der da wollte von dem Weib in der Höhle das gleiche wie sie, wie jeder' [this fellow wanted the same thing from the woman in the cave as them, the same as everyone, *LW* 136]. Despite his reluctance to see himself as being in fact 'wie jeder' [like everyone (*male*)], Cotta reaches for this same 'wie' [like] in viewing his own actions, attempting to maintain a distinction of identity even in the face of identical behaviour. To the reader as onlooker, Cotta is not 'like' a suitor turned rough with desire, he *is* precisely that. The notion of 'falling upon' someone, too, hints at an underlying denial of agency. If we read *Die letzte Welt* as a detective story where the detective is on the wrong track – where they have profoundly misread their situation – then this is perhaps the central moment of misrecognition. Echo's eventual disappearance is one of the first hints that Cotta is living *inside* the text he is in search of, and thus also, in a sense, in the externalised inside of his own head. After hearing her re-telling of Naso's story about an apocalyptic storm, Cotta dreams about just such a storm, awaking to find the physical signs of it all through the streets of Tomis. When asked about it, the townspeople can recall nothing of the kind – 'da habe er wohl schlecht geträumt' [he must have had a bad dream,

⁷⁸ Giorgio Manganelli, 'Der Dichter Ovid, ein unsichtbarer Schatten', in *Die Erfindung der Welt: Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr*, ed. Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 12. cf Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 129.

LW 154] – but Echo has disappeared, never to be seen again. This first crack in Cotta's reality – later compounded by the appearance of Philomela, whose return precipitates Cotta's ultimate realisation and thus the 'Einsturz von [seiner] Welt' [collapse of his world, LW 241] – might seem to support a reading of him as a Narcissus figure. Entrapment within his own obsession would then serve as a form of surreal poetic justice for a character who fails to see beyond his own nose, particularly in his encounters with others. The reader, however, is still given a glimpse of realities beyond Cotta's apprehension, first and foremost through the eyes of Echo herself. It is Echo who realises, in the moment of Cotta's attack, that he is 'nicht anders'; that he is, rather, 'nur einer von vielen und roh wie die meisten' [only one of many and rough as most, LW 133].

It is in this regard that Ransmayr most clearly follows in the wake of Bachmann: of her decision to erase the female Ich in favour of a male narrator for *Todesarten*, and of her portrayal of the 'Herren der Welt' as being 'in [ihrem] Wahn' [in their delusion, E 186], distracted by their own stories and storytelling, unable to relate to the longed-for world outside of themselves except by destroying it. The brief insights Ransmayr's novels do offer into the consciousness of female characters suggest that the dominant perspectives they offset are quite deliberately chosen. In the case of Echo, her realisation about Cotta is the only detail that unmistakably marks him out as a self-deceived protagonist, rather than one merely disoriented by the contingency of the setting he finds himself in. The flash of narrative access to her pain and dismay in the moment of the attack is matched by a brief encounter, in *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* [*Cox or The Course of Time*], with the inner world of the protagonist's wife Faye, who otherwise remains 'sprachlos' [speechless] as the object of Cox's longing: 'Und sie hatte nicht gewollt, niemals, daß er sich stöhnend auf ihr wand, bis sie, überwältigt von Wut, Schmerz und Ekel, spürte, wie sein Samen sie tief in ihrem Inneren berührte, an ihr Innerstes schlug!, und dann wie ein gestaltloses, wässriges Ungeziefer daraus hervorkroch' [And she had never wanted, never, for him to writhe moaning on top of her until she, overwhelmed by anger, pain and disgust, felt how his semen touched her deep in her inside, struck against her innermost! and then crawled out like a formless, watery vermin, C 43]. It is notable – and troubling – that both Faye's visceral reaction and Echo's dismay are accessed directly only through non-consensual sexual acts, the proof that they are indeed 'internally touched' offered only in moments of physical

invasion. This dark mirroring of form and content could be seen as indicating an unease about the authorial male gaze, and the mechanisms by which it purports to see within the minds of female characters. The male figures of the author's 'warmer' works show a similarly uncomfortable awareness of their own gaze: 'Gleich in der ersten Stunde | beim Gaffen ertappt' [caught ogling | in the very first hour, *FB* 122], the narrator Pádraig in *Der fliegende Berg* chides himself after first meeting Nyema, and thinks as though by way of apology 'an das Wort schön [...] wie schön sie ist' [of the word *beautiful* (...) *how beautiful she is*, *FB* 122].

It is tempting, and perhaps valid, to read this failure or refusal to represent female experience unaccompanied by male sexual guilt as a statement of creative bankruptcy that would hardly be overlooked in reverse. Yet the harrowing narrative turn of *Der Fallmeister* casts light back on the broader project of Ransmayr's work in a manner that suggests something more rigorous. The centrality of the narrator's crime within the novel, and the explicitness with which it is depicted, highlight a red thread running from Cotta through Bering, who hunts and kills the woman he has pined after in *Morbus Kitahara*, to his most recent novel. Seen in this light, the subtitle of *Der Fallmeister* applies to a whole series of literary case studies, a cycle of 'Geschichten vom Töten' [stories of killing] that serve as the younger male sibling of 'Todesarten' [Ways of Dying]. The decision to carry this triad of misrecognition, projection and crime forwards into a climate-disrupted setting, meanwhile – and to place it at the centre of the narrative, where it can no longer be overlooked – suggests that for Ransmayr, environmental violence is at root a further manifestation of this same paradigm of domination or mastery. This form of crime, *Der Fallmeister* seems to suggest, is the primary element of the crisis.

Reports and Confessions

The import of this type of 'killer story' is a contentious subject within both feminist and environmentalist writing. In choosing to depict experiences as charged and as distressing as rape and gendered violence, both the *Franza* fragment and *Der Fallmeister* raise the question of who owns such experiences, and to what end they are represented. This query

arises particularly in the case of Ransmayr, both because of his lived experience as a male author and because of the features of his work outlined above: the dearth of female narrative perspectives in his novels, and the decision to represent this type of violence primarily from the perpetrator's point of view. One way of making sense of this approach is to align it with a tradition of post-war German-language writing that tries to make its reader or audience recognise their own culpability through the use of Doppelgänger figures and other types of formal mirroring. In Wolfgang Borchert's well-known post-war morality play *Draußen vor der Tür* [*The Man Outside*, 1947], for instance, a German soldier returns home from a prisoner-of-war camp to find his wife in bed with another man; a few scenes later, he himself is the 'other man' whom a different Heimkehrer [returning soldier] comes home to find. Where Cotta is described as 'einer von vielen' [one of many], Borchert's protagonist Beckmann is listed in the play's dramatis personae as 'einer von denen' [one of those].⁷⁹ The argument commonly made about such texts is that, by showing a chain of accusation while in each case undermining the accuser, they prompt the audience or reader to extend the hall of mirrors outwards into their own lives, and question whether they themselves are similarly implicated.

Gölz makes a similar argument about Bachmann's 'Der Kommandant' [The Commander] as opposed to Kafka's 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer'. In Bachmann's story, the protagonist S. crosses the border without identification papers, is treated by those on the other side as 'the commander', and must attempt – from his position in the commander's headquarters, which is lined with mirrors – to track down the guilty party who crossed the border without papers (*E* 34-6).⁸⁰ Gölz writes that S. 'is in desperate search for – the actual reader knows – *himself*. And yet, surrounded by "mirrors," this elephant in the room is precisely what he cannot find'.⁸¹ In contrast to Kafka's story, which she casts as a hall of mirrors through which 'readers will wander [...], unable to find themselves',⁸² Gölz locates the true significance of Bachmann's story in the way S. responds to the commander's headquarters. He orders his soldiers to 'Nehmt die Spiegel ab! [...] Laßt nur einen einzigen stehen!' [Take down the mirrors! (...) Leave only a single

⁷⁹ Wolfgang Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür und Ausgewählte Erzählungen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001), 7.

⁸⁰ Cf. Gölz, 'Dear K.', 37.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

one standing!, E 36]. Gözl concludes that in Bachmann's model, what is missing is 'not the message, but the reader's self. To overcome his strange inability to find himself, [...] S. must find something that is hard to find in the "ingeniously crafted hall" at the heart of the Kommandantur: an *actual* mirror'.⁸³ According to Gözl's argument, this is Bachmann's way of 'teaching' the reader to catastrophise the text – to see it as a 'textual mirror in which they [can] [...] get in touch with their own experience'.⁸⁴ This ability, once learned, can then be used on other texts. 'Der Kommandant' offers an interesting contrast to *Gould's Book*, which – for all its apparent wish to make the reader see with new eyes – ends with a hall-of-mirrors 'Afterword' in which the various male characters we have encountered appear to have been one another all along.⁸⁵ The idea of texts as mirrors recalls and complicates the book-world problem analysed in Chapter 1: the ways in which books seek to break their own bounds and incite action or behavioural change in the reader, in order to have an effect in the world beyond their pages.

Ransmayr's triads of accusation would seem to fall somewhere between the full-scale 'hall of mirrors' of Flanagan's 'Afterword' and the clarity of Bachmann's 'Der Kommandant'. They undermine the position of the 'goodie', potentially causing the reader to reflect on their own complicity – both in the allegorical Anthropocene context, and, for male readers, in terms of patriarchal patterns of thought and behaviour. Certainly, the moral lesson that *Der Fallmeister* is repeatedly at pains to emphasise is that of the 'hauchzart[e] [...] Membran' [gossamer-fine membrane, FM 82] between culture and barbarism, murderers and non-murderers. Contrary to Morton's view of the aesthetic experience as edifyingly ecological, the novel offers explicit reminders that countless 'mitleidlos[e] Mörder und Massenmörder' [merciless murderers and mass murderers, FM 82-3] passionately loved both art and animals.⁸⁶ That *Der Fallmeister* also locates its cli-fi setting in a tradition of writing 'after Auschwitz' is indicated by textual details like the

⁸³ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁸⁵ The 'Afterword' is presented as a found document from the Archives Office of Tasmania, and reads: 'GOULD, William Buelow, prisoner number 873645; aliases Sid Hammet, "the Surgeon", Jorgen Jorgensen, Capois Death, Pobjoy, "the Commandant"' (GB 458).

⁸⁶ As Liliana Zavaglia points out, the epigraph to Flanagan's *The Narrow Road from the Deep North* is a similar reminder of the overlap between culture and barbarism. The epigraph, a quote from Paul Celan ('Mother, they write poems') indicates 'one of the novel's central paradoxes – that oppressors, along with their victims in both the Jewish Holocaust and the Japanese camps – appreciated the beauty of classical literature and art'. Zavaglia, 'Out of the tear-drenched land', 201.

narrator's journey on an express train 'zurück nach Birkenau-Nord' [back to Birkenau North, FM 174]. At the same time, like 'Unter Mördern und Irren', it invokes the older and simpler tenet: 'Du sollst nicht töten' [Thou shalt not kill, FM 215], references to which also recur throughout *Morbus Kitahara*.⁸⁷ The novel form, meanwhile, complicates the comparison to Borchert's play, since it is associated more with private, individual morality than the public and social medium of theatre.⁸⁸

Ransmayr's matter-of-fact defence of the book is that the horrors it portrays pale in comparison to what is happening in the world every day. Picking up on the novel's reception as 'düster' and 'weltuntergängerisch' [dark and apocalyptic], he remarks: 'Nichts in diesem Buch ist auch nur annähernd so schwarz, so bedrohlich oder, wenn sie wollen, so apokalyptisch, wie [...] die Bilder, die Nachrichten, [...] die wir tagtäglich auf unseren Bildschirmen sehen' [Nothing in this book is anywhere near as dark, as threatening or, if you like, as apocalyptic as (...) the images, the news and messages (...) that we see on our screens daily].⁸⁹ This gestures towards a different understanding of writing as an ethical act: namely, to the idea of bearing witness. This is an approach that we will encounter again in the next chapter, in the context of Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow*. The idea of literature as a means of bearing witness also has a long history in post-war German-language literature, in which Bachmann herself occupies an important place. This mode of writing seeks to salvage stories that would otherwise be destroyed or overlooked,

⁸⁷ Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 39; 249; 335.

⁸⁸ In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh picks up on John Updike's view of the novel as an 'individual moral adventure', and attempts to tease out what this might mean (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 77). Updike traces this definition of the novel back to Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe, and distinguishes it from other forms, which are 'concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate' (Ibid). Ghosh roundly rejects this view of the novel form as a whole – citing everything from *War and Peace* and *Moby-Dick* to recent Bengali and Jordanian fiction – but believes Updike has put his finger on 'a turn that fiction took at a certain time in the countries that were then leading the way to the "Great Acceleration" of the late twentieth century' (Ibid, 79). In *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht traces the development of a related idea – that of 'character' – in early modern drama, compared to medieval forms that focused on 'the entry of an actor's (or a clown's or a joker's) body into a space that it will share with the bodies of the spectators' (Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 31). An essential feature of this turn towards character 'in modern Western culture was the priority of the dimension of time over that of space, in a culture that was no longer centered on a ritual of producing "real presence" but based on the predominance of the *cogito*' (Ibid, 34). Gözl presents the difference between immersive and critical reading in strikingly similar terms, with the former imagining time as the developmental narrative time of the text, and the latter conceiving it as 'this moment in which we read, think, and live' (Gözl, 'Dear K.', 10).

⁸⁹ These comments were made at a reading at Literature House Europe in 2021, a video recording of which is available on YouTube. *Der Fallmeister, Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes: Christoph Ransmayr, Dörte Lyssewski, Brot & Sterne*. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Rm8ifLM9VI>> [Accessed 20th March 2023].

often with a quixotic ideal of comprehensiveness; Bachmann's aim of compiling 'ein[e] einzig[e] groß[e] Studie aller möglichen Todesarten' [a single great study of all possible ways of dying / types of death] is a prime example. The ambition of this undertaking cannot be overstated; as she envisages it, the resulting novel cycle would serve as 'ein Kompendium, ein Manuale' [a compendium, a manual].⁹⁰ This combination suggests a direct relationship between compiling and bearing witness – versions of the 'gathering' we will consider in the epilogue – and action in the world. There is more than a hint of Bachmann to a character in Tokarczuk's *Flights* whom the narrator meets in an airport and ends up having dinner with. Where Bachmann's vision identifies male domination of women as paradigmatic for all forms of violence, this woman declares that:

at first glance the world seems so diverse. Wherever you go you find all sorts of different people, different cultures, cities [...] But don't let yourself be taken in by the diversity – it's superficial [...]. In reality, everywhere is the same. In terms of animals. In terms of how we interact with animals (F 72).

Her response is to gather as many stories as possible of how animals are abused, exploited and killed, wishing to write 'an exhaustive volume that leaves out no crime, from the dawn of the world to our time. It will be humanity's confessions' (F 75). This compendium-in-progress is titled 'Reports on Infamy'.

The idea of confession invoked here is a useful one, providing one possible answer to a question raised earlier: why narrate in the voice of the killer in the first place? While Bachmann's experiments with and slippages in perspective are complicated and compelling, the exemplary crimes she attends to are nonetheless experienced first-hand in the consciousness of female characters. Tokarczuk's chronicler of crimes against animals, by contrast, cannot hope to access their experience of events, but must testify from the position of an observer. The final sentence of the passage, meanwhile – 'She had already gathered the excerpts from ancient Greek literature' (F 75) – suggests something akin to a synthesis of 'Todesarten' with Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* [*Arcades Project*]: we might surmise, that is, that the excerpts she collects are to stand for and speak against

⁹⁰ Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 65.

themselves. If so, they align in perspective with *Der Fallmeister*, as confessions from the mouth of the perpetrator.

Significantly – and despite the emphasis on sameness in the passage from *Flights* – this version of confession is also a relatively specific cultural marker, linking Tokarczuk’s native Poland to the Austrian writers at hand via a shared tradition of Catholicism. While overtly Catholic features are more prevalent elsewhere in the oeuvres of Bachmann and Ransmayr, the portrayal of the desert in *Das Buch Franza* bears heavy religious overtones. ‘Die arabische Wüste’, as the text itself declares, ‘ist von zerbrochenen Gottesvorstellungen umzäunt’ [The Arabian desert is strewn around with shattered conceptions of God, TA 447], manifesting in images of great floods and last suppers (TA 471; 480). While in Egypt, Franza perceives in the Red Sea not only a biblical backdrop, but also a symbolic threat of the predation that she fears, asking: ‘Warum bin ich so verlassen. Warum ist das Rote Meer so voll von Haien, der grausamsten Tiere voll?’ [Why am I so forsaken. Why is the Red Sea so full of sharks, full of the most terrible animals? TA 425].⁹¹ In her sketches for the novel, Bachmann initially preceded these lines with the more overt ‘Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen’ [My God, why have you forsaken me, TA 475].

The idea of confession, particularly as a factor of shared cultural context, helps both to identify key similarities and make sense of key differences between *Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*. Like Tokarczuk’s chronicler of abuse, both Bachmann and Ransmayr are intensely interested in conceptions of crime, which they perceive as an entity external to and expressing itself through individuals. In the preface to *Das Buch Franza*, Bachmann casts this entity as ‘das Virus Verbrechen’ [the virus of crime, TA 341], which she believes cannot have suddenly disappeared with the end of the Third Reich. Ransmayr, noting from the ‘Fallgeschichten’ [case histories] his wife recounts that domestic violence is often

⁹¹ In an intertext that highlights the shift in focus between the two authors, Ransmayr also picks up the image of the sharks of the Red Sea in a story from *Atlas* titled ‘Ein Hai in der Wüste’ [A Shark in the Desert]. As with the allusion mentioned in Chapter 1 to ‘die Vermehrung von Fischen und Broten an jenem [...] See *Genezareth* genannten, ehemals fischreichen Gewässer’ [the multiplying of loaves and fishes in those waters called the Sea of Galilee, once abundant in fish; Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 34], Ransmayr’s version of the image is shaped by the context of biodiversity loss. In the story, a shark from the Red Sea lies dead on the road near Al Hudaydah, having fallen from a lorry bound for the fish market. Carved up on the spot and sold to passersby in plastic bags, the shark becomes an uncomfortable reminder of the new fragility of ecosystems that extend back to the Old Testament (Ransmayr, *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*, 254-9).

passed from generation to generation through childhood trauma, describes this violence as ‘eine Welle, die sich der Individuen nur bedient’ [a wave that merely makes use of individuals].⁹² As I have suggested, meanwhile, the effect of the shift from Bachmann’s triad to Ransmayr’s is that of emphasising culpability. The notion of *Der Fallmeister* as an extreme expression of ‘Anthropocene horror’ – the guilt that arises ‘from living in a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs’⁹³ – is supported by the terms in which the narrator’s attack on Mira is portrayed, mixing horror with denial: ‘Ihr erster, wortloser Befreiungsversuch ließ die Klammer meiner Arme wie die eines automatischen Mechanismus, einer Falle, ganz ohne mein Zutun noch enger werden’ [Her first, wordless attempt to free herself caused the vice-grip of my arms to tighten without my involvement like that of an automatic mechanism, a trap, *FM* 163].

If we accept the reading of *Der Fallmeister* as an allegory for ecological destruction – perhaps the only convincing way of linking the novel’s climate-dystopia setting and sexual assault plot⁹⁴ – then we may well question both the extremity and the appropriateness of the comparison, particularly on the level of individual or personal responsibility. If this counts as one of ‘humanity’s confessions’, then it is one informed by a convergence of cultural contexts particularly intent on diffuse forms of guilt, namely Catholicism and post-Holocaust memory culture. In *Morbus Kitahara*, Ransmayr had found a memorable image for this convergence, in the form of ‘Sühnegesellschaften’ [societies of penitence]: a religious cult dedicated to pious commemoration of the crimes of Mauthausen.⁹⁵ The wish to represent ‘Mitschuld’ or complicity, meanwhile, is already present in *Todesarten*. Sigrid Weigel has suggested that Bachmann set the *Franza* fragment aside not least ‘weil die weibliche Hauptfigur darin trotz allem durch die in ihr verkörperte symbolische Wiederholung tendenziell eher in der Position eines Opfers fixiert bleibt’ [because despite

⁹² *LiteraTour Podcast*, 26 August 2021.

⁹³ Clark, ‘Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror’, 62.

⁹⁴ Gabriele Dürbeck and Christoph Schaub, notably, disagree that *Der Fallmeister* is genuinely interested in engaging with the climate crisis and global disintegration. Instead, they view it as playing out a fairly typical Ransmayr plot against the backdrop of a vaguely delineated climate dystopia (Gabriele Dürbeck and Christoph Schaub, ‘Zur Marginalität von Klimawandel und globaler Desintegration: Reisenarration in Christoph Ransmayr’s *Der Fallmeister*’, conference paper presented at *Austrian Travel Writing*, Maynooth University, 17th June 2022). The intertextual links I have outlined here between *Der Fallmeister* and Bachmann’s archetypal approach, as well as the concept of ‘ecological fiction’ rather than the more strictly defined ‘Anthropocene texts’, help to complicate this reception of the novel.

⁹⁵ Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), 129.

everything, the female main character tends to remain stuck in the position of a victim in the text through the symbolic repetition embodied in her].⁹⁶ For Weigel, this presents an unfavourable contrast to the dream chapters of *Malina*, which show instead of pure victimhood ‘die im Vater-Gefängnis sitzende Tochter, die sich zugleich als Opfer *und* als Komplizin sieht’ [the daughter sitting in the father-prison, seeing herself simultaneously as a victim *and* an accomplice].⁹⁷

The extent to which this sense of personal guilt is appropriate to the context of the climate crisis is a point of constant debate both within and beyond academic ecocriticism. In Chapter 1, we considered Timothy Clark’s emphasis on the strange mismatch between the perceptual level on which switching on a car is a minor, ordinary act, and the species level on which it is destructive. Morton, too, includes this discrepancy among the ‘strange loops’ of ecological awareness, writing that ‘Every time I start my car [...] I don’t mean to harm Earth’, and yet ‘of course I am formally responsible to the extent that I understand global warming [...] I am the criminal’.⁹⁸ At the same time, Morton rejects any attempt to use guilt to force ecological action – not only because, as we saw with Seymour in Chapter 1, it can be alienating and ineffective, but also because ‘as a product of Axial Age religion, guilt is foundationally agrilogistic’.⁹⁹ In referring to the arguments made by Ruth Leys in *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (2009), Morton also draws the link between religious and Holocaust guilt embodied in Ransmayr’s ‘societies of penitence’.¹⁰⁰ As we saw in Chapter 2, meanwhile, critics like Andreas Malm place the blame squarely on the overarching systems of ‘fossil capital’, arguing that emphasis on individual responsibility is a deliberate distraction, and advocating for civil disobedience and property destruction in response.¹⁰¹ Somewhere in between, though certainly towards the Malm end, sits Amitav Ghosh, who situates the responsibility at a system level but also argues for the irreducible importance of restoring a kind of personal meaning to the biosphere.

⁹⁶ Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften*, 505.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 506.

⁹⁸ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 8-9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 133, 182.

¹⁰¹ These arguments are made in Malm, *Fossil Capital* and Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London: Verso, 2021).

The critique of systems of mastery in Ransmayr's novels, which nonetheless often goes hand in hand with personalised guilt on the part of his protagonists, is one aspect of what makes his work both compelling and problematic in an Anthropocene context. The *Franza* fragment, meanwhile, arguably presents an even more vexed case study. Like *Der Fallmeister*, it certainly perceives violence and domination on a structural level, with nods to the geopolitical forces that have shaped the current crisis: we see Franza and Martin, for instance, travelling 'in einem Auto den Shell-Ölfeldern entgegen' [in a car towards the Shell oilfields, TA 444], as though into the true heart of darkness. In line with Ghosh's view, Franza's incompatibility with this system arises not least from her attachment to meaning, which is mystifying to both Jordan and Martin. 'Jemand wie Franza [...] mußte ja leben in der Magie und in Bedeutungen', thinks Martin at the outset of Franza's breakdown [Someone like Franza (...) had to live in magic and in meanings, TA 386], an assessment that she herself later echoes: 'Man kann nur die wirklich bestehlen, die magisch leben, und für mich hat alles Bedeutung' [One can only really rob those who live magically, and for me everything has meaning, TA 414]. Ghosh, too, connects the element of meaning to that of theft, using the titular nutmeg as his central example. 'When I look at a *pala* lying in my palm and think of it as a *jâyaphal*,' he writes – using the Bandanese and Bengali words for nutmeg, both of which mean roughly 'fragrant fruit' –

it is no great stretch to think of it as a tiny planet, or as a maker of history, or as something that hides within itself a vitality that endows it with the power to bless or curse. This possibility is not foreclosed even when I think of it as a 'nutmeg' or *nootmuskat*. It is only when I think of it as *Myristica fragrans* Houtt that those thoughts evaporate and the nut becomes subdued and muted – reduced, as was intended by the Linnaean system, to the status of an inert resource. To think of it then as anything but a commodity seems childlike and fantastical, almost savage.¹⁰²

In Egypt, Franza draws the very same connection between the denial of meaning – in her case, through Jordan's cold-eyed analysis – and colonial resource extraction. Her view, however, adds a further complicating factor in the scope of its comparison, which links geopolitical domination to her personal plight. Jordan, she tells Martin,

¹⁰² Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 98.

hat mir meine Güter genommen. Mein Lachen, meine Zärtlichkeit, mein Freuenkönnen, mein Mitleiden, Helfenkönnen, meine Animalität, mein Strahlen [...] Aber warum tut das jemand, das versteh ich nicht, aber es ist ja auch nicht zu verstehen, warum die Weißen den Schwarzen die Güter genommen haben, nicht nur die Diamanten und die Nüsse, das Öl und die Datteln, sondern den Frieden, in dem die Güter wachsen, und die Gesundheit, ohne die man nicht leben kann, oder gehörten die Bodenschätze mit den anderen Schätzen zusammen, manchmal glaube ich es.

[Took my goods from me. My laugh, my tenderness, my capacity for joy, my compassion, ability to help, my animality, my radiance (...) But why would someone do that, I don't understand, but then it also can't be understood why the Whites took the goods of the Blacks, not only the diamonds and nuts, the oil and the dates, but also the peace in which the goods grow, and the health without which one cannot live, or did the natural resources go hand in hand with the other goods, sometimes I think so, TA 413].

Here we have a further manifestation of the structural, archetypal mode of understanding that has been the focus of this chapter. In *Strahlender Untergang*, too, the 'Herr der Welt' who 'das Fremde zum Rohstoff [erklärte]' [declared the foreign a resource] also goes by the pseudonym 'der Weiße' [the white one, SU 32]. At the same time, this passage of *Franza* – in which Franza also posits that Indigenous Australians committed 'eine Art des Selbstmordes, weil sie glaubten, die Weißen hätten sich all ihrer Güter auf magische Weise bemächtigt' [a kind of suicide, because they believed the whites had taken possession of all their goods by magical means, TA 413] and concludes 'Ich bin eine Papua' [I am a Papuan, TA 414] – is every bit as uncomfortable as the allegorical twist of *Der Fallmeister*. To explore it in more detail, it is worth considering the role of 'die Weißen' [the Whites] as a final shared motif of *Franza* and *Der Fallmeister*.

Whites

As in the case of 'das blaue Wild', 'die Weißen' in *Franza* are a borrowing from a fellow poet that takes on new dimensions in Bachmann's text. Alluding to a line from Rimbaud's

‘Une Saison en Enfer’,¹⁰³ the motif of ‘die Weißen’ comes to crystallise all the types of violence at issue in the fragment. As we have seen, the central figure of this type in *Todesarten* is the father, a trope *Der Fallmeister* also adopts as its initial villain. ‘Die Weißen’, similarly, become a compound image of the camp doctors with their lab coats – emblems of clinical observation, measurement and disenchantment – and the European colonisers of Egypt, Sudan, Libya and Australia. The man who assaults Franza at the base of the pyramid, too, is described only as ‘ein Weißer’ [a White, TA 465]. Bachmann’s transmutation of the historical violence of colonisation and the patriarchal violence of rape into a recurring, ahistoric paradigm is demonstrated by a key passage from the novel:

Die Weißen kommen. Die Weißen gehen an Land. Und wenn sie wieder zurückgeworfen werden, dann werden sie noch einmal wiederkommen, [...] sie werden mit ihrem Geist kommen, wenn sie anders nicht mehr kommen können. Und auferstehen in einem braunen oder schwarzen Gehirn, es werden noch immer die Weißen sein, auch dann noch. Sie werden die Welt weiter besitzen, auf diesem Umweg.

[The whites are coming. The whites are landing. And if they are repelled, then they will come back again, (...) they will come back with their spirit, if they can no longer come another way. And be resurrected in a brown or black brain, it will still be the whites, even then. They will continue to own the world, by this detour, TA 438-9].

