

Becoming ethically preoccupied through *Currere*: W.G. Sebald, Franz Kafka and narrative self-representation

Teresa Strong-Wilson ¹

¹ McGill University, Faculty of Education, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Montreal, Canada

Abstract

Within education, we can learn a great deal from others' uses of narrative as a site of praxis from which to work through difficult psychic processes. The narratives published by W.G. Sebald and Franz Kafka—as well as what we know about these authors' narrative processes—hold important insights for the kind of narrative writing that can happen in *currere*. Born in Germany near the end of WWII and inheriting the heavy burden of the Holocaust, Sebald was concerned with the social implications of writing as a form of witness, even as he was persuaded that a narrative approach was more powerful than discursive prose. Sebald saw in the writing of narrative an attempt at restitution. For Franz Kafka, the writing of literary texts offered the only space in which he experienced some redemption from (as he called it) “murderers’ row.” Despite their stature, both considered themselves as peripheral writers; writing came from a felt sense of precarity and vulnerability. Both relied on unreliable narrators. By exploring the relations between Sebald’s and Kafka’s writing lives and their melancholy, I inquire into how both were driven by a sense of urgency in writing narratively (one form of which is literature) and look at how such writing embodied an ethical probing of unsettling preoccupations, in ways of compelling interest to projects of subjective/social reconstruction.

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Introduction

W.G. Sebald (1944-2001) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) are literary authors that can help us think further on how *currere* can be taken up narratively, narrative being a predominant mode in *currere* and qualitative forms of research that use a *currere* approach. The present year—2024—marks the centenary of Franz Kafka’s passing, an author whose work arguably never goes out of style, being a staple in secondary and post-secondary curricula, while also being the continued focus of major studies, critical as well as biographical (e.g., Duttlinger, 2022; Stach, 2017). Kafka was the subject of an early essay of William Pinar’s on *currere* (1976/1994), in which he used Kafka’s novel *The Trial* as a place from which to think further about *currere*, following the life of a protagonist (and unreliable narrator), K.’s, train of thinking and acting in the wake of being arrested. W.G. Sebald may seem to be a less obvious choice for the subject of *currere*. However, he is a contemporary author, was born in the wake of the disastrous Second World War, was German, and was writing in self-chosen exile from East Anglia in the

Corresponding Author Teresa Strong-Wilson  teresa.strong-wilson@mcgill.ca  McGill University, Faculty of Education, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, 3700 McTavish Street, Suite 244 Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2, Canada

United Kingdom about and through his implication—and whose writing can be highly useful in thinking through ethical forms of self-representation in narrative (Strong-Wilson, 2015, 2017, 2021). I contend that the reading of literary authors like Sebald and Kafka, separately and in relation to one another, can yield important insights into the relationships between autobiography (*currere*) and narrative or literary writing, especially as related to difficult knowledges. Concern with difficult knowledges is often expressed in the form of relentless (i.e., irresolvable) preoccupation with a subject, by a subject (*viz.*, individual), leading to that state known as melancholy—which Richard Burton (in his canonical work on the subject, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*) identified with the “misery of the scholar” produced through “love of learning, or overmuch study” (Burton, 2009)—thus linked with study itself, *currere*’s focus (Pinar, 2015, 2023), understood as a state of mind that informs not just the subject of the writing but the writer/researcher/teacher.

But why Kafka and Sebald together? My study of Kafka has avowedly occurred through Sebald, the implications of whose works for *currere* and curriculum