Like *Der Fallmeister*, this appears as an attempt to personify the attitude of mastery, understood as domination. ‘Der Vater’ and ‘die Weißen’ are both real and embodied, and at the same time eternal and immutable. There is about them something of the inevitability associated with original sin. Franza’s view of Whiteness as a mindset or worldview that can come untethered from its source and spread across cultures – like ‘das Virus Verbrechen’ [the virus of crime], or an invasive species – is also reflected in Ghosh’s analysis. Much like the postcolonial idea of language as a carrier of the coloniser’s culture, Ghosh views contemporary systems of extraction and exploitation as bearing the trace of their origins in White settler colonialism. ‘Western settler-colonial culture’, he writes,

¹⁰³ ‘The white men are landing. Cannon fire! Now we shall have to submit to being baptized, wearing clothes, working’. [‘Les blancs débarquent. Le canon! Il faut se soumettre au baptême, s’habiller, travailler’]. Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell & Illuminations*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: J.M. Dent, 1998), 10 [11].

is no longer confined to the settler colonies. Since the adoption in 1989 of the Washington Consensus, the ideologies and practices of settler colonialism have been actively promoted, in their neoliberal guise, by the world's most powerful countries.¹⁰⁴

As we saw in Chapter 2, Ghosh names China, India and Indonesia as examples of this development. This same understanding extends, for Ghosh, to the phrase 'the white people' as used by the Brazilian shaman Davi Kopenawa in his book *The Falling Sky* (2012). Ghosh points out that 'the phrase "the white people", which recurs often in the book, must be read as a metaphor that designates a project rather than a specific group of people. For, of course, this project has now been adopted by a great many people who are not "white", in the sense of being Euro-descended'.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, then, the conception of history in the *Franza* fragment anticipates a good deal of 21st-century thought about the nature and origins of the climate crisis, or what Ghosh calls 'the planetary crisis'. The danger of this associative understanding, however, is that it may elide crucial differences between quite different lived experiences, cultural identities and forms of violence. Just as the alignment of sexual assault with ecocide in *Der Fallmeister* seems almost to break the frame of comparison, Franza's identification with a whole array of different victims – from Papuans and Indigenous Australians to concentration camp inmates and slaughtered camels – remains one of the most dubious and unsettling elements of the fragment. This is reflected in critical attempts to read the text as a deliberate portrayal of self-blindness on Franza's part, setting her statements at an ironic distance from the narrative voice. Lennox points to multiple textual hints that 'readers should regard Franza's own judgments with some skepticism', from a late draft that 'clearly pokes fun' at Franza's white saviour complex to the 'ubiquitous bottles of Coca-Cola she drinks along her journey'.¹⁰⁶ This argument is picked up and elaborated on by Heidi Schlipphacke, who maintains that 'the "symbolic" [...] and, I would add, formalist nature of Bachmann's use of tropes of oppression in the Franza fragment point to a

¹⁰⁴ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 207; cf. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomani Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters*, 275-6.

conflicted textual irony'.¹⁰⁷ 'Conflicted' is perhaps the operative word here. While there may well be a degree of irony at play in the fragment – particularly in later drafts, as Bachmann realised her dissatisfaction with the first attempt – this hardly accounts for the 'highly symbolic [...] victimizer-victim constellations' that recur throughout the text.¹⁰⁸ In Chapter 4, we will consider this problem in more detail, questioning whether comparison and identification always inherently run this ethical risk, or whether meaningful distinctions can be drawn between 'all-consuming' identification, and empathy that leaves boundaries of difference intact – each of which would be reflected differently in literary form.

In *Der Fallmeister*, meanwhile, the motif of 'die Weißen' is also echoed and amplified. White is the colour of many things in the novel: of the 'Weißer Fluss' [White River], associated with the father and his wish to reverse the current of history; of the salt that forms the bedrock of Bandon's economy, prized as 'weißer Gold' [white gold], and also of the narrator as he hurtles towards his own crime: 'Was ist mit dir?', Mira asks him soon before he kills her, 'Du bist weiß wie unser Fluß' [What's the matter with you? You are as white as our river, *FM* 148]. Above all, however, it is the colour of the 'weiße Khmer' [White Khmer], an imagined successor to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Where the historical Khmer Rouge sought to return Cambodia to a supposedly glorious past through bloody totalitarian rule, Ransmayr follows this thinking to its logical conclusion, imagining a second repetition. In the future he creates, Cambodia has fallen under the power of a dictator called Jaya, whose White Khmer aim to restore the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge. As with the equivalence of the whole world in terms of animal exploitation, or the use of various types of atrocity as metaphors for one another, this plot device functions on a level of abstraction that is undoubtedly useful, highlighting the absurdity of the real Pol Pot's wish to reverse history. Yet it also plays fast and loose with real-world referents in a way that many commentators find troubling. The material that *Der Fallmeister* adapts from a previous short text, recounting the true story of a Cambodian fisherman under Pot's rule, only intensifies this discomfort.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Schlipphacke, 'Postmodernism and the Place of Nostalgia', 73.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Ransmayr, *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*, 168-75.

Conclusion

This chapter has given us several key images for the attitude of mastery: as hunters; as the Father; as the Whites; and, crucially, also as storytellers and narrators. At the same time, it has given rise to ethical questions that are at the crux of writing about the climate crisis, and about real-world referents more broadly. The most prominent among these is the question of perspective. For writing that seeks to bring to light various types of crime, destruction or violence, what reason might there be for adopting the perspective of the perpetrator?

A second important question pertains to literary comparisons, which often appear to equate one experience or identity with another. This is a version of the formal questions raised in Chapter 1, and explored further through ideas of 'multidirectional memory' and dissolving species divides in Chapter 2. If ecological thinking fundamentally destabilises boundaries and categories, then how are we to navigate the distinction between the sense in which everything is everything else, and the sense in which it isn't?

Both Bachmann and Ransmayr approach the subjects that concern them in highly aestheticised, even abstract modes. These subjects, as I have argued, hinge on relationships of domination in the broadest sense, arising from an attitude of mastery which is coded male in their works. The aesthetic methods of both writers certainly produce images and conceits that linger in the mind, from the strange and vivid 'blauess Wild' to the disturbing analogy between ecocide and sexual assault. The greatest limitation of this approach is its almost exclusive preoccupation with acts of destruction – evinced in the title of *Todesarten* – which come to appear inexorable and immutable, as inescapable as the Whites or original sin. Ransmayr adds to this an insistence on exploring the 'killer story', or the structure of mastery, only from within. In adapting key features of Bachmann's *Franza* fragment, he gives us *Der Fallmeister* as a document of Anthropocene horror, leaving us trapped in the same cage or loop we encountered in the first thesis chapter.

The next chapter and the epilogue, by contrast, will consider writing that critiques mastery, and stories about killing, from the outside – that attempts to listen to the blue deer. Where this chapter was dominated by the archetype of the hunter, Chapter 4 and the epilogue belong to the figure of the gatherer. If the killers we encountered in this chapter were characterised above all by their failure to pay the right type of attention, and to hear the other over the babble of the self, Chapter 4 will consider what it means to be open to the experiences of others. It attends to the forms of empathy and identification that, for Tokarczuk, make up the condition of ‘tenderness’.

4. Tenderness

Ich versuche, mich in das Leben einer Fliege hineinzudenken oder in das Leben eines Kaninchens, das im Labor für einen Versuch mißbraucht wird, in eine Ratte, die man abspritzt, aber die doch noch einmal haßvoll zum Sprung ansetzt.

Ivan sagt: Mit solchen Gedanken wirst du wieder nicht dazukommen, dich zu freuen.¹

-Bachmann, *Malina*, 294.

'I don't see what women see in other women,' I'd told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. 'What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?'

Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, 'Tenderness.'

That shut me up.

-Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 210.

For all the differences between them, the types of stories that Ransmayr and Bachmann were telling in Chapter 3 are versions of what we might call 'the killer story'. They foreground acts of destruction and violence, and – particularly in Ransmayr's case – probe the psychology of this violence from within. One of the central truisms of contemporary ecological writing, by contrast, is that fiction must respond to the knowledge of the climate emergency and its attendant injustices with a new and different kind of story. This new story is to show us the way forward, laying the imaginative groundwork for a redemptive future. The present thesis arose partly from a frustration with this truism, and with discussions of the New Story that never quite seemed to get off – or perhaps onto – the ground. My intuitive sense was that such a story, often mentioned but rarely discussed in much detail, would require not just a shift in focus, but also a new form. And yet, as we

¹ [I'm trying to imagine my way into the life of a fly or into the life of a rabbit abused for an experiment in a lab, into a rat who is being lethally injected, but who, full of hate, still prepares once more to leap. Ivan says: You won't get around to feeling happy with thoughts like that]. Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 294.

have seen throughout the discussion so far, coming up with such a form after the artistic Cambrian Explosion that was 20th-century modernism seems like a nigh-on impossible task. For all writers' best efforts, as Bachmann reminds us, 'es passiert sehr wenig Neues in der Literatur' [very little new happens in literature].²

This chapter and the epilogue, 'Gathering', are dedicated to the two propositions for the New Story that I find most compelling, radical and complex. Both come from authors whose fictional work – as with many of the other writers discussed here – entails a theorisation of the same concepts they explore on a plot level. The authors in question are Olga Tokarczuk and Ursula K. Le Guin. In the epilogue, I will consider how Le Guin's concept of fiction as gathering, offered in her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', plays out in contemporary writing. The current chapter, meanwhile, will think through the implications of the detailed, contradictory and often mystifying vision for fiction offered by Tokarczuk in her Nobel lecture 'The Tender Narrator'. A characteristically ambitious literary sermon that is unafraid to wax messianic, this lecture draws together many of the central themes that have concerned us so far. At the same time, it introduces slightly different points of focus, drawing our attention to ideas of vulnerability – in the sense of being woundable, open to the world – and of care, a concept that will also be of crucial importance to Le Guin.

Tokarczuk's lecture, delivered on the occasion of her retroactive Nobel win for 2018, bespeaks a sense of frustration with the status quo of both the literary and wider world. This dissatisfaction – or 'Unrast' [restlessness], as the German title of her novel *Bieguni* (*Flights*) has it³ – is expressed in an outpouring of ideas that often seem tantalisingly contradictory. Among them are many of the concepts that we have encountered in the thesis already, including expanded omniscience; inseparable entanglements of causes and effects across micro and macro levels; the need to bestow upon the more-than-human world, or recognise in it, vitality and meaning; and the value of archetypal or mythic modes of representation. This multiplicity of ideas and perspectives – a hallmark of Tokarczuk's fiction, as well as her speeches and essays – gives rise to a central tension within the

² Bachmann, 'Das Tremendum', 359.

³ Olga Tokarczuk, *Unrast*, trans. Esther Kinsky (Zurich: Kampa, 2019).

lecture. On the one hand, 'The Tender Narrator' argues for a radically zoomed-out view, for 'high viewing points and wide perspectives' (TN 20), and for a universality facilitated by detachment and distance. As we saw in Chapter 1, Tokarczuk champions 'the dimension of the story that is the parable' (TN 5), arguing that the fragmentation of the contemporary world is due not least to a fixation with first-person narratives and their reliance on the reader's identification with the narrator. At the same time, the 'tenderness' at issue in the lecture has to do precisely with features of literature that we might intuitively associate with first-person narratives, and with processes of identification. 'Only literature,' Tokarczuk writes, 'is capable of letting us go deep into the life of another being, understand their reasons, share their emotions and experience their fate'; it is of value because it 'reveals [the characters'] otherwise inaccessible experience to another person' (TN 14).

This chapter, then, will explore the implications of 'tenderness' as Tokarczuk conceives of it. It will first outline Tokarczuk's particular brand of omniscience, and analyse the relationship between omniscience and experience across several of the works discussed so far. A key intertext is provided by William MacAskill's recent moral philosophy treatise *What We Owe The Future*, which offers a series of thought experiments that unwittingly demonstrate the tension between omniscience and experience. This tension is of crucial importance for discussions of justice, a topic central both to the discourse around the climate crisis and to the work of all the authors at hand. Identifying potential misgivings with MacAskill's arguments leads to a discussion of depression as a manifestation of tenderness. In English, the word 'tenderness' – chosen by Tokarczuk's translators Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones – by definition entails an openness to pain and suffering; the Polish word Tokarczuk uses, 'czuły', bears the same double meaning of sensitivity as empathy and as vulnerability.⁴ As a case study, I analyse Tokarczuk's 2009 'eco-thriller' *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2018), whose narrator Janina Duszejko suffers from mysterious 'Ailments' that are legible as depression. A central theme of the novel is a question that is also at the crux of Bachmann's work: namely, to what extent depression is evidence of an

⁴ I am grateful to Prof. Dariusz Komorowski for confirming this, and for talking me through the connotations of 'czuły' in both English and German. One insight that arises from this conversation is that the official German translation, 'Der liebevolle Erzähler' [The Loving Narrator], is not quite right, since it misses the second meaning of the word (Tokarczuk, *Der liebevolle Erzähler*).

innate over-sensitiveness, and to what extent it manifests a cruel and unjust system. The cultural frameworks established over centuries to contain and legitimise depression, meanwhile, are overwhelmingly gendered. While Tokarczuk has offered relatively conventional images of ‘melancholy’ characters in previous works, I argue that Duszejko represents something more novel: as an older female character, she both exposes the limits of these discourses on the level of experience, and touches on quite different archetypes that will be of particular interest to us in the epilogue. Considering Duszejko as an intervention into profoundly gendered discourses of melancholy and mourning leads to a reading of tenderness as care, a concept bound up with gender and labour in ways that will also chime with some of Le Guin’s arguments, as we will see in the epilogue. Finally, the chapter considers how the pitfalls of identification, as described by Tokarczuk, are figured in the literary texts at hand, and examines the distinction between identification and empathy, two terms used frequently in Tokarczuk’s lecture, but not meaningfully differentiated.

Omniscience

Versions of omniscience have preoccupied us since the very beginning of this thesis. In Chapter 1, we saw how *The Overstory* sought to expand the borders of narrative omniscience by opening with a genesis and listening, however notionally, to the voices of trees. These overarching moves, I argued, were made not least in response to the problem of mind-boggling scales, which are easier to render in the form of thought experiments or illustrations than in the structure of a novel. One of the most famous examples is included in Benjamin’s ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ [On the Concept of History], representing the timespan of life on Earth as a 24-hour day in which *Homo sapiens* appears only in the last two seconds.⁵ This model seeks to make scale comprehensible in two different ways. On one reading, it works as a visual image by suggesting the image of a clock face or timeline, something the reader can stand back from and view in its entirety. Considered in this light, the reader is offered the impossible position of an observer ‘outside’ the events. On another reading, however, the 24-hour model attempts to make something

⁵ Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, 703.

fundamentally incommensurable with human experience – the fact of pre-human time, what Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘ancestrality’⁶ – assimilable into everyday life, qualitatively similar to the time elapsed since yesterday’s lunch.

It is this same gap between omniscience and experience that Tokarczuk seeks to bridge with the idea of the ‘tender narrator’. Part of the contradiction her lecture seems to present lies in her merging of the concept of ‘tenderness’ with another frequently-cited idea from the lecture, that of the ‘fourth-person’ narrator (*TN* 21). Where tenderness is linked, for Tokarczuk, with empathy, ‘personalization’ and care – tenderness ‘personalizes everything to which it relates’, and is ‘the most modest form of love’ (*TN* 24) – the idea of a ‘fourth-person’ narrator appears, at first glance, to signal something quite different. Grammatically speaking, the movement from first-, through second- to third-person speech or narration would seem to involve increasing distance and detachment, a ‘looking at’ rather than ‘experiencing with’. Omniscient narration, with its wish to embed the individual life within a societal big picture, is almost always associated with the third-person view, whereas first-person narration, Tokarczuk acknowledges, ‘builds a special bond with the narrator, who asks his listener to put himself in his unique position’ (*TN* 4). The very word ‘omniscience’ suggests the standing back and ‘looking at’ of Benjamin’s clock face: literally ‘knowing all’, it is often used interchangeably with ‘all-seeing’, but rarely ‘all-feeling’ or ‘all-experiencing’. Omniscience is thus an inherently Cartesian concept, implying a disembodied knowledge or consciousness separable from bodily experience.

For Tokarczuk, however, the dream of a ‘fourth-person’ narrator entails not only a zoomed-out overview, but also an intensified empathy or personalisation. In describing her vision of fourth-person narration, she explicitly equates it with the ‘figure of a mysterious, tender narrator’ (*TN* 21), thus drawing in the elements of care and feeling outlined in the lecture up to that point. The seeming incompatibility of these aspects is

⁶ ‘I will call “ancestral” any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to every recognised form of life on earth’ (Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10). For Meillassoux, the ability of mathematics to ‘yield knowledge about the ancestral realm’ might offer a way out of our heads, and into the ‘great outdoors’ (Ibid, 26). As he sees it, it is mathematics’ ability ‘to discourse about a past where both humanity and life are absent’ that enables us ‘to achieve what modern philosophy has been telling us for the past two centuries is impossibility itself: to get out of ourselves, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not’ (Ibid, 27).

acknowledged in Tokarczuk's designation of this construct as a 'dream', which she nonetheless deems possible in actuality. 'I also dream,' she writes,

of a new kind of narrator—a 'fourth-person' one, who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time. Oh yes, I think this narrator's existence is possible (TN 21).

To illustrate her point, she offers the example of 'the marvellous storyteller [...] in the Bible who calls out in a loud voice: "In the beginning was the Word"' (TN 21). Who is this narrator, Tokarczuk asks, 'who knows the thoughts of God, is aware of his doubts, and with a steady hand sets down on paper the incredible sentence: "And God saw that it was good"?' (TN 21).

There is a great deal to unpack here. On the one hand, if the type of narration Tokarczuk describes is not to be understood merely as the omniscient variety familiar from 19th-century novels – which ticks almost all of the boxes she mentions – then it sounds a lot like the maximalist approach of *The Overstory*. Once again, we see the wish to step outside the usual horizons and encompass a wide range of perspectives, including, we might think, those of trees. The lecture's view of tenderness also includes a wish to give voice to the more-than-human world: Tokarczuk recounts how, as a child, she would cry when her mother read her a Hans Christian Andersen story written from the perspective of a broken teapot that has been discarded by its owners. 'It is thanks to tenderness,' she claims, 'that the teapot starts to talk' (TN 24). The understanding of scale in 'The Tender Narrator' also resembles the narrative mode of *The Overstory*. In Powers's novel, as we have seen, brains 'fir[e] and rewir[e], building arborized axons, *dendrites*, those tiny spreading trees'.⁷ Tokarczuk, too, notes how 'the micro and macro scale show an endless system of similarities': 'Our cardiovascular system is like the system of a river basin, the structure of a leaf is like a human transport system, the motion of the galaxies is like the whirl of water flowing down our washbasins' (TN 20). Where *The Overstory* insists that 'there are no

⁷ Powers, *The Overstory*, 93.

individuals in a forest, no separable events',⁸ Tokarczuk's fourth-person 'perspective from where everything can be seen' has a similar upshot. 'Seeing everything,' she argues, 'means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, [...] that every gesture "here" is connected to a gesture "there", [...] and that differentiating between "mine" and "yours" starts to be debatable' (TN 21). If the fourth-person perspective is, for Tokarczuk, not merely a grammatical construct, then perhaps the phrase suggests itself to her partly through its resemblance to the 'fourth dimension' of time, which in this understanding exists all at once and could, in theory, be moved around in as a dimension of space. The narrator 'who is able to ignore time', understood in these terms, might be detectable in Powers's propensity for beginning paragraphs 'miles below and three centuries earlier'.⁹

These parallels beg the question of whether what Tokarczuk dreams of actually is radically 'new', and of whether her vision has already been realised. Along with *The Overstory*, the type of interconnected and radically omniscient aesthetic she describes increasingly appears to be active in contemporary cinema, a medium from which the analogies of 'zooming' and 'panning' are derived. The technique of embedding individual human stories within the vastest possible narrative framework – the birth and death of the universe – has been pioneered by the director Terrence Malick, for instance, whose 2011 film *The Tree of Life* opens with yet another genesis¹⁰ and intersperses images of the Big Bang, dinosaurs, and the death of the sun with a family drama set in 1950s Texas. A heightened awareness of the fact that 'every gesture "here" is connected to a gesture "there"', as well as of the echoes between the micro and macro scales, has also made its way into more popular films. The Safdie brothers' 2019 film *Uncut Gems*, a thriller about a New York jeweller with a gambling addiction, opens with an accident at an Ethiopian mine that allows two miners to secretly extract a black opal they have spotted previously. When the opal emerges from the rock, the camera 'moves into the gem', entering 'a shifting melange of abstract shapes and patterns' that resemble a universe or galaxy.¹¹ The

⁸ Ibid, 218.

⁹ Ibid, *The Overstory*, 81.

¹⁰ The first thing that appears onscreen in Malick's film is a quote from The Book of Job: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2011).

¹¹ Ronald Bronstein, Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie, *Uncut Gems: Final Script* (A24, 2018), 1. Available online on *The Internet Archive* <<https://archive.org/details/gemsfinalscript/page/n1/mode/2up>> [Accessed 16th April 2023].

molecules gradually begin to look more biological, until the frame expands again to show that what we have just been seeing is the inside of the protagonist, who is undergoing a colonoscopy: the shifting shapes we have been watching are now contained within the consultant's screen. From the minute this character encounters the black opal, which has made its way to the Manhattan Diamond District, it seems to direct his fate. 'They say you can see the whole universe in opals', he declares at one point, calling to mind other micro-macro equivalences from Chapter 1, such as Gould's conviction that 'implicit in a single seahorse was the universe' (*GB* 402).¹² The movie ends with the camera once again moving into the protagonist's body, where the 'shifting melange' of colours and shapes resembles the inside of the opal, which in turn looks like a galaxy. The film thus meets many of the criteria for the type of aesthetic Tokarczuk describes: it reveals the invisible connections between a Manhattan jeweller and exploited miners halfway across the world; endows a stone, extracted and traded as a resource, with agency and vitality; and highlights resemblances between the very small and very large that call the borders of the self into question.

The clearest evidence that what Tokarczuk has in mind is something more than simply this broadened and deepened omniscience, however, is found in her specific view of the biblical genesis. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, *The Overstory* and *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* each begin with a genesis of sorts. In Powers's case, this is simply a creation ex nihilo: 'First there was nothing. Then there was everything'.¹³ The question of the observer is absent here; even the question of the creator is obscured. The author, in a sense, has stepped into the position of God in the creation of his novelistic universe, performing the act of misdirection that Haraway terms the 'god trick'.¹⁴ In Flanagan's variation, there is a nod to the long history of genesis stories, drawing attention to the novel's textuality and its place within such a tradition: 'Why at the beginning of things is there always light?' (*NR* 1). This self-referentiality is dialled up a notch in *Gould's Book of Fish*, where Gould wonders at the outset of his tale: 'How might I commence such a mighty chronicle? By singing a new genesis?', before irreverently deciding against this option (*GB* 60). It is only in Tokarczuk's discussion of genesis, however, that the question of

¹² Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie, *Uncut Gems* (A24, 2018).

¹³ Powers, *The Overstory*, 3.

¹⁴ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 581.

perspective is foregrounded. Her lecture emphasises the mysterious observer of this event, the unnamed narrator ‘who knows what God thought’ (TN 21). This shift in focus has several important implications, all of which relate to the gap between omniscience and experience.

One effect of emphasising the narrator of genesis is to ground the act of creation in something closer to ordinary human life. Asking the question of God’s observer denies Him the status of a being who emerged from nowhere, with ‘dependency [...], as it were, written out of the picture’.¹⁵ Instead, it suggests that even God was never alone, but always necessarily stood in relation to some other being.¹⁶ Tokarczuk’s question has the opposite effect to that with which *The Tree of Life* opens – God’s admonishment to Job: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’.¹⁷ That the relationship, moreover, is not one of supremacy or mastery – that the narrator is not merely subservient – is evinced by their empathetic perception of God’s doubt, which places them on equal footing (or, as German has it, ‘auf Augenhöhe’ [at eye level]) with him. By drawing attention to the voice of this observer, Tokarczuk sets up something like the mutual recognition in which *Flights* culminates. As we saw in Chapter 1, Tokarczuk’s answer to the condition of being trapped in a book – which is experienced by so many male protagonists ‘auf ihrer eigenen Spur’ [on their own trail] – is to imagine that people are always mutually observing each other and writing each other down. This is the significance of the novel’s refrain, which recurs at points of transition between her first-person narrative and the longer third-person fragments that make up its constellation form: ‘Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim’ (F 25).

Under other circumstances, this scaling down of God by drawing attention to his observer could be read as an expression of the anthropological view that God consists of human ideas we have deliberately estranged from ourselves, and thus a denial of God as

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 37. Cf. 30-39; 49.

¹⁶ This version of genesis is thus closer to the concept of ‘situated knowledge’ that Haraway places in opposition to the ‘god trick’ (Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, 581). There are clear parallels between Tokarczuk’s notion of tender or ‘fourth-person’ narration and Haraway’s claim that ‘insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision [...] and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment [...] allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity’ (Ibid, 582).

¹⁷ Malick, *The Tree of Life*.

omniscient and omnipotent creator. This is the understanding of God famously presented by philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach, and anticipated by William Blake in the dictum: 'Men forgot that All deities reside in the human Breast'.¹⁸ Leahy, too, points to 'the structures of mutual witnessing by which the Bible as the "Word of God" comes to be written'.¹⁹ She is interested in the 'split' inherent in this origin story, which demonstrates the impossibility of the attempt to start stories 'at the beginning'. 'Where the son of God bears witness to the father,' she writes, 'the disciples to the son, the church to the disciples, and so on, the bible, which purports to tell the cohesive story of human beginnings, involves both its human and divine protagonists in a contingent, circular scheme of giving and receiving'.²⁰ This circularity is a result of God's own invention at the hands of humans, the knowledge of which must then be repressed: 'In return for this story of the beginning, its followers, through writing it themselves, will attribute the bible to a divine source to which they will then offer allegiance, thus splitting themselves into the inventors and the invented of their own text'.²¹ On this view, attributing moral laws such as 'Du sollst nicht töten' [Thou shalt not kill] to God also constitutes yet another game of cat-and-mouse played by the killers against themselves, another way of chasing one's own tail. As we will see in the epilogue, Le Guin would view this as an instance of the Hero's 'uncontrollable impulse [...] to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it'.²²

For Tokarczuk, however, the significance of mutual witnessing is slightly different. She does not seem especially interested in de-mystifying God into an expression of human ideas. Perhaps – as in the case of *The Overstory* – this is because this humanist understanding can easily tip over into anthropocentrism, whereas the idea of God as something outside or beyond ourselves has a renewed resonance for writers wishing to confront the Anthropocene. Shades of Morton's view that both ecological thinking and aesthetic experience consist in an encounter with otherness can be detected in Tokarczuk's assertion that tenderness 'appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our "self"' (TN 24). That God should remain

¹⁸ William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977), 186.

¹⁹ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34.

other is, in this regard, no bad thing. And yet God is still, in this version, anthropomorphised by the psychological reading of his 'doubts'; he is both omniscient and fallible, another iteration of the kind of paradox the lecture espouses.

A closer approximation of the type of omniscience Tokarczuk envisions might be found in her 1996 novel *Prawiek i inne czasy* (*Primeval and Other Times*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2010). As opposed to Benjamin's impersonal clock face, the novel's take on temporal omniscience is to imagine the '[other] times' not only of various people, but also of a dog, an orchard, a grove of lime trees, a coffee grinder, or an angel, conceiving the totality of time as an assemblage of overlapping, mismatched temporal experiences (*P* 210; 177; 188; 43; 15). On one reading, this mode offers an affront to anthropocentrism similar to the knowledge of deep time or the idea of time as a fourth dimension of space, existing all at once, but which human beings can only perceive and experience as unfolding sequentially, through physical processes. The gap between time as understood in physics and as experienced is highlighted by the different ways it is perceived by particular objects and bodies: the grinder seems to have a different temporality when it is at rest than when it is grinding coffee, while the orchard experiences time as an interchange between 'the time of the apple tree and the time of the pear tree' (*P* 177). For trees, in this imagining, the qualities of the four seasons are experienced all at once, while for angels, events do flow but are of little immediate interest, since it is possible to see 'where they were flowing from and to' (*P* 16). Overarching it all, though not signalled as such, is the time of the text and its narrator, who can step in and out of each temporality and array them side by side.

Rather than acting as a kind of lens that can zoom all the way out or all the way in, then, this type of narration is a version of literary cubism, bringing together perspectives that would be impossible to perceive all at once, since perception relies on inhabiting a position. A cinematic intertext for this insight is the 1987 Wim Wenders film *Der Himmel über Berlin* [*Wings of Desire*], which follows an angel who decides to take on a human form. As an angel, this figure – played by Bruno Ganz – can take in the 'high viewing points and wide perspectives' (*TN* 20) of the city from above, and can also pass through the Berlin Wall and hear the thoughts of each human he encounters. In order to become human, he must give this up in favour of a grounded body with only one perspective. Tokarczuk's

vision for the 'tender narrator' is to unite both ways of seeing, without the compromise. Her narrator could swoop back up and out at will, before inhabiting a different type of perception and temporality altogether.²³

That there is more at stake in this discussion than theological or narratological abstractions is demonstrated by versions of omniscience that have been used to probe the morality of the climate crisis. In his recent book *What We Owe The Future*, for instance, the moral philosopher William MacAskill presents the reader with a series of thought experiments that raise, in a different form, the same questions we have been discussing in the case of 'The Tender Narrator'. The book is a defence of 'longtermism', which argues that the future of humanity could last for millions of years, and that the moral value of this future is much greater than the reader might expect. Its opening paragraphs are worth quoting here at some length:

Imagine living, in order of birth, through the life of every human being who has ever lived. Your first life begins about three hundred thousand years ago in Africa. After living that life and dying, you travel back in time and are reincarnated as the second-ever person, born slightly later than the first. Once that second person dies, you are reincarnated as the third person, then the fourth, and so on. One hundred billion lives later, you become the youngest person alive today. Your 'life' consists of all of these lifetimes, lived consecutively.

[...]

Your life lasts for almost four trillion years in total. For a tenth of that time, you're a hunter-gatherer, and for 60 percent you're an agriculturalist. You spend a full 20 percent of your life raising children, a further 20 percent farming, and almost 2 percent taking part in religious rituals. For over 1 percent of your life you are afflicted with malaria or smallpox. You spend 1.5 billion years having sex and 250 million giving birth. You drink forty-four trillion cups of coffee.

²³ It could be argued, of course, that this is what Powers does too. The difference that the reader perceives between Tokarczuk's narration and that of Powers might lie in something like 'attitude', which in its strong sense evokes an embodied position vis-à-vis what is being narrated. Where Tokarczuk's narrators swoop in and out inquisitively, curiously, surprised and sometimes bemused by what they see, Powers's narration often appears to be in a rush to put words in his characters' mouths and minds so that they can be recited back to the reader.

You experience cruelty and kindness from both sides. As a colonizer, you invade new lands; as the colonized, you suffer your lands taken from you. You feel the rage of the abuser and the pain of the abused. For about 10 percent of your life you are a slaveholder; for about the same length of time, you are enslaved.²⁴

There is a good deal to be said about MacAskill's approach. Perhaps the most striking feature of his model is its drive towards completism. This appears as another version of the wish to be all-encompassing that has cropped up again and again throughout this thesis. The idea of *Todesarten* as 'ein[e] einzig[e] groß[e] Studie aller möglichen Todesarten' [a single great study of all possible ways of dying] contains a similar impossibility, particularly since each *Todesarten* text focuses largely on one individual fate. This view thus remains an unattainable ideal that nonetheless informs our understanding of the scope of Bachmann's thinking. Bachmann's reported preference for the biblical titles *Das Buch Malina*, *Das Buch Franza* and *Das Buch Goldmann* is a further testament to the ambition of synthesising individual experience with the vastest possible overview.²⁵ The 'Reports on Infamy' imagined in *Flights* constitute a similarly notional compendium, seeking to salvage and compile every wrong ever suffered by animals at the hands of humans.

References to encyclopaedic projects that dissolve the borders between knowledge and the physical world abound in Tokarczuk's works. Her initial enthusiasm for Wikipedia, for instance, outlined in 'The Tender Narrator' (*TN* 9) and also reflected in a section of *Flights*, gives way to a sense that 'since what it has in it can only be what we can put into words [...] it wouldn't be able to hold everything at all' (*F* 78). Instead, this compendium would have to be somehow melded together with the material world – as in the case of sanitary pads printed with 'entertaining little facts', which appear to the narrator of *Flights* as 'yet another part of the project of the great encyclopaedia now coming into being, the

²⁴ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 3.

²⁵ Marie Luise Wandruszka quotes a letter from Bachmann to her publisher Siegfried Unseld, in which she elaborates on her preference for the title *Das Buch Malina*: 'Das Buch/MALINA [...] Es kann nicht anders heißen. [...] Ueber den »biblischen« Ton dieses Titels, die mögliche Anmassung, die darin liegt, habe ich natürlich auch nachgedacht [...] selbst wenn man diesen Ton im Ohr haben sollte dabei – er stört mich nicht, es hat auch damit für mich eine Richtigkeit' [The Book of/MALINA (...) It cannot be called anything else (...) Of course I have also thought about the 'biblical' tone of this title, the possible presumptuousness that it contains (...) even if one should have this tone in one's ear – it doesn't bother me, even that has a kind of rightness for me]. Bachmann, *Das Buch Goldmann*, ed. Marie Luise Wandruszka (Berlin: Piper, 2017), 285.

encyclopaedia that would encompass all things' (*F* 108). As well as recalling the relationship between the book and the world discussed in Chapter 1, this view of an encyclopaedia that must nonetheless be encountered through the body, 'am eigenen Leib' [first-hand / on one's own body], draws attention once more to a distinction between knowledge and experience. Literature, as Tokarczuk puts it, 'poses questions that cannot be answered with the help of Wikipedia, since it goes beyond just information and events, referring directly to our experience' (*TN* 12).

MacAskill's moral philosophy, too, clearly feels the need to be all-encompassing in order to be coherent. In methodically returning to work its way through each of many overlapping lives, the thought experiment is determined to leave nothing out, no perspectival stone unturned. Here, however, the desired effect is the exact opposite of that seen in *Primeval and Other Times*. If the point of Tokarczuk's novel is to represent the different qualitative experiences of time engendered by different forms and bodies, all of which exist simultaneously, for MacAskill, the point is to line them all out sequentially while homogenising experience into uniform, mathematical time. His model chimes in interesting ways with the tension at the heart of 'The Tender Narrator'. Who, Tokarczuk might ask, is this 'you' who is 100% statistically representative of *Homo sapiens*, encompassing the entire dataset, and yet who also 'feels' and 'experiences' as an individual?

At first, MacAskill's model appears to counteract a Cartesian understanding of godlike omniscience by proposing a knowledge of everything that would require living through it, experiencing it first-hand (or 'am eigenen Leib' [on one's own body]), one body at a time. His choice of statistics is striking: the numbers that remain more difficult to grasp intuitively are deliberately paired with visceral bodily sensations, such as sex, childbirth and (somewhat more trivially) drinking coffee. These experiences – which, with the notable exception of coffee consumption, are transhistorical or even, in the weaker sense, 'ancestral' – are used as a gateway to more complex and charged forms of lived experience and historical identity: coloniser, colonised, slaveholder, slave.

This last paragraph, meanwhile, is where the passage shows its hand, quietly setting up an equation between values that are fundamentally different. From its very title, with its implication of debt, it is clear that *What We Owe The Future* has its sights set on a theory of justice. In its statistical bent, the opening thought experiment seems at first to recall the ‘original position’ thought experiment popularised by John Rawls, in which people are tasked with designing a fair society from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’, without knowing which social position they themselves would occupy.²⁶ Rawls’s view, however, depends on this second step, in which a single position with all its attendant happiness or suffering must ultimately be entered into and inhabited completely. MacAskill’s version, by contrast – through its insistence on compiling the whole dataset of individual experiences – ultimately stands outside all of them. It places itself in a philosophical tradition that treats justice as essentially quantitative, as an act of accounting, though rarely with the convenience of comparing like with like.

The question of what true justice would look like is one that drives the work of all the writers in this thesis; its centrality as a theme would be difficult to overstate. It is one of the primary continuities between the literary works analysed here that predate the knowledge of the climate and biodiversity crises, and those written under their sign. We have already seen how Ghosh highlights the dangers inherent in treating these crises as ‘unprecedented and utterly novel’, and points out the irony of “‘climate justice’ [taking] on a colouring that sets it apart from “justice” in general’.²⁷ The project of *Todesarten* and the imagined project ‘Reports on Infamy’ also arise not least from a longing for justice. The quantifying tendency of MacAskill’s approach to the question of justice is visible in the passage’s statistics, including the conversion of malaria and smallpox rates to a small proportion of human history as a whole. The most striking feature of the passage, however, is its rhetorical balancing of the books on issues that remain extremely historically charged, foremost among them colonialism and slavery. Notably, these experiences are given equal billing not only in quantitative terms, but also in the language of emotion and embodiment, with ‘rage’ and ‘pain’ presented as forces of similar intensity.

²⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1999), 11.

²⁷ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 153.

MacAskill's view of the future extends well beyond the dangers of the climate crisis, which he presents as a less fundamental threat than nuclear weapons or artificial general intelligence in the hands of bad actors. His arguments about the morality of longtermism – including whether the future is, 'on balance', likely to be good or bad²⁸ – depend on a radically zoomed-out, whole-species view. While attentive to various forms of social injustice, this approach depends on the type of double bookkeeping that allows 'good' lives and experiences to counterbalance 'bad'. Although the book is not a run-of-the-mill techno-optimist treatise, it is this abstraction from any particular position that allows it to proceed from slavery swiftly on past climate change to questions around AI and intergalactic travel, deciding at each juncture that these long-term futures may well represent a net good. As it unfolds, the book increasingly calls to mind Ghosh's insight that 'it is largely in affluent countries [...], and mainly among the more privileged, that climate change is perceived as a techno-economic concern oriented toward the future; for the have-nots of the world [...], it is primarily a matter of justice, rooted in race, class and geopolitics'.²⁹

Returning to his opening thought experiment in a later chapter, MacAskill asks: 'Has it all been worth it? If you lived through every life up until today, would you think that your life has been good, on balance? Are you glad that you lived those hundred billion lives?'³⁰ He offers a selection of radically contrasting views from various moral philosophers, ranging from the notorious pessimist Schopenhauer to David Benatar's more recent conclusion that 'it would be better, all things considered, if there were no more people (and indeed no conscious life)'.³¹ MacAskill, for his part, sides with the optimists: 'all things considered,' he writes, 'we should expect the future to be positive on balance'.³² These repeated phrases are eye-catching: 'all things considered', with its aspiration to omniscience, and 'on balance', affirming that suffering and happiness can be measured against one another. After the book has outlined a variety of metrics which demonstrate that overall human wellbeing is currently more positive than negative, the logical

²⁸ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 193.

²⁹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 158

³⁰ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 191.

³¹ *Ibid*, 192.

³² *Ibid*, 193.

conclusion MacAskill arrives at is somehow jarring: 'If I were to live through the lives of everyone alive today, I would be glad to have lived'.³³

This sentence glosses over a little too smoothly the absence of experience that underlies it. It elides a double gap: both the qualitative gap between the narrator's own life and the unknown sorrows and joys experienced by others, and the quantitative gap between one life and billions. The idea of being 'glad to have lived' suggests a complete memory or knowledge of all the lives in question, so that one consciousness has persisted across seven billion lifetimes. This is a version of knowledge wholly unaccounted for in any existing data, and incompatible with experience as we know it. At this point in the book, MacAskill also opens up his analysis to include nonhuman animals, offering a clear-eyed view of the volume of suffering generated by industrial slaughter. In asking the reader to imagine life through the eyes of wild and farmed animals, *What We Owe The Future* should by rights have a good deal in common with the literary texts discussed here. In its attachment to moves like measuring an animal's capacity for suffering by its neuron count, however, it continues to bear the hallmarks of the 'mechanistic metaphysic' critiqued by Ghosh and so many other prominent commentators on the climate emergency. 'If we do this', MacAskill writes, 'then a beetle with 50,000 neurons would have very little capacity for wellbeing; honeybees, with 960,000 neurons, would count a little more; chickens, with 200 million neurons, count a lot more; and humans, with over 80 billion neurons, count the most'.³⁴

Reading this, it is hard to escape the overwhelming feeling that something is missing from MacAskill's analysis. That missing ingredient, Tokarczuk might say, is tenderness. On the one hand, the discrepancy between the pessimistic conclusions of Schopenhauer and Benatar and the optimistic views of MacAskill and his mentor Derek Parfit could be seen as being informed in part by something like disposition. The gulf between the conclusions drawn seems too wide to explain without any recourse to such traits, which are rooted in specific bodies. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman, in his Nobel Prize-winning work on

³³ Ibid, 207.

³⁴ Ibid, 210. It is worth noting that MacAskill does not view this metric as one-way street, positing that 'since we know that conscious experience of pain is the result of activity in certain neurons in the brain, then it should not matter more that the neurons are divided up among four hundred chickens rather than present in one human' (Ibid).

behavioural economics, takes a pragmatic view of the risks and benefits associated with optimistic personality types, which are largely hereditary.³⁵ MacAskill, by contrast, treats ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ only as collective and cultural impulses. Reading *What We Owe The Future*, it is hard not to be reminded at times of Nietzsche’s claim that ‘man alle jene kühnen Tollheiten der Metaphysik, sonderlich deren Antworten auf die Frage nach dem Wert h des Daseins, zunächst immer als Symptome bestimmter Leiber ansehen [darf]’ [one can view all those daring madneses of metaphysics, especially its answer to the question of the value of existence, in the first instance always as the symptoms of particular bodies].³⁶ In describing the life and work of his mentor and fellow moral optimist Derek Parfit, for instance, MacAskill emphasises Parfit’s seemingly boundless energy, from ‘literally running between seminars’ to ‘read[ing] philosophy while brushing his teeth’, as well as quickly responding to comments on an article draft with a reply of ‘nine thousand words, or about the length of a typical journal article’.³⁷ In the same section, MacAskill outlines Parfit’s diet in detail, which seems to consist wholly of light and nutritious fare (‘for dinner, raw carrots, romaine lettuce, celery dipped in peanut butter or hummus, followed by tangerines and apples’).³⁸ The point here is not to cast aspersions on Parfit’s philosophical conclusions based on this portrait of rare constitutional optimism and enthusiasm, but to draw attention to the disparity between such bodily specifics and the claim that ‘If I were to live through the lives of everyone alive today, I would be glad to have lived’.³⁹

These reflections are not a mere digression from the kinds of questions this thesis has been considering so far. Instead, as we shall see, they are part and parcel of the concerns that have accompanied us since Chapter 1: the question of affect as a path to action in the world; ideas of empathy and identification across species divides; and the relationship between the level of the individual and that of systems. In the next section, these questions will be explored in detail through the figure of Janina Duszejko, the protagonist

³⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 255.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden 3*, ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 348.

³⁷ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 167-8.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 167.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 207. Vitalists of the Jane Bennett persuasion, however, might indeed go so far as to read Parfit’s philosophical views as a function of the ‘vibrant’ foodstuffs he subsists on. See for example Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 39-51.

of Tokarczuk's 'eco-thriller' *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. Duszejko, as we will see, is suffering from psychosomatic 'Ailments' that are inseparable from questions of justice, and from the ecological violence she sees in the world around her. I will outline the case of Duszejko at some length, as she helps to draw together many of the key concerns of this chapter and the epilogue. Like Le Guin's vision of the gatherer in the epilogue, Duszejko is a female figure shaped by her opposition to male hunters. She is at odds with the system in which she finds herself on multiple counts: as a Blakean vitalist, vegetarian and astrologist in a carnivorous Catholic village; and as an old woman in a patriarchal society. Within Tokarczuk's work, which has always drawn on the author's interest in psychology, Duszejko represents a new departure that is bound up with the ecological concerns of *Drive Your Plow* as a whole. In contrast to the more familiar male melancholics of the author's earlier work, Duszejko is a depressive narrator who is denied a place within the established cultural frameworks of melancholy, which seek to contain and legitimise depression by associating it with genius and with ethical causes of universal importance. Instead, Duszejko's age, gender and connection to animals leave her marginalised, aligning her with ideas of 'mourning work' at best, and at worst causing her to be treated as an outcast or cast-off. A detailed discussion of Duszejko will therefore leave us ideally placed to consider anew what it is that these texts set themselves against – through the figures of the hunters, which I will connect here to Ghosh's idea of 'omnicide' – and to explore new links to other texts that are concerned with some of the crucial ingredients of 'tenderness': empathy, identification and care.

Depression

One of the most telling features of *What We Owe The Future* – given its stated concern with wellbeing, optimism and pessimism – is its treatment of the state of depression. In keeping with MacAskill's utilitarian moral philosophy, depression appears in the book as a question purely of collective value rather than individual meaning. To explain why a life with 'below-neutral wellbeing' may still be worth living, MacAskill points out that 'even if a person is persistently depressed, they can make a great contribution to the world by being a good friend or family member, by being a doctor or a scientist producing lifesaving

research'.⁴⁰ Where MacAskill's opening thought experiment had appeared at first glance to be striving for a version of Tokarczuk's 'tender narration' – combining omniscience with empathy towards particular embodied perspectives – here, the vantage point of his philosophy is revealed to be firmly outside the experience it claims to evaluate. A further striking detail in the book's 'overview' of human wellbeing is the complete omission of any discussion of suicide. Offering the estimate that only '10 percent of the global population have lives with below-neutral wellbeing' – measured by participants' own estimates of their life satisfaction, studies on what proportion of daily life they would wish to 'skip', and self-reported ratios of suffering to happiness – MacAskill makes no mention at all of suicide rates, or of what this act might mean.⁴¹ Instead, the meaning of human life is reduced to numbers on a scale.⁴²

As Ghosh would be quick to point out, meanwhile, 'pessimistic' physical states like the condition of depression are not only a question of genetic disposition. They are also profoundly shaped by circumstances and by systems. The one allusion MacAskill does make to death by one's own hand is in relation to the Quaker abolitionist Benjamin Lay, who was 'haunted' by the suicide of an enslaved friend. This friend, whose master 'would whip the people he owned every Monday morning', took his own life 'one Sunday evening, in order to avoid the next day's brutality'.⁴³ As the sole reference to suicide in the book, this story points to the same insight evoked in Bachmann's *Todesarten* texts: that suicide is frequently not an individual act freely undertaken, but the consequence of an entire

⁴⁰ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 193.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 207.

⁴² A contrasting view can be found in the work of Siddhartha Mukherjee, who has recently traced the history of mental illness in his own family through the lens of genetic heredity. In discussing the experience of depression, Mukherjee quotes a researcher who observed the crucial importance of patients' chosen metaphors for an understanding of the nature of their symptoms. Common examples included being stuck inside a hole or void; being trapped in a cave or forcefield; or being pressed down by a powerful force. 'Listening to the metaphors was absolutely vital', this neurologist explains: 'It was the metaphors that allowed me to track whether a patient was responding or not [...] These pictures, these descriptions tell you so much more than checking boxes on a depression scale' (Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Song of the Cell: An Exploration of Medicine and the New Human* [New York: Scribner, 2022], 293-4). MacAskill's mentor Derek Parfit makes a cameo in a recent novel by Elif Batuman, as a philosophy professor whose seminar on ethics the depressed protagonist, Selin, is attending. Parfit is brilliant and kind, but the seminar still always leaves Selin 'feeling dissatisfied and anxious. "Quality of life": as if we knew it, and could measure it. I wanted to know what it was: the quality of life' (Elif Batuman, *Either/Or* [London: Penguin, 2022], 61). In the epigraph to the current chapter from Plath's *The Bell Jar*, 'tenderness' itself appears as a quality that is similarly difficult to point to or measure, but whose existence is nonetheless undeniable.

⁴³ MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 50.

series of actions or inactions. In the story of Lay's friend, as in Bachmann's prose work, depression and suicide are symptoms of a wider problem; an individual body bearing the weight collective ills.

One such body is that of Tokarczuk's Janina Duszejko. From the very first line of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the first-person narration pays close attention to the body it emanates from. 'I am already at an age', the text begins, 'and additionally in a state where I must always wash my feet thoroughly before bed, in the event of having to be removed by an ambulance in the Night' (DYP 11). The sense of mortality evoked by the book's title affixes itself here to Duszejko's body, whose age and specific 'Ailments' will drive much of the plot. These mysterious maladies make their first appearance only a few sentences later, as she struggles to respond to a sudden knock on the door 'because my sleepy, shaky body couldn't make the leap from the innocence of sleep into wakefulness. I felt weak and began to reel, as if about to lose consciousness. Unfortunately this has been happening to me lately, and has to do with my Ailments' (DYP 11).

Duszejko, the reader soon discovers, lives alone in the remote Polish village of Luftzug, very near the Czech border. This set-up leaves her with a great deal of time to think, and as a result, we encounter the events of the novel almost tangentially, through the prism of her many musings and personal 'theories'. Her most fervently held beliefs concern the usefulness of astrology and the wrongness – even criminality – of killing any living thing. This view extends to plants and insects, but is most often and most vividly expressed in relation to animals. Duszejko is passionately opposed to the popular local pastimes of hunting and poaching, which she frequently reports to the police not only on legal grounds – when protected animals are killed, or non-protected species are shot outside the legal season – but also as an instance of 'evil' (DYP 37). Duszejko thus puts a more overtly ecological spin on the ideas explored in Chapter 3: on a concern with 'the virus of crime', and with murder.

Combined with her age and her status as a single woman, these beliefs cause most of the locals to dismiss her as a "silly old bag", "crazy old crone", or "madwoman" (DYP 35). When the hunters of Luftzug, most of them local officials, begin to die under mysterious

circumstances, Duszejko struggles to convince the villagers of her hypothesis that the deaths are caused by animals, who are taking their revenge. In her spare time, she is helping her former English pupil, Dizzy, to complete a Polish translation of the works of William Blake. Blake, from whom both the novel's title and the chapter epigraphs are taken, serves as an important model for Duszejko, both in his social status as visionary outcast and in his rejection of pure rationality in favour of a pantheistic vitalism. One of the many features that repeatedly draws attention to her first-person narration is the Blake-esque capitalisation of certain nouns throughout the text, most of them to do with the living world: Animals, Night, Ailments, Deer, Dog, Being, and Person.

Like MacAskill and Ghosh, Duszejko is driven above all by a deep desire for justice. The common bodily metaphor of a 'thirst for justice' would not be out of place here, so profoundly does this desire make itself felt in her very cells. Where Derek Parfit's moral concern was driven by suffering – 'he couldn't bear to see someone suffer [...] even thinking about suffering in the abstract could make him cry'⁴⁴ – Duszejko's mysterious Ailments appear to arise from much the same trait. Many of her symptoms, including the inability to get out of bed for days at a time, or sudden fits of weeping, point to a state of depression. Yet the novel does not permit of any reading of this as purely innate or introspective melancholy; instead, Duszejko's emotional state is inextricably connected to the injustice and pain she perceives in the world around her. The vexed relationship between this collective view and its intensely personal manifestation in her inner life is at issue throughout the text.

By contrast with MacAskill, Duszejko is in no danger of relativising the experience of suffering. On the question of an all-seeing God, for instance, she posits that there can be no such being, 'no celestial accountant', since 'it would be hard for one individual to bear so much suffering, especially an omniscient one' (*DYP* 47). This can be read as another iteration of Tokarczuk's idea of tenderness. Where MacAskill's thought experiment invites the reader to become a kind of celestial (or at least demi-godlike) accountant, counterbalancing suffering with wellbeing, Duszejko imagines that an omniscient God

⁴⁴ Larrisa MacFarquhar, 'How To Be Good', *The New Yorker*, Sep 2011, quoted in MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 168. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/09/05/how-to-be-good>> [Accessed 17th April 2023].

would quickly become overwhelmed not just by the quantities, but also by the qualities of experience. As opposed to the optimistic equations offered by MacAskill, Duszejko appears to weigh suffering much more heavily than satisfaction, or to consider it so qualitatively different as to make it impossible to balance the books.

In seeking to make sense of the role Duszejko's 'Ailments' have to play in *Drive Your Plow*, it is worth contrasting them not only with the versions of omniscience outlined so far, but also with the long-established discourses of melancholy that seek to place the experience of depression within a cultural framework. As we saw in Chapter 2, both the peregrinary narrator of *Flights* and Tokarczuk's use of maps and diagrams in that novel have led to critical comparisons of her work with that of W.G. Sebald. Arguably a stronger connection between the writing of both authors, however, lies in their interest in outdated scientific discourses which, from the vantage point of contemporary scientific literacy, reveal a constant struggle to make sense of powerful inner and outer forces using hopelessly limited tools. We might think of Filip Verheyen in his study, using Spinoza's microscope and a knowledge of anatomy that would now be seen as rudimentary, agonising over his phantom pain; or of Sebald's interest in the writings of Thomas Browne, linked to Verheyen through the prism of 17th-century Dutch anatomy.⁴⁵ The most prominent of these outmoded discourses is that of melancholy, which scholars like Mary Cosgrove have used to analyse the attitude Sebald's writing adopts towards the knowledge of the Holocaust. For Cosgrove, Sebald's channelling of the discourse of melancholy allows him to cast his narrators as versions of the 'male melancholy genius of ethical remembrance'.⁴⁶ While some of Tokarczuk's earlier depressive characters match the trope of noble male melancholy Cosgrove analyses – and where elements of *Drive Your Plow* appear at first to accord with this cultural framework – Duszejko, as we will see, soon breaks the bounds of this discourse.

Cosgrove connects the settings chosen by Sebald ('ruins and graveyards, [...] winter and autumn') with the 'universal, all-encompassing feeling of melancholy' denoted in the term

⁴⁵ Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 22-8.

⁴⁶ Mary Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz: Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* (Rochester: Camden House, 2014), 196.

Weltschmerz, associated with an almost 'sickly melancholic excess'.⁴⁷ *Drive Your Plow*, too, chooses both a setting and a genre that lend themselves well to such a mood. The story opens in the dead of night and the depths of winter, in the snowed-in isolation of the plateau above Luftzug where Duszejko lives. It begins with a knock on the door bringing news of a death, and as the murder-mystery plot starts to unfold in this snowy wasteland, it evokes some of the same bleakness as a Nordic noir. Indeed, Duszejko herself has a certain penchant for morbid places. Describing the makeshift graveyard in which she buries the bodies of any deceased animals she happens across, and for which she has chosen an idyllic spot, she thinks: 'I'd like to lie here too, and take care of everything from here, for ever' (*DYP* 53). Along with her physical symptoms, Duszejko's melancholic bent expresses itself in feelings of exhaustion and revulsion towards the world around her. When summer finally reaches the plateau, she is overcome by the feeling 'that under it all lurked a strong, mindless will, as repulsive as the force that made the Frogs climb on top of each other and endlessly copulate in Oddball's pond' (*DYP* 143). This expression of a deep-seated world-weariness on Duszejko's part stands in contrast to the majority of episodes in the novel, in which despair or hopelessness are occasioned by the sight of dead animals or other recognisable injustices.

Tokarczuk has long been interested in depressed and despondent characters, and draws extensively on the insights she gained as a student of psychology. Duszejko bears some of the traces of earlier melancholic figures in her work. The image of copulating frogs as a cause for generalised dread and disgust aligns her with two figures from *Primeval and Other Times*: the noble *Weltschmerzler* Squire Popielski, and the parish priest. Both characters reflect the profoundly gendered construction of the melancholy genius motif, which, as Cosgrove notes, through its long history has been 'expressed, diagnosed, and described mainly by male thinkers', resulting in the deep-rooted belief that 'great melancholics are men'.⁴⁸ The priest of *Primeval* prefigures Duszejko's revulsion, finding late spring to be 'the most loathsome time of the year' due to the flooding it brings to his meadows, and with it 'shameless frogs [...], naked and revolting, always climbing on top of each other and mindlessly copulating' (*P* 46). While this cleric does not cut a melancholy

⁴⁷ Ibid, 154; 152.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 10.

figure as such – indeed, his main response to the flooding and the frogs is an impotent rage – he evinces a disgust with earthly realities that is bound up with his vocation. Cosgrove connects imagery of flooding to ‘the watery saturnine tradition’ depicted in Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving *Melencolia II*, while the priest’s visceral reaction seems to encapsulate the ‘disgust for earthly life that Nietzsche identifies in the Platonic and Christian message of a better realm beyond the mortal one’.⁴⁹

An even more intriguing foil to Duszejko is Squire Popielski, who takes up Hamlet’s mantle as the true melancholy genius of Primeval. ‘Nobility’, Cosgrove notes, ‘is a key marker of the brilliant melancholy type’, and Popielski, like Hamlet, is noble by birth as well as by temperament.⁵⁰ He too is ‘an individual who has seen through the illusory morals of the Christian worldview, but whose insights render him listless and ineffective’;⁵¹ we are introduced to him first as man who is ‘losing his faith’, with ‘God and all the rest of it becoming rather flat and expressionless, like the etchings in his Bible’ (P 36). Where the priest, out of Platonic revulsion, tries to hold the material world at arm’s length – feeling ‘a shudder of disgust’ at the prospect that a water snake’s ‘long, slimy body might touch his boot’ (P 48) – Popielski prefigures Duszejko in having ‘entirely lost his physical immunity to the world’ (P 36): one side (but only one) of the condition of tenderness. His exhaustion, like Duszejko’s, extends beyond the sight of slithery, reproducing amphibians – which are present only as a simile in Duszejko’s narration – to the sensation that the whole world ‘was disintegrating like rotten wood, matter was being eaten away at from underneath by mould’, and that this is ‘happening quite senselessly’ (P 74). For the squire, too, the vision of an ‘ugly, grey world, full of decay and destruction’ as well as ‘dogged, blind regeneration’ (P 37) manifests in his body as ‘an indeterminate pain’ (P 36); like Duszejko, he is laid up in bed for long spells by ‘a strange illness with lots of symptoms, which to simplify matters was called arthritis’ (P 74). Like the ever-pondering narrator of *Drive Your Plow*, Popielski goes beyond knee-jerk reactions to his surroundings, trying in vain to puzzle out through contemplation and conversation ‘where evil come[s] from in this world’ (P 36).

⁴⁹ Ibid, 49; 57.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 14.

⁵¹ Ibid, 57.

These two male figures are of interest not so much in and of themselves, but rather in the contrast they ultimately present to the figure of Duszejko. The vision of depression or melancholy that they embody is updated in *Drive Your Plow* in ways that are crucial for our understanding of the condition of ‘tenderness’, particularly in an ecological context. A second, related update has to do with the temporality of what is at stake. As opposed to the vague, all-encompassing mood of ‘Weltschmerz’, or the role of melancholy in literary ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ [coming to terms with the past] explored by Cosgrove – with its potential pitfall of adopting ‘a posthumous view on a world that is doomed to self-destruct’⁵² – *Drive Your Plow* draws on many of the same tropes to depict crimes that are still unfolding, and a crisis that requires urgent action if it is to be mitigated or stopped.

To a certain extent, Duszejko’s version of depression resembles that of the female figures in *Todesarten*, in that it is linked to her deep need to bear witness to injustice and cruelty.⁵³ She also bears comparison both with the chronicler of *Todesarten* and with the author of the ‘Reports on Infamy’ in *Flights*: like the latter character, she is determined to bring human misdeeds against animals to light, and is driven by a compulsion towards completism in this task. ‘Must I be a witness to every crime?’, she laments after finding a boar killed by hunters (*DYP* 106), and reports its death as a murder in the police station the following day. When her account is met with indifference, she slaps ‘a ball of bloodstained Boar bristles’ down on the desk (*DYP* 113), revealing that she collects and stores such ‘Remains’ in rows of labelled boxes at home, since ‘one day it’ll be possible to clone all the murdered Animals. So perhaps there’ll be some sort of redress’ (*DYP* 114).

As these actions demonstrate, Duszejko also shares with the Reporter on Infamy an almost prophetic unwillingness to back down from repulsed and reluctant listeners. The narrator of *Flights*, confronted with the details of animal abuse over dinner, exclaims ‘No, no, [...] I can’t listen to this’, and accepts a copy of the report only for the sake of politeness, ‘[knowing] instantly that I wasn’t going to read any of it’ (*F* 73). This dynamic is given a further turn of the screw in Duszejko, who is doubly ignored and humoured because of her

⁵² Ibid, 147.

⁵³ Cosgrove names Bachmann as a central counter-example to the idea of the ‘cultural genesis of melancholy’ as an all-male affair, positing that ‘one could revisit, for example, the *Todesarten* project from this angle’ (Ibid, 10; 29).

age. Throughout the novel, she is met with reactions that barely conceal the dismissal of her as an ‘old bag’, and has developed a keen eye for ‘the meaning of gestures such as rapidly giving assent, avoiding eye contact, and repeating “yes, yes, yes” like clockwork’ (*DYP* 36). This dismissive attitude, which becomes crucial to the novel’s plot, arises from the nexus of Duszejko’s gender, age and particular cause. Cosgrove notes that in certain historical epochs, as in Germany after 1945, ‘the public expression of loss has a high cultural and ethical value that recodifies mourning and melancholy as legitimate *masculine* tasks’.⁵⁴ Cruelty towards animals clearly does not make the grade. This, instead, is a matter for ‘old women... women of your age’, as the city guard just about corrects himself (*DYP* 113; ellipsis in original).

Duszejko is thus denied melancholic status, and is aligned instead with ‘mourning work’, which, ‘in the gendered division of cultural labour, has always been a second-rate task assigned to women’.⁵⁵ This understanding is comically demonstrated after the death of her neighbour Big Foot, with which the novel begins. Having already returned from Big Foot’s house, Duszejko is fetched back by friends of the deceased, who are depicted as almost absurdly masculine: they are lumberjacks, with deep voices, ‘broad shoulders and moustaches’ (*DYP* 44). Although the narrator was not on good terms with her neighbour, whom she had reported to the police for poaching and abuse of his dog, she is silently handed candles: ‘Ah, yes – I was to position the candles around the body, and light them [...] Maybe their flames would allow the tears to flow and soak into their bushy moustaches’ (*DYP* 45). This misapprehension of Duszejko as ‘the mistress of ceremonies, [...] the chief mourner’ (*DYP* 45) culminates in a bumbling musical number:

[...] once the candles were burning, they suddenly fell silent and fixed their sad gazes on me.

‘Please begin,’ a man whom I thought I knew from somewhere whispered to me.

I didn’t understand.

‘Please start singing.’

‘What am I to sing?’ I asked, genuinely alarmed. ‘I don’t know how to sing.’

⁵⁴ Ibid; emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 11; cf. Gisela Ecker, ‘Trauer zeigen: Inszenierung und Sorge um den Anderen’, in *Trauer tragen—Trauer zeigen: Inszenierungen der Geschlechter*, ed. Gisela Ecker (Munich: Fink, 1999), 11-12.

‘Anything,’ he said, ‘best of all “Eternal Rest”.’

‘Why me?’ I asked in an impatient whisper.

At this point the man standing closest to me replied firmly: ‘Because you’re a woman.’

Oh, I see. So that’s the order of the day. I didn’t know what my gender had to do with singing, but I wasn’t going to rebel against tradition at a time like this. (*DYP* 45-6)

Along with the tongue-in-cheek humour that forms an important part of the novel’s overall meaning, several other crucial details are made visible here. The notion of ‘mourning work’ as opposed to melancholy, which is foisted on an unwilling Duszejko in the passage, chimes in many ways with her own self-perception. The question of whether she must be a witness to every crime, for instance, is marked by a genuine reluctance that casts the knowledge of animal suffering as labour, as something to be painfully borne: ‘I could feel the huge, unbearable burden of my own body. Why couldn’t I have gone in another direction instead of following [the Fox]? Why hadn’t I ignored his gloomy paths?’ (*DYP* 106). Her sensation of physically carrying the animal’s suffering – of taking, as another character cheerfully admonishes her, ‘the whole world on [her] shoulders’ (*DYP* 194) – leads to a closer elucidation of her emotional condition: ‘Sorrow, I felt great sorrow, an endless sense of mourning for every dead Animal. One period of grief is followed by another, so I am in constant mourning. This is my natural state’ (*DYP* 106). Where sorrow appears elsewhere in the novel as a generalised experience of the world – which seems to Duszejko ‘shot through with appalling sorrow, quite unbearable’, leading her to conclude that this sorrow ‘lies at the foundations of everything’ (*DYP* 55) – here, it is identified explicitly as an ongoing and constantly renewed experience of grief. This raises, once more, the question of inside and outside, cause and effect that pertains to depressive characters, extending to the suspicion that their ethical concerns arise from a pathological sensitivity, a problem of approaching things ‘too emotionally’ (*DYP* 113). On the one hand, the idea that grief is her ‘natural state’ casts Duszejko as depressive by default, subject to a biological view based on ‘hereditary factors and a morbid predisposition’.⁵⁶ On the other, the characterisation of this condition as mourning points to a clear cause outside the self, and to the Bachmann-esque intuition that in this regard, too, ‘it takes a village’.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 16.

Grannies and Wolves

A second possible reading of this ‘natural state’ – namely, as an essentialist affirmation of gendered mourning – is equally vexed. While Duszejko does not hold back in her wry observation of gendered behaviour, the musical interlude above demonstrates precisely that she does not fit neatly into any version of womanhood acceptable in Luftzug. This differentiates her from the female figures of *Todesarten*, most of whom attempt to slot in with patriarchal structures, and are destroyed in the process. One of *Drive Your Plow’s* most evocative images arises when Oddball invites Duszejko to accompany him to a costumed event, the local mushroom-pickers’ ball. She quickly selects a wolf mask at the local charity shop, along with a furry jumpsuit that ‘fitted me perfectly’, but Oddball has a tougher time finding a costume that will accommodate ‘such an imposing physique’ (*DYP* 191). The solution is to dress him up as Little Red Riding Hood, which makes for a decidedly sullen car journey to the ball. (‘As you can see’, Oddball begrudgingly admits, ‘I have absolutely no sense of humour’ [*DYP* 195]). While undoubtedly comical, the visual of this odd couple is also revealing; for many first-time readers, it may even be the turning point in their perception of Duszejko and their understanding of the plot. Where the feminisation of Oddball, in his ‘sweet flowery dress with a little apron’ (*DYP* 194), appears at first to reverse the gender roles, Duszejko, in her animal costume, seems to belong in a different category altogether. Her character is turned inside out: where, before, only the reader has been privy to the rage within the old woman, now even the villagers of Luftzug are offered a carnivalesque clue that they are dealing not with little old Granny, but with the big bad wolf.

The turn this augurs within the text is one towards an even more daring play on existing tropes and motifs. Duszejko, we learn towards the end of the novel, has been the killer in all cases but one. After her neighbour, Big Foot, choked to death on a deer bone at the outset of the novel, she had found a photograph in his house that set her on the path to murder. The photograph shows all the men in positions of local authority – the police commandant, the priest and a politician nicknamed ‘the President’, along with ‘the head of the hospital, the fire chief, [...] the owner of the petrol station. The fathers of families, exemplary citizens’ (*DYP* 247) – posing with an array of dead animals after a hunt. In the

corner of the photo, Duszejko spots the corpses of her two dogs – referred to cryptically throughout the book as her ‘Little Girls’ – who disappeared a year prior to the events of the novel, and whom she has been mourning ever since. Along with the deer standing outside the house, who seem to have gathered to witness the poetic justice of Big Foot choking on the bones of his victim, the photograph resolves her to take revenge – as she sees it, on behalf of the animals.

This plot reveal is crucial to our understanding of the many ingredients Duszejko is composed of, and to what end they are combined. On the one hand, it serves to relativise her beliefs and actions, prompting the reader to hold her at arm’s length: it is difficult to reconcile her love for living beings with a full-blown killing spree. Pointing to the clear irony of a character ‘so concerned with animal deaths that she causes human deaths’, Nicole Seymour contends that ‘many readers will, along with our narrator’s fellow citizens, find Duszejko quite insufferable for much of the narrative’.⁵⁷ This distance is built into the text as one of the strategies that keep the reader at least partly estranged from the narrator’s perspective. For Seymour, the murder-mystery reveal also kills some of the ‘critical-fairy-tale feel of the novel’, since it ‘at least partially chickens out on the [...] tantalizing suggestion of nonhuman revenge’.⁵⁸ She contrasts this move unfavourably with Matthew Calarco’s reminder that ‘[a]nimals are always more than what our categories allow us to say or think about them’.⁵⁹

This reading of the plot reveal, however, arguably overlooks the extent to which the narrator is represented in the novel as belonging on the border between human and nonhuman categories, a feature that aligns Duszejko with figures like Gould and Rotpeter in Chapter 2. When introducing the geography of Luftzug early in the text, she describes her ‘game of crossing the border’ between Poland and the Czech Republic, a boundary which ‘meander[s] capriciously, making it easy to step across without noticing’ (*DYP* 57). Duszejko also delights in crossing on purpose, ‘deliberately stepping to and fro [...] I love crossing borders’ (*DYP* 57). While the valence here is, on one level, a particularly Polish

⁵⁷ Seymour, ‘Satire’, 274.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; cf. Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 39.

one, arising from the violent histories and almost absurd twists of fate the territory has experienced,⁶⁰ there is also a clear analogy with Duszejko's sense of the divide between human and animal, or between categories of animals, as equally unreal constructs. In answer to the claim that the hunters would never have shot a dog, she retorts 'Is there really such a big difference between a Hare, a Dog and a Pig?' (*DYP* 201). When reporting the shooting of boar outside the legal season, she adds the caveat that 'from the logical point of view it would be hard to convince me that on 28 February you may kill someone, but the next day you may not' (*DYP* 108). The animals she notices – including the fox 'Consul', who leads her to the boar's corpse – cross the border at will, and she eventually follows them over for good, evading the law by fleeing to the Czech Republic.

Where Cosgrove lists dogs among the established symbols of melancholy – since, 'like those who suffer from melancholy, the dog is more sensitive than other animals and can fall victim to madness'⁶¹ – *Drive Your Plow* heightens this element past the point of irony, placing it at the deadly-serious heart of the plot. Duszejko's two dogs, whom she calls her 'Little Girls' or even her 'daughters' (*DYP* 43; 231), set her on the path to revenge in more ways than one. The cruelty of the hunters who witness her despair and allow her to search desperately for the dogs, knowing all the while what has become of them, would be difficult to deny. This detail seems calculated to horrify even those readers who may share the hunters' view of the human-animal divide, and consider the treatment of dogs as family ridiculous or even 'blasphem[ous]' (*DYP* 231). Yet it is also from the dogs that Duszejko adopts her vision of justice. In keeping with the reading of dogs as 'fellow melancholy sufferer[s]',⁶² Duszejko's Little Girls mirror – or prefigure – her own response to the world: 'Whenever I scolded them unfairly or failed to keep my word [...] They'd gaze at me with such awful grief, as if they simply couldn't understand how I could have broken the sacred law. They taught me quite basic, plain and simple justice' (*DYP* 200).

⁶⁰ The act of crossing the border gives Janina pleasure, 'because I could remember the time when it wasn't possible' (*DYP* 57). As we saw in Chapter 2, the arbitrariness and impermanence of borders is a recurring motif in the author's work: in *House of Day, House of Night* (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny* [1998]), for instance, a man dies on the Czech-Polish border and is pushed first into Poland, then into Czechia by police on each side who want to avoid the paperwork (*House of Day, House of Night*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones [London: Granta, 2002], 96-7).

⁶¹ Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz*, 165.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Here, it appears, we have come full circle to the quantitative understanding of justice presented by MacAskill. As opposed to MacAskill's presentation of this idea under the veil of benign omniscience, however, Duszejko's Old Testament version of justice as accounting – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – is unapologetically embodied, and makes no bones about inhabiting a perspective. It is no coincidence that this speech is delivered from within the jaws of the wolf costume, aligning Duszejko with the canine world while casting her as her Little Girls' older and more violent counterpart. The costume, then, is an optical illusion with multiple layers: Duszejko is a wolf in sheep's clothing, dressed up as a wolf. In its emphasis on justice and nobility, this indeterminate image also turns diagnoses of human brutality – most famously, that 'der Mensch dem Menschen ein Wolf [ist]' [Man is a wolf to man, *LW* 234] – back on themselves, resembling instead Franza's cry: 'Ich kann mich mit den Wölfen versöhnen, mit den Menschen nicht' [I can reconcile myself to wolves, but not to people, *TA* 410].

The novel's vision of justice, meanwhile, also works through an inversion of the power dynamics it attends to. In his essay on 'the Decline of Love and the Rise of Non-Freedom' – Richard Flanagan's own defence of something like 'tenderness', though less perceptively defined – the Australian author proposes that 'we trust humour because it is the justice the law never is'.⁶³ This is one way of reading Duszejko's murders, which arise out of a carefully observed context that Seymour's analysis appears to disregard. They represent a humour that emerges in response to deadly serious realities – such as the forms of contempt that shaped the 'killer stories' of Chapter 3 – and which punches up rather than down. Flanagan's comments trace the connection of humour and justice back to Don Quixote, writing: 'Love, humour, freedom – from the first recognisably modern novel, *Don Quixote*, these three are never very far apart'.⁶⁴ Viewed in this light, Duszejko resembles the lone figures taking a stand against the system that we saw in Chapter 2, such as the woman quixotically brandishing her fist against a squadron of fighter planes in Ransmayr's story 'Luftangriff' ['Air Attack', *A* 85]. Just as this woman comes to appear to Ransmayr's narrator as 'eine Riesin' [a giant, *A* 88], the humorous affront to existing power dynamics in *Drive Your Plow* consists partly in the portrayal of Duszejko's physical proportions and

⁶³ Richard Flanagan, *The Australian Disease: On The Decline of Love and the Rise of Non-Freedom* (Victoria: Black Inc., 2011), 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

force vis-à-vis the hunters. While she is, at several points in the novel, physically restrained or shoved to the ground by men, none of them loom as large as the murderer-father of *Malina* and *Franza*; they are, instead, shrunk down to scale by her wry gaze, which often affords them sympathy, even pity. This levelling up (or down) is captured in Duszejko's chosen murder method, which involves clubbing the hunters to death with a bag of frozen animal remains, using her skills as former national vice-champion in the hammer throw (*DYP* 251). Scenes like this not only comically thwart stereotypes of age and gender, but also display some of the same surreal quality as the ever-shifting proportions in a Kafka story, where elders often refuse to stay shrunk – except that this time, the effect is turned back on the patriarchy, rather than reinforcing it.

Duszejko's indeterminate status as a kind of 'border figure' is flagged in the text from early on, and hinted at in her refusal of the name 'Janina'. While she excels at choosing 'the right name' for those around her, which other characters often adopt – from the epithet 'Big Foot' to a dog she christens with the human name Marysia – she cannot settle on a suitable name for herself: 'I think my real name is Emilia, or Joanna. Sometimes I think it's something like Irmtrud too. Or Bellona. Or Medea' (*DYP* 29). These latter options are raised once more in her final confession, when Duszejko explains to her friends that 'I didn't do it entirely consciously', and that she immediately forgot her actions after carrying them out: 'quite simply, from time to time I was not Janina, but Bellona or Medea' (*DYP* 256).

The novel also hints humorously at certain underground affinities on Duszejko's part. Among her most apparent symptoms, for instance, is a 'severe light allergy' that leaves her skin red and blistered, prompting the dermatologist Dr. Ali to insist that she avoid sunlight: 'I've never seen skin like yours before – you are *crated* [sic] for life underground' (*DYP* 218). Where Ali's own seasonal affective disorder causes him to seek out light 'like a sunflower', Duszejko is 'like white chicory, a potato sprout – I should spend the rest of my life in the boiler room' (*DYP* 218-19). Whereas the deer trotter taken from one of Big Foot's victims, which she uses to make tracks implying animal involvement in the murders, appears to Duszejko as the 'Finger of God', the bag of frozen remains she wields as their avenger reminds her of the phrase '*die kalte Teufelshand*' ['the cold hand of the devil', *DYP* 221;

251; emphasis in original]. While it is no doubt significant that the novel marks her out as the wolf rather than the more clichéd fairy-tale figure of the witch, these associations are not lost on some of the villagers, who complain to the principal about Duszejko teaching their children: ‘Apparently you burn candles [...] The parents are afraid it’s something satanic, Satanism. [...] And you give the children strange things to eat. [...] If any of them were poisoned, who’d be responsible?’ (*DYP* 241).

This last example of Duszejko as a figure on the border between the human and nonhuman adds a further layer, based as it is on the assumptions and fears of others towards her rather than her own self-perception. This is, arguably, the most compelling argument against Seymour’s view of the plot twist as ‘a bit cheap’, robbing the text of some of its critical power by copping out of a more literal nonhuman revenge.⁶⁵ The point of the text is not that the nonhuman world is wronged by humans but still possesses agency, though this is an important tenet of ecological thinking and a central idea of many other stories.⁶⁶ Instead, *Drive Your Plow* is concerned above all with the patterns in human behaviour and thought that shape violence against animals and other forms of ecological destruction. Like the associative dream logic of *Todesarten*, it is interested in the underlying truth to be found in archetypes. Duszejko is chosen as the agent of the hunters’ undoing not because the story must end on a note of anthropocentric realism, but because she and the animals are inextricably linked through the hunters’ contempt.

Ghosh – who, as we have seen, also subscribes to this type of thinking – traces anxieties around witchcraft to the same historical moment when European men, through colonial voyages, were coming to view themselves as ‘the subduers of everything they surveyed’.⁶⁷ At that time, he notes, ‘the great majority of Europeans, like common people everywhere, also believed the universe to be a living organism, animated by many kinds of unseen forces’.⁶⁸ The violence with which these views were suppressed, Ghosh argues, was inseparable from that of colonial conquest – particularly in the case of ‘witch-hunting,

⁶⁵ Seymour, ‘Satire’, 275.

⁶⁶ The Korean writer Bora Chung, for instance – very much in dialogue with Polish literature through her work as a literary translator – offers the type of critical fairy tale Seymour was hoping for in ‘Snare’ (Bora Chung, *Cursed Bunny*, trans. Anton Hur [London: Honford Star, 2021], 91-108).

⁶⁷ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 69; 37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

which literally demonised huge numbers of generally poor European women, with tropes drawn from colonialist perceptions of Amerindians as devil worshippers'.⁶⁹ The historical context in which *Drive Your Plow* is set is, of course, a vastly different one, with any lingering suspicion of witchcraft only hinted at in passing. Nonetheless, the parallels the novel establishes between the hunters' contempt towards Duszejko and their disregard for the suffering of animals stick in the mind, mirroring both *Todesarten* and many of the other works at hand.

In the epilogue, I will argue that Le Guin provides a different and much more interesting archetype with which Duszejko and other old woman characters can be aligned: that of the gatherer. In the meantime, however, I would like to turn my attention to another canonical work of ecological fiction that can help us to think in more detail about the condition of tenderness: Marlen Haushofer's 1963 novel *Die Wand* [*The Wall*]. The narrator of Haushofer's novel has a good deal in common with Duszejko. She feels a deep affinity with and empathy for animals, which she nonetheless often experiences as a burden. Her tenderness towards other beings, like Duszejko's, comes at the cost of being constantly wounded, the cumulative effect of which manifests as exhaustion and depression. Although this narrator, stranded in a hunting lodge in the Austrian mountains, must occasionally hunt to keep herself and her animals alive, it pains her to do so; like Duszejko, she perceives the world as being divided into those who kill and those who care. Similarly to *Drive Your Plow* and the works discussed in the epilogue, meanwhile, *Die Wand* also entails a kind of theorisation of what it portrays. A discussion of the correspondences between *Drive Your Plow* and *Die Wand* will thus help to draw out what it is that the idea of 'tenderness' pits itself against: the view of the world that Ghosh calls 'omnicide'.

Care

'Wenn ich mir heute einen Menschen wünschte', reflects the narrator of Marlen Haushofer's *Die Wand* two years into her isolation, 'so müßte es eine alte Frau sein, eine gescheite, witzige, mit der ich manchmal lachen könnte' [If I wished for a human

⁶⁹ Ibid.

companion today, it would have to be an old woman, someone shrewd and funny, with whom I could sometimes laugh].⁷⁰ The unnamed narrator has lived a life of solitude in the company of only a dog, a cat (plus kittens), and a cow (plus calf), since waking up to discover an invisible wall separating her from the rest of the world. Alone in a hunting lodge in the Austrian mountains, she appears to be the sole survivor of a Cold War attack or disaster. Her choice of companion, then, is the result of a good deal of thought. Her framing of it in terms of canniness and humour recalls the wry voice of Duszejko, and anticipates that of Le Guin, which will guide us in the epilogue.

The type of life *Die Wand* is concerned with, and which it presents in distinctly gendered terms, is a life of care. In line with Tokarczuk's concept of tenderness, this life is presented both as a heavy burden and as a constant openness to pain. For as long as she can remember, the narrator has worried about and feared for those close to her,

und ich werde darunter leiden, solange irgendein Geschöpf lebt, das mir anvertraut ist. Manchmal, schon lange ehe es die Wand gab, habe ich gewünscht, tot zu sein, um meine Bürde endlich abwerfen zu können. Über diese schwere Last habe ich immer geschwiegen; ein Mann hätte mich nicht verstanden, und die Frauen, denen ging es doch genau wie mir. [...] Jede von uns wußte darum, und deshalb redeten wir nie darüber. Es war eben der Preis, den man für die Fähigkeit bezahlte, lieben zu können.⁷¹

[and will I continue to suffer in this way as long as any being still lives that has been entrusted to me. Sometimes, even before the wall was there, I wished to be dead, so that I could cast off my burden at last. I always remained silent about this heavy load; a man wouldn't have understood, and women, it was exactly the same for them as it was for me (...) Every one of us knew about it, and so we never talked about it. It was just the price that one paid for the ability to love].

⁷⁰ Marlen Haushofer, *Die Wand* (Berlin: List, 2007), 66.

⁷¹ Ibid, 71. Emily Jeremiah reads *Das Buch Franza* and the related story 'Das Gebell' ['The Barking', 1972] – which features the characters of Franza, Jordan and his elderly mother, Mrs Jordan – in similar terms. In 'Das Gebell' Jeremiah argues, 'gendered care features in the figure of Franziska, but her death casts doubt on its efficacy and viability', while '*Das Buch Franza* shows even more starkly the failure of care and the effects of sadism' (Emily Jeremiah, "'Keine Zeit zu verlieren": Time and Care in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Das Gebell" and *Das Buch Franza*, *German Life and Letters* 75.4 [2022], 540-53 [541]).

As with elements of *Drive Your Plow* – and, as we shall see, Le Guin’s ‘Carrier Bag Theory’ – this passage arguably tends towards the essentialist end of the gender theory spectrum.⁷² *Die Wand* is not immune to a ‘maternalist’ feminism that locates meaning in ‘the biological facts of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation’.⁷³ After the cat gives birth, the narrator perceives that she is, ‘wie jede Mutter, erfüllt von dem Bewußtsein, etwas ganz Einmaliges geschaffen zu haben’ [like every mother, filled with the awareness of having created something utterly unique].⁷⁴ When seeking to understand the ‘other’ type of people, ‘die Mörder’ [the murderers] – here, too, coded male – she concludes: ‘Ihr Haß auf alles, was neues Leben erschaffen kann, muß ungeheuer sein’ [Their hatred for everything that can produce new life must be immense].⁷⁵ Tokarczuk’s lecture on tenderness begins with a similarly ‘maternalist’ image: ‘it was an exchange between my mother and me, her small child’ that Tokarczuk credits with giving her ‘a store of strength that has lasted me my whole life [...] my mother [...] gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world’s greatest *tender narrator*’ (TN 2).

Both *Drive Your Plow* and *Die Wand* expand images of birth and motherhood to encompass the dream of a new animal-human race. In stark contrast to the vision of, say, *2001: A Space Odyssey* – which imagines a Nietzschean Übermensch arrived at through the technology of space travel, appearing as a ‘lovely fetus’ floating through space ‘without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all’⁷⁶ – *Drive Your Plow* and *Die Wand* locate dreams of the future in syntheses of human and animal, born from the bodies of mothers. ‘Die Schranken zwischen Tier und Mensch fallen sehr leicht’ [The barriers between human and animal fall very easily], remarks the narrator of *Die Wand*, going on to describe how:

Im Traum bringe ich Kinder zur Welt, aber es sind nicht nur Menschenkinder, es gibt unter ihnen Katzen, Hunde, Kälber, Bären und ganz fremdartige pelzige Geschöpfe.

⁷² ‘If we imagine gender theory as a spectrum, we can locate essentialism at one end and constructivism at the other, bearing in mind that many thinkers and writers who have addressed questions of gender have combined elements of these two models’. Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Sex in Imagined Spaces: Gender and Utopia from More to Bloch* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), 58.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁴ Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 73.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁶ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 29.

Aber alle brechen sie aus mir hervor, und es ist nichts an ihnen, was mich erschrecken oder abstoßen könnte'.⁷⁷

[In my dreams I bring children into the world, but they are not only human children, there are also cats, dogs, calves and bears among them, and very strange furred creatures. But they all emerge from me, and there is nothing about them that could frighten or repulse me].

Duszejko, for her part, dreams 'that [...] my Little Girls had just given birth to children, and there were lots and lots of them on the floor in the hall and the kitchen. They were people, a completely new race of people brought forth by Animals' (*DYP* 219). Later, upon seeing some of the local schoolchildren dressed as woodland creatures for the feast day of St Hubert, she remarks that 'in their costumes they looked unreal, like a new half-human, half-animal race that was just about to be born' (*DYP* 238).⁷⁸

In the case of *Die Wand*, however, the longer passage quoted above about the narrator's burden also shows signs of a subtler, starker vision that has elevated the novel to the status of a modern classic in both feminist and environmentalist circles.⁷⁹ The distinction lies in the combination of close attention to the dynamics of care with increasing detachment from its more familiar manifestations. The narrator has two daughters, but they hardly feature in her report; she can only assume that they died on the day the wall appeared. They belong to a past life and self that increasingly recedes

⁷⁷ Ibid, 235.

⁷⁸ This is another connection to the vision of metamorphosis put forward in *Die letzte Welt*, where – as we saw in Chapter 2 – Naso imagines a 'new race of people' that will be born from ants.

⁷⁹ This classic status is now gaining belated recognition in the English-speaking world. Along with *Malina*, which was re-issued as a Penguin Modern Classic in 2019, *The Wall* has seen a revival in English translation as part of the Vintage Classics 'Vintage Earth' series, which re-issued Shaun Whiteside's translation in 2022. When I began this PhD, both texts were still much harder to come by in English translation. Somewhat surprisingly, given the authorial image outlined in Chapter 3, Ransmayr has named *Die Wand* as one of the three books that have most shaped his life. He describes first reading Haushofer's novel as a school pupil in search of 'eine Art Brückenschlag zwischen der Welt der Literatur, der erzählten Welt, und meiner, der vermeintlich tatsächlichen, historischen Welt' [a kind of bridge between the world of literature, the narrated world, and my world, the supposedly real, historical world]. Ransmayr was moved by the narrator's attempts to build 'eine neue Welt, in der sich leben ließ' [a new world, in which it would be possible to live], and describes having read the book 'immer wieder [...] und mir gedacht [...]: also wenn Schreiben, dann in etwa so wie Marlen Haushofer schreibt' [over and over (...) and (thinking) to myself: if I am to write, then roughly in the way Marlen Haushofer writes] (*Lesenswert: Kurt Kotrschal und Christoph Ransmayr*, May 2022. <<https://www.swrfernsehen.de/lesenswert/kurt-kotrschal-und-christoph-ransmayr-100.html>> [Accessed 20th April 2023]).

from her. Rather than encountering her as a mother, the reader observes her tending to her animals, two of whom – the cat and Bella, the cow – give birth to offspring that, one after another, disappear or are killed. The last birth in the novel is a stillbirth: soon after the narrator’s dream of bearing a new race, and after the disappearance of the second kitten, Tiger, ‘zog [die Katze] sich zurück und gebar unter schrecklichen Wimmern vier tote Kätzchen’ [the cat retreated and gave birth to four dead kittens amid terrible whimpering].⁸⁰ Far from ‘the maternalist-feminist idea of women as “wardens of the world to come”’,⁸¹ then, *Die Wand* in many ways presents a world where mothers outlive their young, where the future looks bleak, and where care itself is imbued with a sense of futility and exhaustion, as evinced by the narrator’s allusion to suicide in the longer passage above. In this regard, it resembles artistic visions of sterility like Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Alfonso Cuarón’s film *Children of Men* (2006), which Mark Fisher uses as the entry point for his study *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009). For Fisher, ‘it is evident that the theme of sterility must be read metaphorically, as the displacement of another kind of anxiety’ – in this case, the sense of ‘no alternative’ engendered by 21st-century capitalism.⁸² Put differently, this is another expression of the need for a ‘New Story’.⁸³ Le Guin – who, like Tokarczuk, seeks ‘with a certain feeling of urgency [...] the other story, the untold one, the life story’⁸⁴ – has voiced a thought very similar to Fisher’s, giving it a characteristically memorable turn of phrase: ‘We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words’.⁸⁵ Here, the ideas of art as resistance explored in Chapter 2 meet and join forces with the proposals put forward by Tokarczuk and Le Guin for what such a story might entail.

⁸⁰ Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 242.

⁸¹ Ní Dhúill, *Sex in Imagined Spaces*, 57.

⁸² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 3.

⁸³ This connection is hinted at in *Die Wand*. Faced with the prospect that the cow, Bella, may have fallen pregnant again, the narrator writes: ‘Manchmal denke ich [...], es wäre besser, wenn es nicht geschähe. Es würde das unvermeidliche Ende nur hinauszögern und mir eine neue Last aufbürden. Aber es wäre doch schön, wenn wieder etwas Neues, Junges da wäre’ [Sometimes I think (...) it would be better if it didn’t happen. It would only prolong the inevitable end and place a new burden on me. But it would be nice if there was something new again, something young] (Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 77).

⁸⁴ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 33.

⁸⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘Acceptance speech at the National Book Awards’, *The Guardian*, Nov 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/20/ursula-k-le-guin-national-book-awards-speech>> [Accessed 18th Dec 2022].

As we have seen, two closely related concepts that inform Tokarczuk's definition of the 'new story' – the kind of story told by tender narrators – are 'empathy' and 'identification'. These ideas have accompanied the discussion of ecological fiction's affective tendencies throughout the thesis so far, without being spelled out as such. In Tokarczuk's lecture, too, they remain somewhat vaguely delineated, and often appear contradictory. They have to do with a dissolution of the boundaries of the self, which for Tokarczuk appears to be desirable only in its more radical forms. When reading a parable, for instance, the reader 'must surrender completely his distinctness and become the Everyman' (*TN 6*), a condition Tokarczuk welcomes. The 'new variety of emotional understanding based on empathy' engendered by the rise of autobiographical or autofictional narratives, by contrast, encourages us only 'to identify with people who are just like us', rather than, say, with a deity, a dog or a forest (*TN 4*). Tokarczuk's theory of reading thus puts a different spin on the dichotomy between immersion and critical reflection offered by Götz, in which a reader is either 'here' (in the fictional world of the text) or 'here' (in their own embodied reading). Rather than being 'conscripted' by a masculine text and author, Tokarczuk perceives the potential 'danger' of reading in terms of the wrong kind of empathy or identification. The 'new variety of emotional understanding' arising from loosely autobiographical first-person narratives,

by its very nature, brings together and eliminates borders; it is very easy to lose track in a novel of the borders between the narrator's self and the reader's self, and a so-called 'absorbing novel' actually counts on that border being blurred—on the reader, through empathy, becoming the narrator for a while (*TN 4-5*).

The somewhat counter-intuitive role assigned to empathy and identification in Tokarczuk's vision is worth flagging here, as it presents a crucial point of contact between Tokarczuk's 'tender narrator' and Le Guin's figure of the gatherer. Both these proposals for the 'New Story' seem to hinge on vantage points that can encompass the level of the 'omnium' – all-seeing, all-living, all-dissolving, all-connected, 'Everyman' – and that of the 'gatherum', allowing these perspectives to be collected in and perceived by one particular body. This could provide one means of separating out 'empathy' from 'identification', though the terms are not differentiated in this way in Tokarczuk's lecture. 'Empathy', on

this view, might refer to a position that sees, feels and cares about the joys and sufferings of others, but leaves intact a vantage point of selfhood which can be returned to and perceived from. This understanding is commensurate with Tokarczuk's definition of 'tender' omniscience. 'Identification', on the other hand, might name the risk of excessive or illusory empathy: of having one's own position overwhelmed or 'consumed' by that of others, as appears to happen to Franza in Bachmann's novel fragment. A further pitfall suggested by this understanding of 'identification' is the sense that perceived connections may arise less from the real experience of the other, empathetically perceived, and more from an outpouring of pain on the part of the self, which 'consumes' the reality of the other. This would appear to be the case, for instance, in Franza's cry 'Ich bin eine Papua' [I am a Papuan, TA 414].

We will return to this differentiation at the end of this chapter, where it will be considered in terms of 'consumption'. As the discussion of Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' in the epilogue will show, it is 'empathy' rather than 'identification' which tends to be represented archetypally in these texts, through the figure of the gatherer as an old woman. Like *Drive Your Plow, Die Wand* provides a useful linchpin for many of these ideas. Its narrator can be understood as a survivor who battles her own pain in order to keep herself and her animals alive – a re-imagining of the 'Robinsonade' [Robinson Crusoe narrative] shaped around the idea of care. As opposed to the female figures of *Todesarten*, who are destroyed and disappeared by the system, the narrator of *Die Wand* appears as a remainder, left over after the self-destruction of the system itself. As she ages, and in her separation from human society, she also shows signs of the dissolution of species borders we saw with Duszejko.

Evaluating her new situation after the appearance of the wall, Haushofer's narrator observes that 'um ernstlich an Selbstmord zu denken, war ich nicht mehr jung genug' [I was no longer young enough to think seriously of suicide].⁸⁶ Two and a half years into her isolation, when writing her 'Bericht', she no longer feels any connection to 'die Frau [...], die ich einmal war, die Frau mit dem kleinen Doppelkinn, die sich sehr bemühte, jünger auszusehen, als sie war' [the woman I once was, the woman with the little double chin,

⁸⁶ Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 40.

who made a great effort to look younger than she was].⁸⁷ One of the first steps of her transformation is to lose 'die Fraulichkeit der Vierzigerjahre' [the womanliness of my forties] and with it 'das Bewußtsein [...], eine Frau zu sein' [the awareness of being a woman].⁸⁸ This change is figured as a type of freedom and flux:

Ich konnte ruhig vergessen, daß ich eine Frau war. Manchmal war ich ein Kind, das Erdbeeren suchte, dann wieder ein junger Mann, der Holz zersägte, oder, wenn ich Perle auf den mageren Knien haltend auf der Bank saß und der sinkenden Sonne nachsah, ein sehr altes, geschlechtsloses Wesen.⁸⁹

[I could simply forget that I was a woman. Sometimes I was a child who was searching for strawberries, then a young man who was sawing wood, or, when I sat on the bench holding Pearl on my skinny knees and watched the sinking sun, a very old, sexless being].

While this strange flux does not last past the first year of her new life, the sense of transformation remains; these days, the narrator tells us, she resembles a tree more than a person, 'einem zähen braunen Stämmchen, das seine ganze Kraft braucht, um zu überleben' [a tough brown trunk that needs all its strength to survive].⁹⁰ This feeling of gradual metamorphosis is a recurring feature of her report, and entails both an individual change of state – from woman to child to man to tree – and a dissolution of identity into a more collective form. 'Manchmal verwirren sich meine Gedanken' [Sometimes my thoughts become confused], she writes later,

und es ist, als fange der Wald an, in mir Wurzeln zu schlagen und mit meinem Hirn seine alten, ewigen Gedanken zu denken [...] Es fällt mir schwer, beim Schreiben mein früheres und mein neues Ich auseinanderzuhalten, mein neues Ich, von dem ich nicht sicher bin, daß es nicht langsam von einem größeren Wir aufgesogen wird'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid, 82.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 185.

[and it is as though the forest is beginning to put down roots in me and think its old, eternal thoughts with my brain (...) I find it difficult when writing to tell my former self and my new self apart, my new 'I', of which I am not sure that it is not being slowly absorbed by a larger 'we'].

The suggestion of an alliance or proximity between the narrator and all other living things in the forest – including the trees themselves – stands in stark opposition to the figure of the 'Mörder' [murderer] who stalked Chapter 3, and who also makes his presence felt in *Die Wand*. Before we return to these visions of dissolving identity, then – and to the relationship between empathy, identification and 'consumption' – it is worth considering the figure of the murderer or hunter one last time. If Duszejko, Haushofer's narrator and the many victims of Chapter 3 can be differentiated in terms of empathy and identification, they nevertheless all stand in opposition to this archetypal hunter figure, who appears as an embodiment of what Amitav Ghosh calls 'omnicide'.

Omnicide

'Es gibt,' the narrator of *Die Wand* muses, 'keine vernünftigerer Regung als Liebe. Sie macht dem Liebenden und dem Geliebten das Leben erträglicher' [There is no more reasonable impulse than love. It makes life more bearable for the lover and the one loved].⁹² This is a further disruption of conventional notions of rationality, to add to those we encountered in Chapter 2. When coining the term 'omnicide', Ghosh also attacks the conventional view of rationality, but from the opposite direction. Ghosh introduces the concept with reference to the policies pursued by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on the Banda islands, where they had carried out a genocide in 1621. As we saw in Chapter 2, when their increased access reduced the value of the spices, the VOC determined that every clove and nutmeg tree on all but a chosen few islands – in an archipelago of over a thousand – was to be 'extirpated'.⁹³ The company clung to this absurd policy, Ghosh notes, with a relentlessness that appears 'distinctly unhinged', persisting with their efforts for over a hundred years, with little success.⁹⁴ The VOC, he writes,

⁹² Ibid, 238.

⁹³ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 74.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

was the embodiment of early capitalism; it was run by stolid burghers who prided themselves on their rationality, moderation, and common sense. Yet they pursued a policy that perfectly illustrates the unrestrainable excess that lies hidden at the heart of the vision of world-as-resource – an excess that leads ultimately not just to genocide but an even greater violence, an impulse that can only be called ‘omnicide’, the desire to destroy everything.⁹⁵

The idea of ‘omnicide’ is yet another manifestation of the ‘omni-level’ identified at the outset of this thesis. It appears, on one level, as an admission of narrative defeat, like a movie villain who is intrinsically motivated to destroy the world. Yet there is more to the term than first meets the eye. Rather than a name that falsely inflates something more identifiable – such as greed – the concept appears in Ghosh’s analysis as a careful tracing of behavioural patterns that, while perplexing from many perspectives, are widely in evidence in colonial history and writings about war.⁹⁶ Ghosh cites, for instance, a 1553 account from a Spanish conquistador of how ‘If a man had need of one pig, [...] he killed twenty; if four Indians were wanted, he took a dozen [...] [T]hey thought no more of killing Indians than if they were useless beasts’.⁹⁷ In an Irish context, the impulse Ghosh describes is captured even more succinctly in the Earl of Chichester’s boast, after a 1601 massacre, that ‘we have burnt and destroyed all along the Lough, [...] where we kill[ed] man, woman, child, horse, beast and whatever we found’.⁹⁸

The idea of omnicide, then, is evidently a version of the question that preoccupies Bachmann, Ransmayr, Tokarczuk and Flanagan in different contexts: the puzzle of murderousness over and above ‘rational’ motivations; of ‘das Virus Verbrechen’ [the virus of crime]. This phenomenon is figured across the various texts as a mystery, a drive that remains ineffable to those who have not experienced it. *Die Wand*, driven throughout by

⁹⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁹⁶ Although the emphasis of Ghosh’s analysis in *The Nutmeg’s Curse* is on the specific forms of violence that arise from colonialism, commonalities with European wars are acknowledged in his analysis. The VOC’s decree that the Bandanese should be put to death by ‘burn[ing] everywhere their dwellings’, for instance, ‘suggests a tactic, burning peasant villages to the ground, that was widely used during the Thirty Years’ War, which was then raging in the Netherlands’ (Ibid, 23).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 210.

depictions of care in the absence of other humans, culminates in the killing of the dog Luchs [Lynx] and Stier [Bull], the calf, by a lone man who has also survived in the woods unbeknownst to the narrator. On a plot level, this attack is introduced in a way that deliberately emphasises a sense of randomness and confusion, occurring suddenly in the final pages of the novel. It is foreshadowed only in one or two sentences of the narrator's report, which is written retrospectively after these events. Perhaps because of this foreknowledge, the report is coloured by the Bachmann-esque suspicion that 'das Virus Verbrechen' [the virus of crime] cannot simply have disappeared, even in the seeming absence of other humans; the narrator hints throughout at her wariness that another person or people may have survived.⁹⁹ Like the notion of violence as a 'virus', her view of the killing is framed in terms of dormancy and inescapability: 'Der heimliche Wunsch zu morden,' she speculates, 'muß immer schon in ihm geschlafen haben. Ich bin sogar geneigt, ihn zu bedauern, weil er so beschaffen war' [The secret wish to murder must have been sleeping in him from the beginning. I am even inclined to pity him, because he was made that way].¹⁰⁰ When the narration catches up with the killing itself, the impression of senselessness is conveyed even more clearly:

Ich verstehe nicht, was geschehen ist. Noch heute frage ich mich, warum der fremde Mann Stier und Luchs getötet hat. Ich hatte doch Luchs zurückgepiffen, und er mußte wehrlos darauf warten, daß ihm der Schädel eingeschlagen wurde. Ich möchte wissen, warum der fremde Mann meine Tiere getötet hat. Ich werde es nie erfahren, und vielleicht ist es auch besser so.¹⁰¹

[I don't understand what happened. To this day I still ask myself why the strange man killed Bull and Lynx. I had called Lynx back, and he had to wait there defencelessly to have his head bashed in. I would like to know why the strange man killed my animals. I will never find out, and maybe it's better that way].

⁹⁹ 'Ich wußte, daß alle meine Maßnahmen gegen Menschen gerichtet waren, und sie erschienen mir lächerlich. Aber da bisher jede Gefahr von Menschen gedroht hatte, konnte ich mich nicht so schnell umstellen. Der einzige Feind, den ich in meinem bisherigen Leben gekannt hatte, war der Mensch gewesen' [I knew that all my measures were directed against humans, and they appeared ridiculous to me. But since every threat until now had come from humans, I couldn't adjust so quickly. The only enemy that I had known in my life so far had been humans] (Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 23).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 162.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 275.

For Ursula K. Le Guin, too, as will see in the epilogue, the destructive drive of 'Man the Hero' is the underlying mystery that gives rise to more elaborate and systematic forms of violence. It is, as mentioned above, the Hero's 'uncontrollable impulse [...] to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it'.¹⁰²

Given its vast scope, this might appear to be an idle question (or, in other words, an omni-question). Like the question of how to represent the climate crisis, it is unanswerable because it is too big, too vague. Translated to a species level, it corresponds to the question of why the climate crisis has been allowed to unfold: how human destructiveness continues to overpower both fellow feeling and self-interest, seemingly against all reason. In attempting to answer this question, Ghosh untangles it into several more specific strands, all of which nonetheless appear to entail a lack of empathy or identification.

The first element of omnicide that Ghosh outlines is, essentially, greed. On the face of it, greed appears to be a more comprehensible impulse than destruction for its own sake. While by definition excessive, it can be explained in social terms. Ghosh points out, for instance, that the cost of spices at the time of the Banda genocide was so staggeringly high that it could not be accounted for 'in terms of utility alone'; instead, nutmeg, mace and cloves functioned as 'fetishes', valued 'because they had become envy-inducing symbols of luxury and wealth'.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the proximity of greed to the behaviours these writers and narrators find so baffling is encapsulated in a description of how Indigenous people viewed European settlers, written by an Italian conquistador in 1565: 'They say that we have come to this earth to destroy the world. They say [...] that we devour everything, we consume the earth, [...] we are never quiet, never at rest, but always run here and there, seeking gold and silver, never satisfied, and then we gamble with it, make war, kill each other'.¹⁰⁴ As we have already seen, the connection Ghosh proposes is the reduction of the world to a collection of resources, an objectifying tendency applied both to landscapes and places, and, by extension, to their human inhabitants. He reads, for instance, the flourishing of still life paintings as a genre – underwritten, in the Dutch

¹⁰² Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34.

¹⁰³ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 55.

Golden Age, by profits from spices, which sometimes featured in the artworks themselves – as an expression of ‘the colonial envisioning of “nature” as a vast mass of inert resources’, pointing to the French name for the genre: *‘Nature Morte’*.¹⁰⁵

This paradigm shift – of rendering ‘brute’ and ‘inert’ both the physical world and its human inhabitants – also gives rise to the second element of ‘omnicide’ Ghosh describes: namely, the conviction of superiority. ‘Subdue’, he points out, ‘was a key word in these conquests, recurring again and again in reference not just to human beings, but also to the terrain’.¹⁰⁶ It was the process of colonisation, he claims, that eventually allowed upper-class European men to think of themselves as ‘the subduers of everything they surveyed’.¹⁰⁷ The narrative of their inevitable rise – what Le Guin would call ‘the Ascent of Man the Hero’ – was strengthened over the centuries, as we have seen, by ideas about evolution, which were used to present genocide and ecocide as essentially ‘natural’ phenomena, a necessary part of evolutionary progress. The ‘co-discoverer’ of the theory of evolution, Alfred Russell Wallace, is reported to have viewed the ‘extermination’ of Indigenous populations as ‘simply [...] another name for natural selection’.¹⁰⁸ Ghosh traces this conviction of superiority forwards to global climate politics in the present day, positing that the tacit lesson White settler cultures have learned from colonial history is that ‘omnicidal war’ – the kind that attacks all elements of the web of life humans depend on – ‘would always work to their advantage’.¹⁰⁹ On this view, Ghosh argues, the slow violence of inaction may be upheld, rather than challenged, by reminders of how unequally the worst effects of the crisis will be distributed across the globe. ‘Is it possible,’ he asks, ‘that this message has [...] persuaded the privileged to think they need do nothing about climate change because they will be insulated from the worst impacts of global warming by their affluence, and indeed by their bodily advantages?’¹¹⁰

The continuity between this line of thought and 20th-century eugenics – the same continuity condensed by Bachmann into the motif of ‘die Weißen’, and identified by

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 37.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 184.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 168.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 170.

Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – is gestured towards at several points in Ghosh’s analysis. He traces, for instance, the circumstances in which VOC officials decided that ‘the Banda problem needs a final solution: the islands must be emptied of their inhabitants’.¹¹¹

Both these strands of the drive towards omnicide – greed on the one hand, and the conviction of superiority on the other – can be read, at the most basic level, as arising from a lack of empathy. The literary figure whom Ghosh uses as a symbolic lynchpin for ideas of omnicide is Conrad’s Mr Kurtz. Ghosh follows the Swedish scholar Sven Lindqvist in attempting to unpack the sentence Kurtz scrawls across a report, which is found later by the narrator, Marlow: ‘Exterminate all the brutes’. Building on Lindqvist’s analysis of the central place the idea of extermination once held in Western culture, which we encountered in Chapter 2, Ghosh emphasises the dissonance between this central position and the portrayal of Kurtz as a man at the end of the world and the end of his wits. Far from being ‘an incidental thought that sometimes flashed into the minds of beleaguered White men’,¹¹² as *Heart of Darkness* suggests, extermination was a state-sanctioned and richly rewarded affair, carried out in the open. Its perpetrators did not die ‘forgotten in miserable huts in the jungle’, but are commemorated throughout Europe in monuments and statues, such as the statue of Leopold II whose continued presence in the centre of Brussels Ransmayr has castigated.¹¹³ While Lindqvist focuses his attention on the place extermination of other peoples once held ‘within the heart of Whiteness’,¹¹⁴ Ghosh expands the scope of the analysis, with reference to the types of connections between humans, nonhuman animals and the web of life that we considered in Chapter 2. ‘Humans are not the only brutes whose extermination is envisaged by Kurtz,’ he writes; ‘there are many others around him – animals, the jungle, indeed the landscape itself. What Kurtz’s scrawled sentence actually expresses, then, is the urge to omnicide’.¹¹⁵

This discussion of omnicide, culminating with the figure of Kurtz, is useful in furthering our understanding of what it is that the Le Guins and Duszajkos of contemporary fiction –

¹¹¹ Ibid, 13.

¹¹² Ibid, 184.

¹¹³ Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 21.

¹¹⁴ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 186.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 190.

the agents of tenderness – are being pitted against. Ghosh criticises Lindqvist for not realising the import of his own argument as it relates to *Heart of Darkness*: that ‘in making exterminatory violence appear exceptional, as a thought that flashes momentarily through Kurtz’s mind, Conrad was in fact concealing the true nature of that phenomenon’.¹¹⁶ Yet this very concealment also provides a useful illustration for the argument of *The Nutmeg’s Curse*. By distilling his analysis into a charismatic ‘villain’ like Kurtz, Ghosh helps to narrativise omnicide for the reader in more familiar terms, giving us a Brando-worthy baddie with one hand while taking him away with the other. This neatly captures the two-sided nature of omnicide as it appears in our literary texts. On one level, it is complex, impersonal, unindividuated and inseparable from collective behaviours: it is a virus, a wave, a constellation, a system. On another level, omnicide is tropey, archetypal, leering: it is the hunters, der Vater, der Mörder, die Weißen, Mr Kurtz, der Herr der Welt.

The problem of how to narrativise omnicide, then, is related to other well-known iterations of the problem of representing evil. There are clear echoes, in Ghosh’s analysis, of questions of collective culpability and the ‘banality of evil’ as they arose in the wake of the Shoah. The thoughts of Tokarczuk, Haushofer and Le Guin about tenderness and care in the face of environmental destruction can, in this regard, be traced back to earlier feminist rejections of certain narrative traditions, including in the postwar context. Writing about her experience of life in the concentration camps, Ruth Klüger – another old woman who writes with a humour that ‘bites and stings’, and who will feature in the epilogue – cites Simone Weil’s suspicion of ‘fast [der] ganze[n] Belletristik [...], weil darin fast immer das Gute langweilig und das Böse interessant ist, eine genaue Umkehrung der Wirklichkeit, meinte sie’ [almost the whole of literature, (...) since it almost always shows good to be boring and evil interesting, an exact reversal of reality, she claimed]. ‘Vielleicht,’ Klüger continues, ‘wissen Frauen mehr über das Gute als Männer, die es so gern trivialisieren’ [Perhaps women know more about goodness than men, who are so fond of trivialising it].¹¹⁷ Despite the shift in historical context, this is the sign under which many of the texts discussed here are written. One means of uniting the usual aims of the novel with that of inciting active intervention in the world, after all, is to make the good interesting, a task at

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 186.

¹¹⁷ Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Munich: dtv, 2016), 132.

which ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ and *Die Wand* excel (and, I would argue, the central way in which *The Overstory* falls short). To make the good interesting is, on this view, the true, unspoken job of tenderness.

Consumption

If omniscient evil is characterised by a lack of empathy or identification with anything beyond the self – confined to the narrowest group, such as the European male cultural elite – then the ‘good’ of care would appear to be a question of empathy. At first glance, Klüger’s claim that women understand more about the good than men suggests an essentialist view of this question, not unlike the hints of a maternalist conception of care in *Die Wand*. This is not the only way of reading perceived gendered differences in empathy, however. As exemplified by the figure of Franza in the previous chapter, this greater capacity for the ‘tenderness’ of emotional connection can also be seen as arising from shared victimhood or marginalisation from the position of domination. In Chapter 2, we saw how the discourse of evolution – and ideas of what constitutes ‘brutishness’ – reinforced ‘a belief in the absolute exceptionalism and supremacy of one kind of human – White, Western man’.¹¹⁸ It is not altogether surprising that those excluded from this perspective by dint of their gender, race or cultural identity might have greater cause to reflect critically on it, and to arrive instead at an understanding of themselves as being linked ‘to other life-forms by close ties of kinship’, such as those demonstrated by Duszejko and by Haushofer’s narrator.

As I have already suggested, however – and as Tokarczuk’s lecture indicates – this sense of connection with other people and other beings is far from uniform. It can manifest in quite different ways, with different implications both for the other and for the self. For Tokarczuk, as we have seen, identification that dissolves the boundaries of the self is not always the ‘right’ way of reading, or of relating to the other. The distinction between empathy and identification in Tokarczuk’s lecture is unclear, and she appears to welcome some forms of self-dissolution, such as becoming the ‘Everywhere Everyman’ when

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

reading parables, or the identification with 'deities' (TN 4). In light of this, I have proposed that we might distinguish 'empathy' – which approaches the other with tenderness, but leaves intact a self that can be returned to – from 'identification', which relates to the other by surrendering the 'here' of the self. This is in keeping with the form of omniscience Tokarczuk envisions in the lecture, characterised by an embodied perception of the 'omni'-level.

Another way of approaching this question is to ask what purpose empathy or identification serves. Does it offer real insight into the joys and the suffering of others, allowing the self to treat them with care? Or does it end up perceiving the other only through the prism of the suffering self, 'consuming' its specificity through the correspondence of emotional pain?

A useful framework in which to consider these questions is that of 'consumption' itself. This is an idea that could hardly be more relevant to discussions of ecological fiction. 'Consumption' marks, on several different levels, the place where the self meets the world, where boundaries are revealed to be porous and everything to be everything else. It pertains, for instance, to the individual 'consumer' who is left in the deranged position of burning up the planet with each turn of a car key (or so fossil fuel companies would like us to think).¹¹⁹ In Chapter 1, we considered Ransmayr's image of scale derangement as a communion wafer laid on the tongue, allowing the universe to dissolve in the mouth (A 305). Consumption as a reminder of the porous boundaries of the self also drives the vital materialist resurgence of the idea that 'you are what you eat',¹²⁰ which MacAskill's preoccupation with Parfit's diet unwittingly recalls. Perhaps most importantly, however, consumption is one of the most fundamental ways in which we relate to other beings, an insight to which Duszejko's passionate vegetarianism attests. It is particularly telling, in this regard, that so many of the texts considered here as instances of identification refer to the plight of suffering animals, and use the language of slaughter, butchery and meat.

¹¹⁹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 151-2.

¹²⁰ Or, as Bennett puts it in a flourish of omni-rhetoric: 'Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: [...] you both are and are not what you eat' (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 49).

The sense that the opposite of domination and mastery would be identification beyond the self recurs across this composite corpus, but often in ways that come at the cost of the disappearance or dissolution of the subject, leaving no remainder, no position 'outside' the identification. Victim and perpetrator, human and animal become so mixed up as to be indistinguishable. This is the process enacted in *Strahlender Untergang*: the disintegration of 'der Weiße' [the white (man)], 'der Herr der Welt' [the master of the world], into a disembodied identification with various other subjects. The prose poem, we recall, offers a counter-image to the old Enlightenment science of measurement and data in the form of the 'neue Wissenschaft' [new science, *SU* 16]. The experiment proposed by the new science – without measurements or observation – is to leave a 'Protagonist' [protagonist, *SU* 21] to die of thirst in an artificial 'terrarium' in the desert, in order for the subject to experience 'das Wesentliche' [the essential, *SU* 16]: self-identity. In the moment of his disappearance, the protagonist will finally be able to say: 'Ich bin es, | ich, | der da untergeht' [It is I, | I, | who am perishing, *SU* 19].

As the protagonist dehydrates in the terrarium, however, he experiences disjointed visions from the past that he can no longer place. In one scene, a 'Sommergast' [summer guest] has his idyll interrupted by a stray ball, and lashes out in anger at the group of 'Ballspielern' [ball players]; 'war ich der Sommergast,' the protagonist muses, 'oder ein Ballspieler?' [Was I the summer guest, or a ball player?, *SU* 52]. In other memories, he is involved in animal and human testing for a cosmetics company, testing sunscreen on the skin of slaughtered pigs and the inmates of an Arizona prison: 'Auch Schweine haben wir geschlachtet [...] | Und in Arizona | haben wir Häftlingen bedeutet, | sich in die Sonne zu legen' [We also slaughtered pigs (...) | And in Arizona | we instructed prisoners to lie down in the sun, *SU* 59]. In the closing stanzas, the protagonist at first appears to reach the promised moment of clarity, recalling his place in the first memory: 'Jetzt weiß ich wieder, | daß *ich* der Sommergast war' [Now I remember | that *I* was the summer guest, *SU* 60; emphasis in original]. This certainty of identity is immediately undercut, however, by a diffuse expansion of this 'Ich' into slaughterer and slaughtered, tester and subject: 'Ich war auch der Häftling, | das Schwein | und der Schlachter' [I was also the prisoner, | the pig | and the slaughterer, *SU* 60].¹²¹ This is a peculiar conclusion to an experiment designed to

¹²¹ The German word 'Schlachter', which means literally 'slaughterer', is also the word for butcher.

allow its subject to be able to say 'Ich bin es, | ich, | der da untergeht [...] Ich, und dann nichts mehr' [It is I, | I, | who am perishing here (...) I, and then nothing more, *SU* 19; 36]. If, as Leahy argues, *Strahlender Untergang* bears resemblances to Kafka's penal colony, then the similarity may be seen to lie in the malfunctioning of each elaborate experiment.¹²² The Officer of Kafka's story, having held forth at length about the transcendent effects of the Apparat, attempts to submit himself to the procedure, but is dispatched in a manner that contrasts markedly with what he has described. The attempt at self-identity in the terrarium, too, appears to have gone awry; insofar as the subject can say 'I' in his final moments, it is an 'I' of multidirectional identification.¹²³

This 'I', that is, disintegrates in the moment it sees itself in others. This malfunction of selfhood is not unlike the more extended fragmentation in the desert we witnessed in the case of Franza. Repeatedly, Franza looks in at other suffering beings and sees only herself looking out. She is, on one reading, the polar opposite of the omniscient impulse, in that she identifies with all its victims, in categories of gender, class and species. After seeing a woman bound and gagged in a train station in Cairo, held by her plaited hair as though on a leash, Franza thinks: 'Immer wird hier die Frau sein, [...] ich bin die Frau geworden, das ist es' [The woman will always be here (...) I have become the woman, that's what it is, *TA* 459].¹²⁴ If the captive woman resembles a trussed-up animal, earlier in the text, Franza had seen herself in – and through – the eyes of a camel slaughtered at a wedding feast: 'Das Kamel, sie hatten das Kamel getötet. Ich weiß, wie ich aussehe' [The camel, they had killed the camel. I know how I look], she thinks. 'Ich sehe aus wie das Kamel, das mich ansieht' [I look like the camel that's looking at me, *TA* 440]. This moment in *Das Buch*

¹²² Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 108.

¹²³ Leahy, by contrast, reads *Strahlender Untergang* as the story of an experiment gone right. Rather than being designed to yield new knowledge, she points out – the approach of the 'alte Wissenschaft' [old science] – the aim and outcome of this test is verification of what is already known: 'there is to be a fusion of the dying man's experience with what has been foretold for him. And in that fusion of experience and a foretold plot, *das Wesentliche* – identity – comes into being' (Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 102). Rather than a breakdown in the manner of the 'Penal Colony', Leahy argues that 'in place of Kafka's disjunction, there is a "coming true" with no remainder, or no difference' (Ibid, 109). While I opt for a different reading of the text here, Leahy's interpretation in terms of narrative and its remainders is crucial in informing much of the analysis that follows.

¹²⁴ In terms of the destabilising of perspective, this moment in the text is also notable for playing out in microcosm the dynamic between Jordan and Franza, which in today's parlance would be termed gaslighting. When Franza protests to bystanders that the behaviour of the male captor is unhinged, exclaiming: 'er ist wahnsinnig' [he's insane], one of them grins and retorts: 'Nicht er ist verrückt. Sie ist wahnsinnig' [It's not him that's crazy. She's insane, *TA* 459].

Franza highlights a connection that is ubiquitous in our texts: the correspondence between the plight of slaughtered animals, women within patriarchal structures, and other forms of systematic violence. This connection is also hinted at in the prisoner-slaughterer-pig complex of Ransmayr's dehydrating protagonist. At the same time, Franza's thoughts crystallise some of the difficulties – narrative and otherwise – inherent in construing identification as the impulse that might serve to counteract omnicide.

The connection between the suffering of animals and forms of human suffering, especially those arising from entrapment or imprisonment, can be found throughout almost all of the texts at hand. We have already seen how the plan for 'Reports on Infamy' in *Flights* seems to mirror Bachmann's *Todesarten* project, and how the raccoon in *Austerlitz* reflects the imprisonment 'in [einer] falschen Welt' [in a wrong/unreal world] of the displaced protagonist.¹²⁵ In *Die letzte Welt*, Tereus, the butcher, is also Philomela's captor and abuser; he is opposed by the figure of Pythagoras, a Duszejko-esque vegetarian figure who 'hielt vor dem Schlachthaus Ansprachen über die Schande der Fleischfresserei, bis Tereus ihn [...] mit Schafsherzen und Gedärmen bewarf' [held forth in front of the slaughterhouse about the abomination of meat eating, until Tereus pelted him with intestines and sheep hearts, *LW* 223]. This is the vision of the butcher or hunter as 'master of the world' that the dark humour of *Drive Your Plow* turns on its head, allowing the vegetarian preacher to slay the hunters with a bag of meat. In contrast to the strangely Cartesian form of reincarnation we encountered in MacAskill, Pythagoras's vegetarianism is informed by a 'tender' vision of metamorphosis as reincarnation – he 'behauptete, in

¹²⁵ The animals at the beginning of *Austerlitz* are also brought into close proximity with human victims of colonialism through the narrator's mixed-up memories of the nocturama and the Antwerp railway station built in honour of Leopold II, which blur into one in his mind. The narrator imagines that the railway station should have cages with lions and leopards, and aquariums of fish, built into its niches and walls, an image that stands alongside the real statue of an African child built onto the station façade 'als ein Denkmal der afrikanischen Tier- und Eingeborenenwelt' [As a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of Africa (Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 12-13)]. In his controversial essay 'Luftkrieg und Literatur' ['On the Natural History of Destruction'; literally 'Air War and Literature'], Sebald argues that descriptions of the firebombing of Dresden often focused on the suffering of zoo animals over human victims, since the pain of the latter would be so overwhelming to the reader as to cause repression; in this way, the 'psychological mechanism of trauma-induced censorship' could be bypassed (Christian Moser, 'The Anatomy of Torture: W. G. Sebald and the Representation of the Agonized Body', *The Germanic Review* 87.1, 68). 'Domestic or zoo animals,' Christian Moser argues, are 'especially suited to serving as such a medium of representation [...]: They are familiar enough to arouse our empathy, but they are also alien enough to prevent our empathy from triggering the psychological mechanism of repression' (Ibid). This is the opposite of the move made by Duszejko, who attempts to restore the 'absent referent' of suffering animals through the shock tactic of comparing them to concentration camp inmates (*DYP* 111).

den Augen von Kühen und Schweinen den Blick verlorener, verwandelter Menschen ebenso zu erkennen wie im Gestarre eines betrunkenen Erzkochers schon das Lauern eines Raubtiers' [claimed to see in the eyes of cows and pigs the gaze of forlorn, metamorphosed humans, and the lurking of a beast of prey in the stare of a drunken smelter, *LW* 223].¹²⁶ *Strahlender Untergang* ends with an image derived from a 'weiße Schlachterschürze' [white butcher's apron, *SU* 60], recalling the significance of the Whites in *Franza* and pre-empting motifs of whiteness in *Der Fallmeister*. Chapter 2 gave us the vivid examples of Rotpeter and Gould, the latter of whom begins to recognise his own plight in the fish he kills and paints in service of reports to an academy, until he himself seeks the 'way out' of becoming one of them. The novel begins, we recall, with Sid Hammet discovering the '*Book of Fish*' inside a 'meat safe' in a junk shop (*GB* 12). This recognition is continued in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, when the prisoner-of-war Darky Gardiner becomes consumed by the thought of the fish he used to enjoy eating at his favourite chipper in Hobart: 'You know, Darky said, as he lay there in the wet darkness of the jungle floor, I always think of those poor bloody fish. [...] I never thought how that's their prison, Darky Gardiner said. Their camp. And I feel sick now thinking about those poor bloody fish in Nikitaris's tank' (*NR* 230-1). Here, the problem of identification as consuming and being consumed comes into view. While the killing and consumption of animals can provide a salient image for – and literal parallel to – other forms of violence, in narrative terms, this often requires that the protagonist themselves be in some way consumed by the comparison.

The connection between the slaughter of animals and patriarchy, in particular, has been established by an extensive body of scholarship. The most prominent example is Carol J. Adams's landmark study *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, first published in 1990 and updated each decade since with new materials demonstrating one of Adams's central theses: that there is an intimate link between the way women and meat are represented in Western

¹²⁶ The vision of metamorphosis as reincarnation is what recommends Pythagoras as a forebear to Ovid, who includes him as a character in the last book of *Metamorphoses*. Stuart Tristram notes the connection between reincarnation and vegetarianism in pointing to the 'extraordinary coincidence that roughly contemporaneous seminal Eastern and Greek philosophers, the Buddha and Pythagoras, both taught [...] that it was wrong for people to eat animals' (Stuart Tristram, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* [London: Harper Press, 2006], 41; cf. *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies*, 34).

culture, including between meat marketing and pornography.¹²⁷ This connection can be found in the ‘cycle of objectification, fragmentation and consumption’ that ‘links butchering with both the representation and reality of sexual violence’.¹²⁸ Like Le Guin – as we will see in the epilogue – Adams draws on a long tradition of feminist writing that includes Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, which she quotes to the effect that ‘scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not us’.¹²⁹ Adams’s central concern, however, is with restoring what she calls the ‘absent referent’: the real, experiencing animal made absent in the act of butchering it into parts; in the use of different language for meat than for living animals; and in the use of both meat and animals for the purposes of metaphor.¹³⁰ Both sides of her argument – the metaphor and the real experience – help to elucidate the problems with identification as it occurs in the literary texts.

In *Todesarten* and in much of Bachmann’s other writing, the symbolic links between women and animals – and between animals and other victims – are impossible to overlook. ‘Unter Mördern und Irren’, as we saw in Chapter 3, opens with the archetype of men as hunters, and with a condensed image for their victims: ‘das blaue Wild’ [the blue deer, *E* 159]. At the same time, the story makes clear that it is not concerned with literal hunters or literal deer; rather, these serve as symbolic illustrations for the problems Bachmann really wishes to address. The hunters and deer here bear the same relation to those of *Drive Your Plow* as *Todesarten* does to ‘Reports on Infamy’, with the Bachmann texts setting up a complex of metaphors that the Tokarczuk versions seek to literalise. This is the first problem with identification as a counterbalance to omnicide: namely, the problem of its ethics.

¹²⁷ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2010). Adams regularly updates her website with recent illustrations of her argument from popular and online culture. <<https://caroljadams.com/examples-of-spom>> [Accessed 3rd February 2023].

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66-7. Interestingly, Adams’s second example of how animals are rendered into ‘absent referents’ in the production of meat – through language – does not apply in German. In English, Adams points out, ‘when we eat animals we change the way we talk about them, for instance, we no longer talk about baby animals but about veal or lamb’ (*Ibid.*). This is often not the case in German, where the same word, ‘Fleisch’, is used for both ‘flesh’ and ‘meat’, and meat is often transparently named: pork is ‘Schweinefleisch’ [pig flesh], veal is ‘Kalbfleisch’ [calf flesh] and so on. Adams’s second example, ‘lamb’, reveals that even in English this ‘definitional’ feature of meat is sporadic.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Franza's apparent excess of identification – her 'multidirectional' conception of victimhood – has been the subject of critical scrutiny. When she sees herself in camp inmates and camels, in captive women and Indigenous Australians, Franza runs the risk of her own pain consuming the reality of the other, who ceases to exist except as a manifestation of her own victimhood. An awareness of this effect is hinted at it in the women of 'Unter Mördern und Irren' [Among Murderers and Madmen], confined to domestic despair while their husbands talk and opine and narrate; in their frustration and resentment, they sink into daydreams of their husbands dying, crying at first for this imagined (and desired) loss until they 'beweinten endlich sich selber. Sie waren angekommen bei ihren wahrhaftigsten Tränen' [finally cried for themselves. They had arrived at their truest tears, *E* 160]. This is also the version of empathy perceived by Laura Wright in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, whose protagonist Marian becomes vegetarian for a while as a reaction against the restriction of marriage, but eventually makes a full 'recovery': 'In other words, she feels for the cow insofar as the cow is an entity onto which she projects her own helplessness. Her empathy for the cow [...] is rather a displaced empathy for herself as she works to repress her uncertainty about marriage and motherhood; that empathy doesn't extend to actual cows and their vulnerability and suffering in the service of being rendered meat'.¹³¹

The texts with which Wright juxtaposes *The Edible Woman*, on the other hand, highlight the trap that lies in the opposite direction. When not being fed by the suffering of others, identification can itself consume the subject, leaving no remainder. Adams, who has also analysed Atwood's novel, emphasises the changed form of its 'vegetarian' section – noting that 'both meat eating and first-person narration are suspended once Marian intuits her link to other animals, suggesting that a challenge to meat eating is linked to an attack on the sovereign individual subject' – and posits that 'the fluid, merged subjectivity of the middle part of the book finds mystical identity with things, especially animals, that are consumed'.¹³² In Wright's analysis, this breakdown of the subject takes the form of bodily withdrawal and disappearance. She considers Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (*채식주의자*, 2007; trans. Deborah Smith, 2015), in which the protagonist Yeong-hye's

¹³¹ Laura Wright, 'Veganism and Disordered Eating', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies*, ed. Laura Wright and Emelia Quinn (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 176.

¹³² Adams, 'Veganism and Women's Writing', 49.

sudden act of passive resistance in refusing meat is followed by a gradual retreat into starvation, privation and pathology. By the end of the novel, Yeong-hye is committed to hospital and believes that she needs only sunlight to survive, as she is becoming a plant; the novel leaves both the literal, magical realist interpretation and the pathological reading open. More generally, however, *The Vegetarian* demonstrates a difficulty that could not be more relevant to readings of *Todesarten*; namely, that ‘the link between veganism and insanity for women is impossible to navigate’, with the renunciation of meat-eating often appearing as ‘the first step towards mental illness and possibly death for women who feel they have no other option but to starve to avoid inscription within the patriarchy’.¹³³

The second problem of identification as consumption, then – and a central difficulty it presents for narrative – is the problem of disappearance. We came up against a version of this problem in Chapter 3, with the extreme and seemingly inexorable outcomes of Bachmann’s *Todesarten* on one hand, and Ransmayr’s ‘Geschichten vom Töten’ [stories of killing] on the other. In playing out patterns and systems of violence, these texts demand that events take their course according to the logic of what they are portraying: the logic of mastery, or of murder. In Franza’s case, this logic demands that she must die, and must disappear from the narrative except in the incomplete memory of her brother Martin. The same is true, to an extent, of Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian*: she, too, is viewed only through the eyes of her small-minded husband; her brother-in-law, who develops a sexual fascination with her; and finally her sister, who witnesses her apparent decline towards a death of starvation. Yeong-hye’s deterioration is, in many ways, a Bachmann-esque development: the reactions of those around her to her decision to stop eating meat determine the course it takes, reflecting the insight that individual acts of privation are not only self-inflicted.¹³⁴ Yeong-hye and Franza both become lost in identification with others in ways that dissolve the boundaries of their selfhood, carrying symptoms on their own bodies of ills arising elsewhere. The fundamental difficulty their identification creates,

¹³³ Wright, ‘Veganism and Disordered Eating’, 168-9.

¹³⁴ I am grateful to Caitríona Leahy for this observation about Bachmann’s work. Wright’s argument that literary representations of vegetarianism and veganism are frequently read as pathological in the case of female characters, meanwhile – as opposed to the dietary restrictions of male characters like Kafka’s hunger artist, associated ‘with passion, with art, and with the plight of being misunderstood and mistranslated’ – echoes the discussion of depression and its cultural constructions through the figure of Duszejko above (Wright, ‘Veganism and Disordered Eating’, 169).

then, is the difficulty that preoccupies Leahy throughout her discussion of Bachmann's work in *Der wahre Historiker*: the problem of how to narrate disappearance.

As so often before, the moment of identification as dissolution of the self that we saw in *Strahlender Untergang* contains a striking echo of a *Todesarten* text. Where almost the last thing to go through the mind of Ransmayr's protagonist is the realisation of being 'das Schwein | und der Schlachter' [the pig | and the butcher, *SU* 59], Bachmann's first sketches for what would have become the second book of *Todesarten* – first published as the fragment *Requiem für Fanny Goldmann* [*Requiem for Fanny Goldmann*] in 1978, and recently re-edited as *Das Buch Goldmann* [*The Book of Goldmann*, 2017] – centre on an almost identical image. The protagonist, Fanny, is reeling from the publication of a novel by her former lover, the writer Anton Marek, who has openly used her life and their relationship as material, complete with crucial distortions and omissions. Her response is doubly couched in the language of consumption: through identification with butchered animals on the one hand, and her own consumption of Marek's text on the other. Reading the novel, she is overcome with the sensation that her life has been

»ausgeschlachtet« [...], ja es heißt ausgeschlachtet, so heißt es [...] er hatte sie ausgeweidet, hatte aus ihr Blutwurst und Braten und alles gemacht, er hatte sie geschlachtet sie war geschlachtet auf 386 Seiten in einem Buch, [...] diese Schande, daß sie hier geschlachtet, gekocht und geräuchert worden war, wie ein Schwein.

Sie dachte aber auch, du Schwein, er war ein Schwein, das war das einzigen Wort, das sie für ihn fand [...] ihr Schlächter, den sie Schwein nannte, obwohl sie das Tier war, das er geschlachtet hatte.¹³⁵

['butchered' (...), yes they call it butchered, that's what it's called (...) he had gutted her, had made blood sausage and roast and everything out of her, he had slaughtered her she was slaughtered over 386 pages in a book, (...) this disgrace, that she had been butchered, cooked and smoked here, like a pig.

¹³⁵ Bachmann, *Das Buch Goldmann* 16-17; cf. *TA* 515.

But she also thought, you pig, he was a pig, that was the only word she could think of for him (...) her butcher, whom she called a pig, although she was the animal that he had slaughtered].

In this version of dissolving boundaries, Fanny's identification with a butchered animal coincides with the disappearance of her own life into narrative. In line with Adams's analysis of objectification and fragmentation, Fanny has been rendered into parts – 'die geselchte Wurst, das rohe Blut, die Keule' [the smoked sausage, the raw blood, the haunch] – which all obscure the reality of her experience.¹³⁶ It is Marek who 'das alles afaß und sich nährte von ihr' [ate all of it up and nourished himself from her]; and yet the form this consumption takes is indirect, resulting in a by-product – his book – which robs Fanny of her life. Her experiences 'standen alle da, und immer durch ihren Mund und nun durch seinen Mund, nein, [...] durch seine Buchstaben standen sie da, und sie war geraubt, ausgeraubt [...], wo war ihr Leben, hier war es' [were all there, and always through her mouth and now through his mouth, no, (...) through his letters they were there, and she was robbed, everything stolen (...), where was her life, here it was].¹³⁷ This appears as a different take on Gözl's analysis of indexicals in Chapter 2, giving it a further twist. It is not just through the act of reading that Fanny is 'here' only in Marek's text, but also through his method of fragmenting her life and writing it down. This way of dying, then, begins with the question of what it means to turn things into narrative, and who might be capable of doing so responsibly. Just as Gould's book causes the deaths of the real fish whose image it preserves – a circumstance that begins to trouble him deeply – Marek's book, with far less tenderness, destroys Fanny's life in the service of something else. Through the book, Fanny's life becomes material for wider consumption, matter even she herself is compelled to chew on: 'sie kaute es wieder mit den Augen. Sie kaute jedes einzelne Wort [...] Sie konnte hier wiederlesen, wiederkäuen, wie sie [...] gelebt hatte' [she chewed it again with her eyes. She chewed each individual word (...) She could read here again,

¹³⁶ Ibid, 17; cf. *TA* 515-16.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 16; cf. *TA* 514-15.

ruminare over, how she (...) had lived].¹³⁸ Fanny's self is lost, doubly consumed: she can attempt to find her way back to it only through another round of identification.

Appropriately enough, given the considerations this chapter began with, the word that occurs to Fanny for the book which is also her life and flesh is 'Bibel' [Bible]. She is, she thinks, the 'Lamm Gottes' [Lamb of God], who has been slaughtered 'auf 386 Seiten Bibel' [over 386 pages of Bible], while Marek, 'der Bibelschreiber, der Passionsschilderer' [the Bible writer, the Passion depicter], has achieved success 'mit der Schlachtung, dem Ölberg und dem Essigschwamm' [with the slaughter, the Mount of Olives and the vinegar sponge].¹³⁹ This motif of the passion and its transmission draws together both strands of identification as consumption outlined above. On the one hand, we have the 'absent referent' of animals as 'the first metaphor', the sense in which 'Lamm Gottes' [Lamb of God] is meant here.¹⁴⁰ For Leahy, this version of the relationship between metaphor and its 'real', absent referent is crystallised in the Eucharist as interpreted literally (in Catholicism) or figuratively (in the Protestant tradition). The issue raised by this interpretative difference, Leahy points out, is 'very often a feature of interpretations and depictions of metamorphosis': its 'proximity to the discourse of the aesthetic (symbolism, metaphor, etc.), and the way in which the aesthetic "steps in" to provide explanation (reason, *Grund*) when the means by which we verify the real [...] is inadequate'.¹⁴¹ The 'metamorphosis' at issue here, in other words, is a question of direction: of whether we read animals 'away' from themselves, in aesthetic association with something else, or use their metaphorical connection with human victims to direct empathy back towards them. Tokarczuk's Reporter on Infamy had offered a more literal reading of the 'Lamm Gottes', holding up the triptych *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* as supposed proof that 'the true God is an animal' (F 73-4), while Duszejko is also buffeted back and forth between the Lamb and flesh of God as symbol and as material while she sits in a Catholic Mass:

¹³⁸ Ibid, 15. This is another instance of German appearing more 'literal' or transparent than English: 'wiederkäuen' [ruminare] recognisably means 'chew again'. The word Bachmann uses for 'chewing' [käuen] is a deviation from the standard 'kauen', possibly to make this connection even clearer.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 17; 19; 18.

¹⁴⁰ Berger, *About Looking*, 5.

¹⁴¹ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 112.

‘O Lamb of God...’ the words thundered overhead, and I heard a strange noise, a faint thudding sound from all directions – it was people beating their own chests as they prayed to the Lamb. [...]

I couldn't stop wondering what they had in their bellies. What they had eaten today and yesterday, whether they had already digested the ham, whether the Chickens, Rabbits and Calves had already gone through their stomachs yet. [...]

Father Rustle was now coming along the railing, accompanied by an altar boy, feeding them their next bit of meat, this time in symbolic form, but nevertheless meat, the body of a living Being.

It occurred to me that if there really was a Good God, he should appear now in his true shape, as a Sheep, Cow or Stag, and thunder in a mighty tone (*DYP* 234).

In Kafka's logic of literalised metaphors in *Die Verwandlung*, Gregor Samsa is precisely *not* a sacrificial lamb, but rather an 'Ungeziefer' [vermin], meaning literally 'an unclean animal [...] unfit to be sacrificed';¹⁴² nonetheless, amid the Christlike imagery of his demise and the mystery of where his remains have wound up, one of the few hints is a 'Fleischergeselle' [butcher's boy] ascending the staircase.¹⁴³ Darcy Gardiner, too, is a Christ figure whose drawn-out public torment at the hands of camp guards is the death which *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* circles around, and attempts to transmute into meaning, including in Dorrigo's own written testimony as witness (*NR* 25-6). As Liliana Zavaglia points out, the association of Christ with the fish as symbol is attached to Darcy from early in the text, when we first meet him 'sitting [...] in an opulent armchair that was upholstered in blue silk brocaded with silver fish', throwing Dorrigo 'a tin of Portuguese sardines'; his kitbag 'seemed only half the size of anyone else's, but from it appeared a seemingly inexhaustible supply of foodstuffs and cigarettes—traded on the black market, foraged or stolen—small miracles that had led to his earning his other name of the Black Prince' (*NR* 35).¹⁴⁴ The symbolic association is later made literal, however, in his empathy for the fish in Nikitaris's tanks, which his surviving comrades eventually liberate and throw into the sea in memory of him. By contrast, in Fanny's identification with slaughtered

¹⁴² Carolin Duttlinger, *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 34.

¹⁴³ Kafka, 'Die Verwandlung', 44.

¹⁴⁴ Zavaglia, 'Out of the tear-drenched land', 211. Zavaglia also argues that Darcy 'is often depicted as saintly. Like St. Francis of Assisi, he is associated with the patronage of animals', including 'empathis[ing] with the sodden monkeys in jungle downpours' (*ibid*; cf. *NR* 236).

animals, the value does not migrate across the equation in this way, staying instead on the side of the associative and symbolic.

At the same time, Fanny's status as a sacrifice, as an object to be fragmented and reconstituted into a book, aligns with this same associative prose, a hallmark of Bachmann's early *Todesarten* writings. As with the protagonist of *Strahlender Untergang*, whose thoughts echo hers, for Fanny, identification coincides with the loss of a stable self; if her identity roams around in search of images in which to moor itself, it is because Marek's book has destroyed her own understanding of who she is. Like Franza, trapped in the cage of Jordan's notes (TA 407), she identifies with other prisoners and other victims in the midst of her own annihilation. As Leahy writes of the first-person narrator of *Malina* – who tries and fails to rescue herself from disappearance by 'grounding' herself in texts such as 'the Christian *Passionsgeschichte*' [story of the passion] – 'to predicate the possibility of selfhood on a model of intersubjectivity makes for a potentially fatal vulnerability: one might be drowned rather than saved in the texts of others'.¹⁴⁵ Where Franza's suicide is legible to the reader not as an act freely undertaken, but rather as a form of murder at the hands of Jordan and the Whites, Fanny wishes for Marek to make her death at his hands literal and visible, so completely has it obliterated her sense of self: 'Jetzt wartete sie darauf, daß Marek sie ermordete, ja, das war es vor allem, was sie wünschte, er sollte [...] nun auch wirklich und sichtbar und nachweisbar den Mord an ihr [...] begehen, der für sie anders und früher in der Tat begangen war' [now she was waiting for Marek to murder her, yes, that above all was what she wanted, he should now really and visibly and demonstrably commit the murder which for her had in fact already been committed in a different form].¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

This elision of the gap between suicide and murder in the *Todesarten* texts brings us back to the questions of justice, and to the experience of depression, with which our reading of Duszejko began. Duszejko's 'Ailments', like Franza's 'Krankheit des Damals' [sickness of the past, TA 372], are perceived by those around her as evidence of an

¹⁴⁵ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 193-4.

¹⁴⁶ Bachmann, *Das Buch Goldmann*, 47.

oversensitive disposition. As the discussion has shown, however, these manifestations of ‘wounding knowledge’¹⁴⁷ are – at least in the literary texts at hand – not only reminders that experience is rooted in particular bodies, but are also symptomatic of the types of unjust system that were explored in Chapter 2. The question of how to represent this system level is one that has cropped up repeatedly throughout the thesis. This chapter has given us Ghosh’s idea of ‘omnicide’ as a concept that combines the overarching or underlying level of systems and paradigms, and the visible, narratable level of archetypes, such as that of the hunters. Through the figure of Mr Kurtz, we have seen how a recognisable villain can help to make systemic violence legible and recognisable, even if this involves setting up such characters only in order to subvert them.

While empathy and identification have appeared since Chapter 1 as affective forces that might counteract the fragmentation of the world into so many inert resources, the discussion of ‘tenderness’ here has shown that they carry their own inherent risks. Identification, in particular – when considered through the lens of ‘consumption’ – presents both the ethical problem of consuming the reality of the other, and the narrative problem of the self being consumed in acts of comparison, leaving no remainder.

Although Duszejko provides a useful case study for ideas of tenderness as embodied sensitivity, she does not quite fit the definition of the ‘tender narrator’ offered in Tokarczuk’s lecture. As we saw in the very first part of the chapter, the other crucial element of this ‘tender’ or ‘fourth-person’ narrator is omniscience: the kind that can take in ‘high viewing points and wide perspectives’, while remaining rooted in a particular selfhood, a particular ‘attitude’. The closest approximation of this viewpoint that can be found in Tokarczuk’s literary work comes to us through a figure we have not yet considered: that of Grandma Yente, through whose consciousness the events of the encyclopaedic novel *The Books of Jacob* (*Księgi Jakubowe*, 2014; trans. Jennifer Croft, 2021) are filtered. The entire narrative, spanning centuries and continents, is held together by Yente’s wizened body, which – with a Duszejko-esque defiance – refuses to die when it is supposed to. By contrast with the many texts considered so far which ultimately require the disappearance of the protagonist or subject, the epilogue will turn its attention to

¹⁴⁷ Seymour, ‘Satire’, 274.

Yente and other narrators who are figured as living remainders. In accordance with Le Guin's proposal for the New Story, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', these narrators appear as archetypal gatherers: as witnesses and survivors, who attempt to gather up and give voice to what is being lost.

Epilogue: Gathering

At base – as I am convinced – the writer’s mind is a synthetic mind that doggedly gathers up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together again to create a universal whole.

-Tokarczuk, ‘The Tender Narrator’, 17.

This thesis began with the phenomenon of the ‘omnium’: the will of contemporary fiction, in the light of a new ecological awareness, to be all-encompassing, to narrate everything, everywhere, all at once. Across its four chapters, we have encountered this drive towards comprehensiveness in an array of different forms. We have witnessed genesis after genesis, from the basic (nothing into everything) to the pensive (‘Why at the beginning of things is there always light?’ [NR 1]) via the meta (How should I start? With a genesis?) to the tender (‘And God saw that it was good’ [TN 21]). We have seen the universe implicit in a single seahorse, or dissolving on the tongue, or even making its way through the colon. We have admired an endless parade of never-ending books, compendiums, encyclopaedias and Bibles, and come face to face with “‘omnicide”, the desire to destroy everything’.¹ We have read books in which everyone turned out to be everyone else, and have been encouraged in turn to dissolve our reading selves into the ‘Everywhere Everyman’ (TN 5). We have ‘lived, in order of birth, through the life of every human being who has ever lived’, and viewed the history of life on earth as the events of a single day.² We have heard a litany of all-consuming narrative principles, from ‘all things long to live, and the highest form of living is freedom’ (NR 303) to the simple, inarguable refrain of ‘keinem bleibt seine Gestalt’ [nothing retains its form, LW 99]. We have met characters who wish to bear witness to every crime, and to write ‘exhaustive volume[s]’, leaving nothing out (F 75).

¹ Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 75.

² MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, 3; Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, 703.

In between all of this all-ness, we have also heard repeatedly about something seemingly incompatible with the omni-level: the need for stories. Implicit in the manifestos for storytelling we have encountered is the understanding that stories should operate on a certain scale: that they depend on being comprehensible, rather than comprehensive. Stories need to give a face to the system, if only to take it away again, as we saw with Ghosh's use of Mr Kurtz. In order to counteract the forms of disenchantment that Ghosh, Le Guin and many others identify as the root cause of the climate crisis, we need stories that make meaning, but do not 'drown' us in it:³ a New Story, not an Overstory.

Ursula K. Le Guin's essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1986) is an older story than Tokarczuk's by some three decades. In my view, however, it is the strongest contender in this thesis for the role of the New Story that points the way out of the narrative desert of comprehensiveness, towards greener pastures. Part of the reason for this is that 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', as we shall see, has more to say to Tokarczuk's literary work than 'The Tender Narrator' does. Like Walter Benjamin's 'Der Erzähler' [The Storyteller], with its now-defunct 'grand grounding principle of *Naturgeschichte*' [the story of nature], the 'Carrier Bag Theory' is a story about stories – an attempt to tell 'the *story of storytelling*'.⁴ As opposed to Benjamin's characteristic lament for 'the well-nigh extinct *Erzähler*' [storyteller],⁵ however, Le Guin's essay is informed by the other great truism about stories in the ecocritical discourse: the idea that we (or, rather, 'die Männer' [the men, *E* 159]) have been telling the wrong story all along. This vision of the wrong story, told for the wrong reasons, was a crucial feature of the detective-criminal-storytellers we met in Chapter 3. Le Guin's essay envisages the end of this particular age-old storyteller, the type we saw sitting around the fire 'in der Nacht und der Wüste' [in the night and the desert, *E* 159] of Bachmann's Vienna. In her view, the sense that 'a certain kind of story is approaching its end' is not a cause for lament, but presents the possibility of a new beginning.⁶ 'Lest there be no more telling of stories at all', Le Guin writes, 'some of us here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished'.⁷

³ Powers, *The Overstory*, 4.

⁴ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 62; 57; emphasis in original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*

In this one short essay, Le Guin gathers together the key arguments of this thesis. As we saw in the introduction, she discusses gathering not only on a representational level, but also in terms of literary form. Le Guin's vision of the novel resembling 'a sack, a bag' offers a useful metaphor for composite forms, made up of bits and pieces; and yet, at the same time, it does not claim to be all-encompassing. The essay's portrayal of care, which chimes with the protagonists and narrators we met in Chapter 4, is extended via the metaphor of the bag to the objects of literary representation, anticipating Tokarczuk's idea of 'tenderness'. Le Guin understands the power of archetypes for making sense of complex systems, and knows that stories can be told not only to make meaning, but also to silence other voices: the voice of the other, and the quiet inner voice of the self. In its form as an origin story about origin stories, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' recognises that scientific discourses like that of evolution are never neutral, but are filtered through cultural imaginations which direct them towards particular ends. Like Tokarczuk and Flanagan, Le Guin knows the power of humour, especially when faced with the most serious problems. Like Gözl, meanwhile, she is ready to ask the radical question: what if I just say no to your story? What if I turn away instead?⁸

In contrast to the female figures discussed at the end of Chapter 4 – the protagonists of Bachmann's *Todesarten*, as well as Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* – Le Guin does not seek to expose the systems built on 'the killer story' by imagining death or disappearance at their hands. Instead, she offers a genuine alternative in the guise of the gatherer. The gatherer of 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' builds on existing gendered tropes, including those of mothers and wise goddesses, but immediately departs from them, transforming them into something more original and more daring. Taking a closer look at this figure will thus allow us both to assemble the key insights of the thesis as a whole, and to suggest new points of departure.

⁸ Gözl suggests this move of 'turning away' – one valence of her concept of the 'apostrophe' – as the other manner in which readers can reject a textual apparatus, along with 'catastrophising' it, as we saw in Chapter 2. 'This turn away', she writes, 'is key to the poetics of certain strong women poets', foremost among them Ingeborg Bachmann (Sabine I. Gözl, 'Apostrophe's Double', *Konturen* 10 [2018], 22).

Bags

‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ arises, at the most basic level, from the argument that the first tool early hominids invented was probably not a weapon, but a bag or container. ‘Before’, Le Guin writes,

once you think about it, surely long before [...] the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool [...]; right along with the indispensable whacker, grinder and digger – for what’s the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug ones you can’t eat home in – with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. It makes sense to me. I am an adherent of what [Elizabeth] Fisher calls the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution.⁹

As with the re-framing of evolution in terms of symbiosis rather than competition discussed in Chapter 1, with reference to the ‘postmodern synthesis’ proposed by Lynn Margulis, this simple scientific hypothesis allows Le Guin to undertake a radical re-appraisal of the cultural status quo. The essay begins by transporting us back to ‘the temperate and tropical regions where it appears that hominids evolved into human beings’.¹⁰ This opening move signals a logic of tracing effects all the way back to their earliest possible causes, in search of a true point of origin. It represents, in Bachmann’s terms, a search for ‘das erste’ [the first thing]. Chapter 3 touched on the significance of this type of origin story through the image of male storytellers gathered around a primeval fire, on their hunt for the blue deer. These storytellers, as we saw, were all the while ‘unterwegs zu sich’ [on the way to themselves], suggesting that they were stuck in a loop, that the stories they had been telling since and about ‘the beginning’ could only ever lead them back to where they are now. The discourse of the ‘Anthropocene’, meanwhile, is itself extremely concerned with the search for an origin story. An almost ubiquitous move in discussions of the concept is to begin by suggesting a range of possible start dates for this unprecedented new era, extending backwards from the Great Acceleration of the

⁹ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

postwar era to the birth of agriculture in Ancient Mesopotamia, as suggested by Morton and *Der Fallmeister*. This drive to 'wieder und wieder | nach einem Punkt such[en], | an dem alles anfang' [again and again | search for a point | at which everything began, *SU* 47] suggests an almost desperate hope that if we could only identify where exactly everything went wrong, we would know how far to backtrack in order to set it right. At the same time, the compulsion to name a start date for the epoch of the Anthropocene recalls one of the central problems of Chapter 1: the recognition that what we are suffering from is not a 'deficit of information'.¹¹ Instead, what appears to be missing is a translation of this knowledge into affect, and from there into effects, via a change of state within the reader.

Repeatedly, we have been faced with the thorny question of how this change is to be brought about. One option that has accompanied us throughout the thesis is that of representing or inducing guilt. In Chapter 1, we considered Sebald's raccoon in his 'falsche Welt' [wrong/unreal world] as an image of the ecological wrong life that Clark terms 'Anthropocene horror'. This sensation of inhabiting 'a context of latent environmental violence and feeling personally trapped in its wrongs'¹² was driven to extremes in Chapter 3, where character triads and patterns of narrative mirroring encouraged the reader to consider whether they themselves were the allegorical cli-fi criminal. And yet guilt, as Morton argues – and as Ransmayr's 'societies of penitence' appear to imply – is part and parcel of the age-old religious doctrines that have led us here, in part by encouraging a view of nature, including one's own, as a 'dominion' to be subdued. Nicole Seymour, meanwhile, has highlighted the relationship between earnestness, guilt and the self-blindness of Western environmentalists, who alienate would-be allies with expressions of tone-deaf moralism.

What Le Guin's essay recognises, by contrast, is that critiques work best when accompanied by an alternative story to root for. Unlike Powers, Le Guin also realises that it is often more effective to undercut than overbear. Her origin story does begin with knowledge: with the fact that, while 'the mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave

¹¹ Campbell et al., 'Climate Change is Not a Problem', 729. We have also seen how Timothy Clark – on a related note that is perhaps relevant to this search for an origin – highlights ecocriticism's fondness for a 'fallacy to which much academic life is prone: that of ascribing most problems and ills of the world to some sort of intellectual mistake or set of false assumptions' (Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, 131).

¹² Clark, 'Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror', 62.

wall and the mind, [...] what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits and grains', along with 'netting or snaring' birds, fish 'and other tuskless small fry'.¹³ This form of subsistence, she points out, required only about 15 hours of work per week.¹⁴ Le Guin builds on these scientific insights (the knowledge) to draw the same types of connections identified by Ghosh (the story), which she presents with the wry humour championed by Tokarczuk and Seymour. Rather than being 'das Wesentliche' [the essential, *SU* 16] – as the cave man image of evolution seen in *2001: A Space Odyssey* suggests – mammoth hunting appears here as an inexplicable excess, an early expression of omnicide. Anticipating the smugly mediocre men about town who make up the hunting club in *Drive Your Plow*, Le Guin posits that maybe it was 'the restless ones who didn't have a baby around to enliven their life, or skill in making or cooking or singing, or very interesting thoughts to think' who 'decided to slope off and hunt mammoths'.¹⁵ Those who succeeded came back with useful extracted resources, of course – 'a load of meat, a lot of ivory' – but also with a tale of triumph. 'It wasn't the meat that made the difference,' Le Guin argues, 'It was the story'.¹⁶

The story the mammoth hunters tell, in Le Guin's vision, is the same story that the literary and theoretical texts discussed here have revealed and opposed since Chapter 2: the 'Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero'.¹⁷ As with the concepts of archetypes, correspondences or 'multidirectionality', the story has many different iterations, but is always a manifestation of the same underlying assumptions. It starts out as the hunting tale of 'how Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain', and metastasises into the story of 'how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man'.¹⁸ Le Guin suggests that it was this story, which 'not only has Action', but also has 'a Hero', that gave rise to and upheld a certain understanding of evolution, and not the other way around.¹⁹ The view of evolution in question is the one

¹³ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27; 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

Le Guin perceives in the phallic match-cut of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which centres all of human history around 'the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things'.²⁰



Fig. 5.1: Match-cut from *2001: A Space Odyssey*

The key characteristics of Le Guin's gatherer figure are best shown in contrast not only with the 'Ape Man' of Kubrick's film,²¹ but also with some of the other origin stories that have featured in our discussion. The ease with which the mammoth hunter theory of storytelling trips off the tongue can be seen, for instance, in Ransmayr's introduction to his 2018 book of 'Dankereden' [award acceptance speeches]. Like Le Guin, Ransmayr begins with a jump back to the palaeolithic era. 'Versuchen wir das Unmögliche', he writes, 'und versetzen uns in einen mehr als eine Milliarde zurückliegenden spätherbstlichen Nachmittag der Altsteinzeit im südafrikanischen Bergland' [Let us attempt the impossible, and transport ourselves back to a late autumn afternoon of the Old Stone Age in the South African mountains, more than a million years ago].²² Much like Le Guin's proposal that a novel is a 'medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us', Ransmayr's story imagines stories themselves as 'Arznei gegen das

²⁰ Ibid, 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 9.

Zugrundegehen, Kraut für die Sterblichkeit' [medicine to prevent perishing, a salve for mortality].²³ Where Le Guin's essay challenges the centrality of male hunters within the act of storytelling, however, Ransmayr's story upholds it. The description of the stories as medicine is uttered by one of the women who, along with children, 'umring[en]' [encircle] this 'von Narben übersäter Mann' [man covered in scars].²⁴ This dovetails with Le Guin's view of the mammoth hunter as an early instantiation of the Hero, an 'imperial' figure adept at centring himself and overlooking his own dependency.²⁵ 'Before you know it', she writes, 'the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his'.²⁶ Ransmayr's humorous touch, as mentioned in Chapter 3, is to transport this storyteller into a 21st-century context, where he finds himself in attendance at a literary awards ceremony. Ransmayr himself, that is – as the recipient of the award – is revealed as a closet cave man: 'Der Hochgelobte ist von Narben übersät, trägt nur ein Fell um die Hüften und stützt seine Hände auf eine Keule, an der schwarze Tränen zu sehen sind; getrocknetes Blut? [...] Er atmet flach, kaum merklich, ein Jäger' [The luminary is covered in scars, wears only a pelt around his hips and leans his hands on a club, on which black tears can be seen: dried blood? (...) He breathes shallowly, barely perceptibly, a hunter].²⁷ Here, the tale as old as time is reiterated and reinforced, rather than subverted: it was ever thus, and nothing looks likely to change.

For Robert Macfarlane, too, the experience of seeing prehistoric cave art is not so much an encounter with otherness – with the blue deer – but rather a recognition of the self, reaffirming its perpetuation across time. With the same undercurrent of awe and earnestness that Ransmayr brings to the topic, *Underland* ends with Macfarlane pressing his palm against that of his young son in imitation of the cave handprints he has seen, 'his skin strange as stone against mine'.²⁸

²³ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34; Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 11.

²⁴ Ransmayr, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit*, 9.

²⁵ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ Macfarlane, *Underland*, 425.

Where Macfarlane's vision turns skin back into stone, Le Guin's essay makes the opposite move: it works by taking the two-dimensional images down from the cave wall and fleshing them out. Here, the roles of gender and of perspective, which have been pivotal throughout the thesis, come into play. For Le Guin to imagine herself in this scene yields a completely different view than those of Ransmayr or Macfarlane. Like *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, as we saw in Chapter 4, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' names Virginia Woolf's feminist-pacifist treatise *Three Guineas* as its ancestor.²⁹ This helps to draw attention to how the humour of the essay works: it is achieved in large part by bringing more realism to the prehistoric scene than is ever afforded by Le Guin's male counterparts. The evidence showing that 'sixty-five to eighty percent of what human beings ate in those [...] times was gathered', Le Guin suggests, is overlooked primarily because

it is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats...³⁰

Le Guin's critique of the age-old story, that is, takes issue not only with its destructiveness, but also with its detachment from reality. This places her essay in opposition to the origin story of *Strahlender Untergang*, in which '[sich] ein Vieh | plötzlich | auf[richtete]' [a beast | suddenly | stood upright, *SU* 28]. We saw in Chapter 3 how this model recalls Judith Butler's insight that 'dependency is, as it were, written out of the picture of the original man',³¹ a critique which itself echoes Le Guin's riposte to *2001*, ending as it does with a 'lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all'.³² Not only does Ransmayr's prose poem bring the 'Herr der Welt' [master of the world] 'upright [...] without ever having been fed when he could not feed himself',³³ but it is also intent on disintegrating him into nothingness, leaving nothing behind but the text. This makes *Strahlender Untergang* a version of Leahy's idea, considered in Chapter 3, that the aesthetic consists partly in

²⁹ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27; ellipsis in original.

³¹ Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 37.

³² Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 29.

³³ Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 37.

processes of emptying out the world and filling it back in with the things you wish to pay attention to. It is also, as Leahy notes, a 'scientific' version of the death of Benjamin's storyteller, in which the storyteller himself must perish but is 'saved into the meaningfulness of being part of the story of how the world is – the story of indifference', a term Leahy aligns with 'Naturgeschichte' [the story of nature].³⁴ In keeping with the loss of this 'Naturgeschichte' outlined in the introduction, Le Guin's essay resists such an aesthetic in two different ways. It suggests that many of the writers and artists who have emptied out the world and filled it back in with those things they wish to pay attention to have picked the wrong objects, and failed to see beyond their own noses, such that Ransmayr can offer a grand all-consuming story of human history – from its origins to its end – in which not a single woman features. And, like Gölz, it rejects the authorial principle of the 'omni' as textual system, in which everything is consumed and all accounted for. Instead, Le Guin's essay is interested in what escapes attention: the remainder left out of the story, the piece that was overlooked.

There are parallels, here, to *Die Wand*, which is in many ways an attempt to tell the kind of story Le Guin describes above: a story of finding raspberry patches and planting potatoes, and attending to the everyday needs and moods of the beings around you.³⁵ Where Le Guin offers a feminist rejoinder to the conventional caveman scene, Haushofer's novel is a 'Robinsonade' whose tone and focus are changed utterly by being narrated from a female perspective. The narrator of *Die Wand*, as we saw in Chapter 4, is a survivor figure, a remainder left over after the self-destruction of the same Cold War system Le Guin opposes. On another level, her fate of waking up to find herself trapped behind an invisible wall is a literalisation of the condition of invisibility itself. The narrator's sense that her inner life cannot be perceived except by those who share her plight is part of the marginalisation that is finally made manifest in the appearance of the wall. This feature links Haushofer's narrator to Janina Duszejko, whose direct experience of age invisibility shapes the events of *Drive Your Plow*. In Tokarczuk's novel, the condition of invisibility is a factor of not slotting in with, or being of interest to, the dominant system – a circumstance which can be liberating as well as alienating, as we see with Duszejko and Le Guin.

³⁴ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 110.

³⁵ See for instance Haushofer, *Die Wand*, 85; 46. In literal terms, however, Haushofer's narrator is more an agriculturalist than a hunter-gatherer.

The link between Duszejko and Le Guin in terms of age helps to direct attention to the figuring of the gatherer as an archetype, a status that so far has been extended in this analysis only to victims (the blue deer) and to perpetrators (the hunters, the father, the whites). The narrator of Le Guin's essay represents something quite different. At first, like *Die Wand*, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' appears to support a 'maternalist-feminist' vision of care,³⁶ imagining hominid life before the invention of the bag through the practical problems of child-rearing. 'If you haven't got anything to put it in', she writes, 'food will escape you': there will be nothing to carry it home in, and thus nothing to 'give little Oom to make her shut up', forcing you to

get up and go to the damned soggy oat patch in the rain, and wouldn't it be a good thing if you had something to put Baby Oo Oo in so that you could pick the oats with both hands? A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container.³⁷

The narrator's eventual choice to 'turn away' from the killer story, too, is framed in these terms. Before hearing about the Carrier Bag Theory of evolution, she had never before felt 'grounded' in human culture, which seemed to be dominated by variations of 'bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing'.³⁸ This 'new story' allows her to turn away from the 'Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero', strolling off with the children instead:

I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about the sticks and spears and swords, [...] but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. [...]

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket. You just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel [...]³⁹

³⁶ Ní Dhúill, *Sex in Imagined Spaces*, 57.

³⁷ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 28-9.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 29; 32.

Here, we see enacted on a representational level what Götz proposes on the level of reading: that we ‘turn away’ from certain stories, that we refuse to be interpellated into texts and canons that wield enormous power and wish to continue doing so. This move is a way of acting on the suspicion, offered by Simone Weil via Ruth Klüger in Chapter 4, that ‘fast die ganze Belletristik’ [almost all of literature] has paid the wrong type of attention, or attended to the wrong things.⁴⁰ While Le Guin’s Stone Age avatar is a mother of young children, meanwhile, the narrator of this ‘turn away’ is closer to the author’s own voice and age at the time of writing. Duszejko, we remember, was dismissively associated with shopping bags through the epithet ‘old bag’ (*DYP* 35), and turned this perception back on the system both metaphorically – by taking advantage of the hunters’ readiness to underestimate her – and literally, through her choice of murder weapon. Le Guin, too, makes it clear that her peaceful evolutionary tool (the bag) is nonetheless a means of fighting the powers that be. She is ‘not an unaggressive or uncombative human being’, but ‘an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off’.⁴¹ Through images of this kind, Le Guin both evokes and subverts established tropes in ways that help to clarify the significance of the gatherer figure. Before turning to the subversion of these tropes – and their implications for questions of literary form – I will first suggest a mythological ancestor for Le Guin’s gatherer, in the shape of the goddess Isis. By comparing Isis to the narrator of Klüger’s memoir *weiter leben*, we can gain a clearer picture of the relationship between the gatherer figure and empathy, as opposed to identification.

Survivors

Bachmann’s *Das Buch Franza*, as we have seen, draws on a literary inheritance that includes the myth of Isis and Osiris. If someone were to search for an origin story for the characters and narrators I am concerned with here, they could do worse than the figure of Isis – at least in some of her many guises. In almost all versions of the myth, Isis is a gatherer and restorer of the fragmented body. After her brother Set, god of disorder, has killed her brother-lover Osiris and scattered his body all over Egypt, it is Isis who gathers up the pieces – except for the crucial phallus, which she crafts out of clay – and puts him back

⁴⁰ Klüger, *weiter leben*, 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

together again.⁴² In this iteration, Isis is a model of sorts for that other collector of body parts, Janina Duszejko, who goes around gathering animal remains in the hopes of resurrecting them. Like Duszejko, Isis is also a figure of mourning; her restoration of Osiris's body is viewed as a mythical basis for the funerary culture of mummies, whose tombs Franza cannot stand to see 'geschändet' [defiled, *TA* 436] by the Whites.⁴³ In the version of Isis immortalised in Plutarch's *Moralia*, this role of gathering bodies is matched by a role of collecting and restoring stories, including the goddess's own. Isis, Plutarch writes, is 'a goddess exceptionally wise and a lover of wisdom'; her nemesis, Set or Typhon, 'tears to pieces and scatters to the winds the sacred writings, which the goddess collects and puts together and gives into the keeping of those that are initiated into the holy rites'.⁴⁴

Here, Isis's status as a gatherer and healer of fragmented bodies is matched by her role of compiling and passing on stories and texts. In this way, she connects Duszejko to the chronicler of 'Reports on Infamy': where Duszejko wishes to collect the physical traces of animals and resurrect them in bodily form, the Reporter seeks to unearth and collate the fragments of their stories, leaving nothing out, and passes on this record to those she has chosen to initiate (*F* 75). As a compiler of sacred compendiums, Isis resembles both the Reporter on Infamy and the author of *Todesarten*; as a piecer-together of composite texts, she anticipates the contemporary authors we have been discussing. Perhaps most importantly, Isis as salvager of stories is motivated, in Plutarch's version, partly by the need to bear witness to her own suffering and lived experience. She is, Plutarch tells us,

not indifferent to the struggles which she had endured, nor to her own wanderings nor to her manifold deeds of wisdom and many feats of bravery, nor would she accept oblivion and silence for them, but she intermingled in the most holy rites portrayals and suggestions and representations of her experiences at that time, and sanctified

⁴² Bachmann, notably, inverts this gendered element of the myth: it is Franza who is fragmented, and whose puzzle pieces Martin must seek to put back together. The loss of Osiris's sex becomes, in Bachmann's rewriting, a dark allusion to the physical and psychological assaults Franza suffers. Among the drafts for the novel is the sentence: 'Ich habe kein Geschlecht, keines mehr, man hat es mir herausgerissen' [I have no sex, none anymore, it was torn from me, *TA* 476]. This exemplifies the contrast between the position of the *Todesarten* protagonists within the system and that of the Isis-like gatherers under discussion here.

⁴³ Importantly for the wider context of *Das Buch Franza*, this word – the root of which is the noun 'Schande' [disgrace] – is also used archaically to refer to sexual assault.

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. 5, trans. F.C. Babbitt (London: William Heinemann, 1936), 9.

them, both as a lesson in godliness and an encouragement for men and women who find themselves in the clutch of like calamities.⁴⁵

This is the Isis of Haushofer's narrator, who writes her 'Bericht' in the irrational hope that there may yet be someone left alive to read it; and it is also the Isis of a text which I believe can shed more light on the gatherer figure, and its relationship both to survival and to empathy: Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* [*Still Alive*, 1992].

Klüger was born just five years after her compatriot, Bachmann, and yet their works lie on opposite sides of a few significant divides. If, for Bachmann, the march of Hitler's troops into Klagenfurt was the event that 'shattered her childhood' – inducing 'das Aufkommen meiner ersten Todesangst' [the emergence of my first fear that I would die]⁴⁶ – she was nonetheless on the safe side of the racial boundaries constructed and policed by Nazi ideology. The same cannot be said of Klüger, who was deported from Vienna to Theresienstadt at the age of 10, and was to be interned in both Auschwitz and Christianstadt – an auxiliary camp of Groß-Rosen – before escaping a 'death march' with her mother in 1945. It is tempting, then, to ascribe the differences in approach and aesthetic between the two writers to this gulf between their experiences. Yet there is also another crucial difference between their lives and work, one which is less immediately obvious: where the Wunderkind Bachmann was to die at age 47, leaving behind a substantial body of unfinished work, her younger compatriot made her literary debut with *weiter leben* in 1992, when she was 61 years old. In certain respects, then, Klüger – whose public image is by default much 'older' than Bachmann's – belongs to the 'tardy masses' reckoning with the types of identification and self-narration *Todesarten* sets up.⁴⁷ Klüger's philosophy of comparison attends to the same correspondences we have seen in Bachmann's work – between patriarchy and fascism, and between the plight of concentration camp inmates, captive animals and other victims – but transposes them from a mode of identification and consumption into one of empathy, rooted in her own body.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 67.

⁴⁶ Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 111.

⁴⁷ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 19.

Like Bachmann, Klüger traces the links between different versions of contempt and mastery, and does not hesitate to connect them, even as she anticipates protest. Drawing together her experiences from before, during and after the war, she writes:

Erst hatte es die Verachtung der arischen Kinder für die jüdischen in Wien, danach die der tschechischen Kinder für die deutschen in Theresienstadt gegeben, jetzt die der Männer für Frauen. Diese drei Arten der Verachtung sind inkommensurabel, werdet ihr sagen, aber ich erlebte sie an mir selber, in der angegebenen Reihenfolge. Ich war das *tertium comparationis*, das Versuchskarnickel dieses Vergleichs, und darum stimmt er für mich.⁴⁸

[First there had been the contempt of the Aryan children for the Jewish children in Vienna, then that of the Czech children for the German children in Theresianstadt (Terezin), now that of men for women. These three types of contempt are incommensurable, you will all say, but I experienced them myself (literally: on my self), in the order I have given. I was the *tertium comparationis*, the guinea pig for this comparison, and so it is true for me].

This passage is typical of Klüger's authorial voice in several ways, drawing together her defence of comparisons with a conviction in the authority of her own experience, and communicating both in the half-barbed, half-humorous tone of a speaker who expects opposition but stubbornly refuses to be silenced. Some of the comparisons she chooses to draw are familiar ones, often couched in the same language we have encountered in so many of the texts in this thesis. A camp official deciding whether she will live or die is a 'Meister aus Deutschland' [Master from Germany] – a quote from Celan's 'Todesfuge' [Death Fugue] – or a 'Herr über Leben und Tod' [master of life and death]: '»Die ist aber noch sehr klein«, bemerkte der Herr über Leben und Tod, nicht unfreundlich, eher wie man Kühe und Kälber besichtigt' ['This one is still very small, though', remarked the master of life and death, not unkindly, more the way one would inspect cows and calves].⁴⁹ Of her fellow prisoners, all of whom have stopped menstruating due to malnourishment, she remarks: 'Aber ich frag mich, ob es nur die Unterernährung war. Paßt hier ein Vergleich mit Tieren? Selbst gutgenährte Säugetiere im Zoo haben selten Junge. Gefangenschaft ist

⁴⁸ Klüger, *weiter leben*, 216-17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 134.

schädlich, von der untersten bis zur obersten Stufe der Entwicklung' [But I wonder whether it was only the malnutrition. Is a comparison with animals appropriate here? Even well-nourished mammals in the zoo rarely bear young. Imprisonment is damaging, from the lowest to the highest level of development].⁵⁰

What distinguishes Klüger's mode of comparison from the 'consuming' identification we saw at the end of Chapter 4 is its method of recognising correspondences while insisting on the author's own embodied perspective. Her memoir is addressed in large part to her German friends, whose experience lies on the other side of a divide called Auschwitz. In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, too – which contains a wide range of intertexts to Holocaust literature, including its epigraph from Celan – we hear that for the survivors of the Death Railway, 'forever after, there were [...] only two sorts of men: the men who were *on the Line*, and the rest of humanity, who were not' (NR 26; emphasis in original). Klüger rejects this kind of rhetoric, advocating instead for the value of comparisons. 'Ohne Vergleiche kommt man nicht aus' [We cannot do without comparisons], she writes in defence of her suggestion that those who have experienced claustrophobia have some idea of what she suffered on the train to the camps, and that she, in turn, has some idea of what those in the gas chambers experienced.⁵¹ Of a woman who compares the hardship of wartime Germany to the suffering in the camps, however, Klüger remarks, '*Die* scheute sich nicht zu vergleichen, nur wurde aus ihren Vergleichen gleich Gleichungen, und schlechte Rechnerin, die sie war, stimmten die Lösungen nicht' [*She* was not afraid to compare, only her comparisons quickly became equations, and poor mathematician that she was, the solutions didn't add up].⁵² This distinction recalls MacAskill's unequal equations of slaveholder and slave, coloniser and colonised at the outset of Chapter 4.

Klüger's entire theory of comparisons rests on a rejection of the 'omni' – on an insistence that correspondences will nonetheless always miss 'the stubbornness of the particular'.⁵³ For Klüger – unlike in the all-consuming narrative principles of Ransmayr,

⁵⁰ Ibid, 151.

⁵¹ Ibid, 111.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Leahy, 'Disturbing Anselm Kiefer', 181.

Benjamin and Bachmann – sums always have remainders, and rules always have exceptions. She presents her own experience of such an exception, in which she was rescued from the gas chamber through the intervention of a Jewish camp secretary: the same act that has led her to believe ‘Simone Weil hatte recht, [...] ich weiß es von damals, das Gute ist unvergleichlich und auch unerklärlich, weil es [...] nichts will als sich selbst’ [Simone Weil was right, (...) I know it from back then, goodness is incomparable and also inexplicable, because it (...) wants nothing but itself].⁵⁴ In answer to ‘the logic of *Endlösung* [final solution], in which everything disappears including the evidence of any disappearance’,⁵⁵ Klüger replies, ‘Bitte, ich bin die Ausnahme’ [Here you go, I am the exception].⁵⁶ This is not a claim that anything about her character or behaviour was exceptional – indeed, she repeatedly makes the opposite argument – but instead appears as a rejoinder to the types of totalising systems we saw in Chapter 2. The act of kindness from a stranger that saved her life comes to resemble the quixotic stances against the system that have recurred throughout the thesis, but this time in a mode of tenderness, with Klüger’s living body as evidence. While her memoir circles around questions of statistics and coincidence, this act leads Klüger to conclude that ‘vielleicht sollten wir Freiheit schlicht als das nicht Voraussagbare definieren’ [perhaps we should define freedom simply as that which cannot be predicted].⁵⁷

This interest in remainders, and emphasis on her own body as a living testament to the failure of all-encompassing systems, leads Klüger to a particular view of what it means to empathise or identify. She takes an explicit interest in the reader, which is reminiscent both of Gölz’s analysis and of Tokarczuk’s lecture. Klüger has no wish to interpellate the reader, or for them to dissolve their selfhood in identification: ‘Ihr müßt euch nicht mit mir identifizieren’, she tells her German readers, ‘es ist mir sogar lieber, wenn ihr es nicht tut’ [You don’t have to identify with me, I would even prefer if you didn’t].⁵⁸ Instead, like Gölz, she asks her readers to ‘werdet streitsüchtig, sucht die Auseinandersetzung’ [become

⁵⁴ Klüger, *weiter leben*, 133.

⁵⁵ Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 171.

⁵⁶ Klüger, *weiter leben*, 132.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 142.

combative, engage].⁵⁹ Similar nods to the relationship between author, text, reader and literary system can be found throughout the book, from the gleeful 'Ich sehe meine Leser befremdet die Köpfe schütteln' [I see my readers shaking their heads in consternation]⁶⁰ to allusions to the gender of her readers, whom she pictures as 'Leserin[nen] (wer rechnet schon mit männlichen Lesern? Die lesen nur von anderen Männern Geschriebenes)' [female readers (who expects male readers? They only read things written by other men)].⁶¹ Where Götz posits that Bachmann's writing encodes instructions for the reader about how to read the text – by turning away, or by 'catastrophising' it, insisting on the 'here' of their own embodied reading – Klüger makes the instruction explicit, wishing to communicate 'mit Leserinnen, die mitdenken, und vielleicht sogar ein paar Lesern dazu' [with readers (*female*) who are actively thinking along, and perhaps even a couple of readers (*male*) too].⁶² The upholding of a divide between the embodied here and now of the reader and the embodied writing of the memoir – which does not present itself, as the works of Bachmann and Ransmayr do, as a disappearance into the text – is matched by a response to comparisons that consists in empathetic action, rather than dissolution of the self. The various 'consumptive' associations between slaughtered animals and other victims at the end of Chapter 4 stand in stark contrast to Klüger's offhand reference to her vegetarianism: 'Das Kalb, mit dem man spielt, bleibt trotzdem Schlachtvieh. So ein Kalb wollte ich nicht sein. (Diese Vergleiche mit Tieren, die sich wie von selbst einstellen, haben mir irgendwann das Fleischessen verleidet)' [The calf you play with remains an animal to be slaughtered. I didn't want to be such a calf. (These comparisons with animals, which happen almost automatically, at some point put me off eating meat)].⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid. The word 'Auseinandersetzung' – a condition which Klüger encourages the reader to seek out – means both 'conflict' or 'disagreement' and 'engagement', in the sense of engaging meaningfully with a topic or line of thought.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 238.

⁶¹ Ibid, 82.

⁶² Ibid, 79.

⁶³ Ibid, 147-8.

Utensils

Connecting this practical form of empathy back to Isis, and thus to Le Guin's gatherer, it is tempting to read *weiter leben* as an expression of wisdom – a trait closely linked to storytelling both in Benjamin's analysis, and in culture more widely. Benjamin suggests that the art of storytelling 'neigt ihrem Ende zu, weil die [...] Weisheit [...] ausstirbt' [is coming to an end, because (...) wisdom (...) is dying out].⁶⁴ Wisdom is intimately related, in Benjamin's analysis, to 'Rat' [advice], a crucial element of true storytelling. The novel, by contrast with the story, exemplifies for Benjamin 'die tiefe Ratlosigkeit des Lebenden' [the deep helplessness (literally: lack of advice) of the living].⁶⁵ Tokarczuk echoes this sentiment in claiming that 'the fact that we have lost the parable from view is a testament to our current helplessness' (TN 6).⁶⁶ Wisdom, certainly, forms part of the gatherer archetype. A clear precursor to Janina Duszejko in Tokarczuk's writing, for instance, is Marta, an old woman who lives next door to the autofictional narrator of *House of Day, House of Night*. One evening, as they are 'clearing the empty teacups and plates from the terrace', Marta tells this narrator that 'the most important human duty is to save things that are falling into decay, rather than create new ones', a proclamation with overtones of the wise old woman trope.⁶⁷

This piece of advice, however, helps us both to align the gatherer with the tender narrator, and at the same time to complicate the idea that the gatherer's story must be justified by wisdom. In 'The Tender Narrator', we recall, Tokarczuk had described listening 'with flushed cheeks and tears in my eyes to the story of a broken teapot' (TN 14), discarded by its owners after losing its handle. This is a key point at which Tokarczuk's argument overlaps with that of Ghosh: by linking an image of wastefulness to ideas of meaning, it offers a vital materialist understanding of the world and of the 'planetary crisis'. The teapot becomes a touchstone of tenderness: faced with the world of inert resources, Tokarczuk 'longs for that other world, the world of the teapot' (TN 17) and posits that 'it is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk' (TN 24). Marta, in this regard, is the 'tender' figure of *House of Day, House of Night*. She 'has a lot of broken

⁶⁴ Benjamin, 'Der Erzähler', 442.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 443.

⁶⁶ Tokarczuk's German translator opts for 'Ratlosigkeit' here (Tokarczuk, *Der liebevolle Erzähler*, 21).

⁶⁷ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 92.

things: single cups, [...] tin mugs with makeshift wire handles, and pots with rusty marks where the enamel has peeled off' – unlike the narrator, who 'prefer[s] like everyone else to have shiny new things with traces of glue from the price sticker and a guarantee that they'll last'.⁶⁸ Marta, as the collector of broken objects and dispenser of sage soundbites, could thus easily be mistaken for a wise gatherer figure.

In contrast to the idea of wisdom as a form of practical value, however – suggested in Benjamin's view of the storyteller as 'ein Mann, der dem Hörer Rat weiß' [a man who knows how to advise the listener]⁶⁹ – Marta is a character who refuses to be useful in this way. She is, as the narrator complains early in the novel, 'not a therapist at heart [...] Sometimes I have thought Marta wasn't listening or that she lacked sensitivity, like a lifeless cut-down tree, because when I've told her something meaningful the kitchen utensils have not stopped clattering'.⁷⁰ Along with her love of dogs ('Marta stroked their backs with her long, bony fingers, telling them how beautiful they were [...] She spoke only to the dogs all evening'),⁷¹ the image of the lifeless tree connects Marta to Duszejko in a crucial way, as we will soon see. This connection also ties in with the other resemblance between both characters: Marta, like Duszejko, is shown by this narrator 'rummaging about in her plastic carrier bags'.⁷²

If Marta appears to the narrator of *House of Day, House of Night* as somehow 'useless' – 'I don't understand her', the narrator remarks, 'But why should I? [...] What would I gain from her life story, if indeed she has a life story to speak of?'⁷³ – *Drive Your Plow* once again switches the viewpoint, offering a gleeful manifesto for 'uselessness' through the voice of Duszejko herself. What Seymour calls the 'subtler subplot' of the novel – in which Duszejko 'slowly warms to humans, forming a friend group with other local misfits'⁷⁴ – culminates in Duszejko's realisation of what she has in common with these other figures:

⁶⁸ Ibid, 238.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, 'Der Erzähler', 449.

⁷⁰ Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*, 6.

⁷¹ Ibid, 4.

⁷² Ibid, 26.

⁷³ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁴ Seymour, 'Satire', 275.

Suddenly I saw the four of us in a different way – as if we had a lot in common, as if we were a family. I realized that we were the sort of people whom the world regards as useless. We do nothing essential, we don't produce important ideas, no vital objects or foodstuffs, we don't cultivate the land, we don't fuel the economy. We haven't done any reproducing, except for Oddball, who does have a son, even if it's just Black Coat. So far we've never provided the world with anything useful (*DYP* 242-3).

Here, the way in which the gatherer figure of this chapter subverts mythological models like that of Isis comes into view. This figure is, at root, an archetype for the opposition to use value, for the insistence that things do not need a reason to exist: a champion of the 'for its own sake'. In her study of 'Alte Menschen in der Dichtung' [Old People in Literature], Klüger points out that 'im Großen und Ganzen sind die Alten in der Literatur entweder gute Ratgeber und Seher – ein Nestor, ein Teiresias, besorgte Ammen – oder Hexen und Miesmacher' [by and large, old people in literature are either good advisors and seers – a Nestor, a Tiresias, concerned nannies – or witches and killjoys].⁷⁵ Literature, Klüger writes, 'sofern sie davon handelt, wie der Mensch seine Zukunft gestalten soll, kann mit den alten Leuten nichts anfangen, denn sie haben keine eigene Zukunft mehr' [insofar as it is about how humans should shape their future, has little to say about the old, for they have no future of their own anymore].⁷⁶ In keeping with Morton's idea of 'agricultural religion' – the religions of the book as expressions and enforcements of the mindset of 'dominion' over nature⁷⁷ – Klüger points out that such religions have a hard time with old women in particular. She writes that 'in der Bibel, die ja besessen ist vom Fruchtbarkeitsgedanken, gibt es zweimal das ganz besonders merkwürdige Wunder der alten Frau, die doch noch gebiert' [in the Bible, which is obsessed with the thought of fertility, there are two instances of the particularly peculiar miracle of the old woman who still gives birth after all].⁷⁸ A contrast to these observations is presented, in Klüger's

⁷⁵ Ruth Klüger, *Ein alter Mann ist stets ein König Lear': Alte Menschen in der Dichtung*, E-Book (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 2012).

⁷⁶ Ibid. Emily Jeremiah, similarly, remarks of Bachmann's story 'Das Gebell' that Franza's act of caring for Jordan's elderly mother – for whom he professes to have 'no time' – 'run[s] counter to a capitalist logic that stresses speed, efficiency, and productivity, whereby some individuals' time is valued, and others', such as the old, is viewed as useless' (Jeremiah, 'Keine Zeit zu verlieren', 542).

⁷⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 132.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Benjamin's view of storytelling, meanwhile, also depends on ideas of (belated) fertility and germination, as we saw in Chapter 1. Leahy notes that Benjamin describes 'the work of art which has not yet yielded its secrets to the gaze of the reader [...] in terms which invite sexual comparison', including being

analysis, by Bertolt Brecht's ironically titled story 'Die unwürdige Greisin' [The Undignified Old Lady], in which the poet offers 'eine rare Ausnahmegestalt' [a figure who is a rare exception].⁷⁹ This woman – Brecht's grandmother – lacks dignity only in the eyes of 'die Verwandten, die sie nicht mehr ausnützen können' [the relatives who can no longer exploit her], since she does not wish to see them or leave them any worldly possessions. Brecht's story ends with a view that aligns with Klüger's own authorial interests: 'Sie hatte die langen Jahre der Knechtschaft und die kurzen Jahre der Freiheit ausgekostet' [She had tasted the long years of servitude and the short years of freedom].⁸⁰ For Duszejko, too, uselessness comes to seem tantamount to freedom, including freedom from the destructive thought patterns of agrilogistics. This liberating potential of uselessness is shown in an image that recalls the view of Marta as a lifeless tree:

But why should we have to be useful and for what reason? Who divided the world into useless and useful, and by what right? Does a thistle have no right to life, or a Mouse that eats the grain in a warehouse? [...] A large tree, crooked and full of holes, survives for centuries without being cut down, because nothing could possibly be made out of it. This example should raise the spirits of people like us. Everyone knows the profit to be reaped from the useful, but nobody knows the benefit to be gained from the useless. (*DYP* 243-4)

Here, again, we have a vision of the gatherer as survivor: as something or someone overlooked by a system which believes itself all-encompassing, and who finds in this condition power and freedom, the capacity to turn away. In terms of representing real-world systems, this is, of course, an incomplete picture. We have seen repeatedly how the systems at issue here – from colonialism to capitalism, via patriarchy and the concentration camps – do not offer this 'way out' very often. In this regard, the texts of *Todesarten* and *The Vegetarian* provide an accurate and necessary view of these systems in operation. 'Turning away' from the knowledge of ecological violence itself, meanwhile, is – as Duszejko is painfully aware – not a viable option. Yet the gatherer figure who unites Le Guin's essay with the writings of Klüger and Tokarczuk offers much-needed hope: the

'chaste' ['keusch'] and 'capable of arousing astonishment' ['imstande Staunen [...] zu erregen'] (Leahy, *Der wahre Historiker*, 61).

⁷⁹ Klüger, *Ein alter Mann*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

sense that perhaps there is not ‘no alternative’. The mode they inhabit is what Seymour identifies as a ‘warm irony’, which ‘might provide respite from [...] “wounding knowledge”’.⁸¹

Perhaps most importantly, the metaphor of gathering – and of the gatherer as an ‘old bag’ – offers a comment on the aesthetic itself, both in its form and its meaning. ‘Plastic’, as we heard from Macfarlane in Chapter 1, is ‘the substance that has served as our most perfect container’, but which ‘now overwhelms our systems of containment’.⁸² Plastic bags are the poster child of ‘single-use’, designed to be binned without a second thought; yet their longevity far exceeds that of their user. The ‘hyperobject’ of the plastic bag therefore becomes a salient image of how human mastery is thwarted, defeated by its own fixation on use value. In owning her association with the bags, Duszejko occupies the position of someone or something that is intended to be discarded, but that stubbornly refuses to go; Klüger, too, presents herself in her memoir as someone who has escaped a system intent on discarding her, and now refuses to disappear.

Plastic bags also make their way into one of Ransmayr’s texts, which otherwise – as Schaub points out – are often too busy showing the grand poetic system of metamorphosis to represent contingent changes to this system, such as the conditions of the Anthropocene. They appear in one of the stories from *Atlas*, where they represent an obstacle to the vision of the desert as all-consuming terrarium contained in *Strahlender Untergang*. In the story, the plastic bags in which customers are given fillets of shark meat on the coast of the Red Sea become the ‘unverwüstliche Fetzen’ [indestructible scraps, A 259] that resist the return to nothingness so often enacted in Ransmayr’s writing. Like Tokarczuk, Ransmayr cannot help but see the aesthetic side of these ‘bunte, hauchdünne, wasser- und staubdichte Taschen’ [colourful, paper-thin, water- and dust-proof bags, A 258], which blow around the desert until they are snagged on a bush or tree, where they flutter as ‘Grenzzeichen einer verheißungsvollen, vielfarbigen Welt’ [border signs of a promising, multi-coloured world, A 259]. One way in which this story invites ‘Anthropocene readings’, as I suggested in Chapter 3, is through the image of the shark

⁸¹ Seymour, ‘Satire’, 274.

⁸² Macfarlane, *Underland*, 320.

dead on the road, evoking the fragility of the marine life that plastic pollution and human activities threaten. Another way, however, is in the more distant – more ‘*antianthropocentric*’⁸³ – view of the strangeness of use value turned inside out.

It is in Tokarczuk’s ‘On the Origin of Species’, however, that plastic bags are most clearly shown as an instance of use value looping back on itself – as Morton might say – and becoming aesthetic, a ‘for its own sake’. The bags in Tokarczuk’s fragment are ‘pure form that seeks contents but immediately tires of them, throwing themselves to the wind yet again’ (F 404). They resemble, in this view, Kafka’s depiction of the human as that which does not tolerate being bound, and soon scatters itself in all directions instead. Tokarczuk’s zoomed-out vision is in harmony with Le Guin’s proposition that ‘the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag’.⁸⁴ Le Guin, like Tokarczuk, envisions this bag as containing things not easily compatible with use value. Her carrier bag is ‘full of wimps and klutzes’ – recalling Duszejko’s joyfully useless misfits – ‘and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble [...]; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail and people who don’t understand’.⁸⁵ More important than these ‘contents’, however, is the metaphor for form itself.

The idea of the novel as a ‘bundle’ or assemblage rather than a linear narrative – or even the now-commonplace character ‘arc’ – is one that chimes with almost all of the texts and authors discussed in this thesis. None of the writers collected here are comfortable writing ‘straight’ novels. As we have seen, a key aesthetic principle of Flanagan’s work is the preference for circles over lines, which are repeatedly associated with violence, with doomed attempts at mastery and ‘imperial dreams’ (NR 303). Even a novel like *Narrow Road*, seemingly under the spell of the Hero in the form of Dorrigo Evans, is fragmented into short chapters from a wide array of perspectives that becomes wider as the story unfolds. Both Kafka and Bachmann – in her second life as a prose writer – created bodies of work characterised by fragments as much as finished products. Ransmayr, perhaps the closest we have come here to a straight-down-the-line writer, has also experimented with forms such as the *Atlas* and the broader project of ‘Spielformen des Erzählens’ [Playforms

⁸³ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 24; emphasis in original.

⁸⁴ Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory*, 34.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

of Storytelling], which includes prose poems, plays, ‘Bildergeschichten’ [picture stories], ‘ein Verhör’ [an interrogation] and the collection of award speeches, *Arznei gegen die Sterblichkeit* [*Remedy for Mortality*]. It is Tokarczuk, however, whose work best reflects the idea of fiction as gathering imagined by Le Guin, with the composite aesthetic most immediately visible in *Flights*.

Bodies

In order to gain a clearer picture of where the gatherer figure leads us, I would like to consider one more brief example of this archetypal figure in the work of the writers at hand. The figure in question is Grandma Yente in Tokarczuk’s *The Books of Jacob*, whom we met in the conclusion of Chapter 4.

Benjamin’s vision of storytelling, as has been hinted here already, imbues the figure of the storyteller with meaning by enforcing his death. Benjamin contends that ‘nicht etwa nur das Wissen oder die Weisheit des Menschen sondern vor allem sein gelebtes Leben – und das ist der Stoff, aus dem die Geschichten werden – tradierbare Form erst am Sterbenden annimmt’ [not only, for instance, a person’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all their lived life – and that is the material stories come from – takes on a form that can be passed on only in the case of the dying].⁸⁶ At first glance, Yente as the omniscient (or ‘fourth-person’) narrator of *The Books of Jacob* would appear to fit the bill. After a ‘Prologue’ which cryptically introduces her as the consciousness through which the novel’s events are filtered (‘Yente sees everything from above [...] And that is how it is now, how it will be: Yente sees all’),⁸⁷ we meet Yente first as a dying grandmother who has been brought to a wedding. Since ‘Yente is the eldest, everyone who comes to the wedding immediately goes to pay her a visit’⁸⁸ – a scene which Benjamin, with his wistfulness for the communal aspect of both death and storytelling, might welcome. Yente, however, has no intention of obliging him. When a relative hangs an amulet around her neck inscribed with a protective charm – meant to prevent her from dying during the wedding and

⁸⁶ Benjamin, ‘Der Erzähler’, 449.

⁸⁷ Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, trans. Jennifer Croft (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2021), xxxii.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 848. The page numbers of *The Books of Jacob* count backwards, in a nod to books written in Hebrew.

bringing bad luck – Yente swallows it instead, absorbing it into her cells. This magical realist premise prevents her from dying not only when it is inconvenient, but ever. Once again we have a rejection of the story that demands disappearance, as well as the story that upholds invisibility. Yente becomes the tender narrator of *The Books of Jacob* by overstaying her welcome like a discarded plastic bag, stubbornly refusing to go. Like Gözl's critical reader, she declines to do what she is told. 'It's all over now, Yente [...] You can go', her nephew tells her after the wedding, to no avail.⁸⁹

There is a certain childishness here that is key to Tokarczuk's humour and, to a lesser extent, the humour of Le Guin. Duszejko, too, describes herself repeatedly as 'a little infantile' (*DYP* 118; 229), a trait that steers her clear of the roles Klüger sees allocated to the old in literature – 'Ratgeber', 'Seher', 'Hexe', 'Miesmacher' [counsellor, seer, witch, killjoy]⁹⁰ – and into the realm of mischief and play. She finds common cause with magpies, for instance, who are 'intelligent and insolent' (*DYP* 105). This childishness can be a means not only of subverting stereotypes, but also of disrupting what old age has represented for previous literary movements, such as 20th-century modernism.

Yente's childishness has farther-reaching consequences for the form of *The Books of Jacob* than Duszejko's does for *Drive Your Plow*. Her defiance of death turns her into the wizened body holding the novel together. This premise puts both Yente herself and the gatherer as described here under a certain strain. As a narrator of sorts for *The Books of Jacob*, Yente does much of the same work we saw in the 'tender' omniscience of *Primeval and Other Times*. 'In her scattered state', it seems to Yente that

she won't be able to return to the hardwood floor of this world. So be it. It's better here – times intermingle, overlap. How could she ever have believed in the flow of time? She had thought time flowed! Now she finds it funny. It's obvious that time spins around like skirts whirling in a dance. Like a linden top twirled onto a table and sustained in motion there by the reverential eyes of children.

She sees those children [...] ⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid, 760.

⁹⁰ Klüger, *Ein alter Mann*.

⁹¹ Ibid, 767-66.

The Books of Jacob makes tender omniscience more explicit than it was in *Primeval and Other Times*, by foregrounding the witnessing figure of Yente herself; yet Yente disappears from view for large swathes of the narrative, and the reader must be intermittently nudged to remember her. The novel thus displays some of the paradoxes of this mode of narration, as outlined in Chapter 4. In its biblical title and physical heft as a volume, *The Books of Jacob* recalls the various ‘compendium’ projects we have encountered, such as the biblical books of Bachmann’s *Todesarten*; if Bachmann had written the novel, it might have been called *Das Buch Yente*. This would require a disappearance of Yente herself into the text, of course, which the novel, with its focus on Yente’s body, seems to want to resist – yet even in this regard, it might not be far off the mark. The extent to which the omniscience of *The Books of Jacob* aligns more with the visual witnessing of cinema than the embodied witnessing of theatre is highlighted by a surprising intertext with *Uncut Gems*. In Yente’s refusal to die over the two and a half centuries of the novel, her body gradually becomes ‘pure crystal [...] She ceases to be just a witness, an eye that travels through space and time – she can also flow through human bodies, women, men and children, and time speeds up so everything happens very fast, in one instant’.⁹² Deep in a cave in which Polish Jews are hiding from the Nazis, Yente

transforms slowly into a crystal and, in a few million more years, she will be a diamond [...] That long pinkish crystal, grown into the rock, which lights up from time to time from the sparingly used oil lamps, shows a blurred and indistinct interior. The children, who have become used to life in the cave and are already able to venture deep inside it, say that that piece of the rock is alive [...] but of course no one takes this seriously.⁹³

The insistent survivor body of the other gatherer texts becomes, here, subject to the law of metamorphosis after all. Yente herself becomes the blue pebble gathered in the bag, a piece of the material world which is revealed to be vibrant and ‘storied’, like the fate-directing opal of *Uncut Gems*.

⁹² Ibid, 29.

⁹³ Ibid, 28.

Conclusion

I hope that this thesis has shown, however, that we do not need to depart from prose fiction in order to encounter aesthetic forms that engage in compelling, ambitious and affecting ways with ecological thought. Many of the most interesting contemporary texts and authors of ecological fiction do not ‘zu den Gräserbewisperern gehöre[n]’ [belong among the grass-whisperers].⁹⁴ Instead, this type of fiction includes a plurality of vantage points, aesthetic techniques, scales, scopes and symbols. What is more, we have seen that ideas of the ecological, the ethical and the aesthetic quickly turn out to be inseparable. All are in play when we think about use value and political systems; about religion and factory farming; gender and perspective; humour and solemnity; mountains, trees and fish.

The three authors this thesis has focused on – along with their literary ancestors, Kafka and Bachmann – have been revealed to have a great deal in common, both in subject matter and in literary form. By taking Tokarczuk, Flanagan and Ransmayr at their word and refusing to divide them along national or linguistic lines, we have discovered a whole host of correspondences between their bodies of work, an exchange which has given rise to something new. In combining the fragments of their literary texts, we have ‘created constellations capable of describing more, and in a more complex way’ (*TN* 22). Le Guin’s cave woman has struck up a friendship with Bachmann’s blue deer; Gould is engaged in an impassioned debate with Gölz; Ransmayr’s plastic bags chase Tokarczuk’s around the desert. Duszejko is giving MacAskill an earful in the corner, while Darky Gardiner exchanges notes with Yeong-hye and Pythagoras over a vegetarian meal.⁹⁵

The figure of the gatherer outlined in this epilogue, finally, offers a welcome contrast to the vast scales and scopes with which the thesis began. ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ accords with Tokarczuk’s view of the writer’s mind as a synthetic mind, gathering up ‘all the tiny pieces’; but it stops short of conjuring a ‘universal whole’ (*TN* 17). This is also an apt model for the attempt to sum up a thesis, a task which gives rise to the sensation that

⁹⁴ *Ingeborg Bachmann erhält den Georg-Büchner-Preis 1964*. <<https://youtu.be/XJRzkixRKQE>> [Accessed 20th April 2023].

⁹⁵ Tokarczuk’s vision also imagines that ‘our stories could refer to one another in an infinite way, and their central characters could enter into relationships with each other’ (*TN* 22).

'the whole is always weirdly *less* than the sum of its parts'.⁹⁶ My hope, however, is that the process of doggedly gathering up these pieces, and allowing them to talk – not only to the reader, but also to one another – has resulted in a story worth telling: not the story of *unus mundus*, but that of the *omnium gatherum*.

⁹⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 12; emphasis in original.

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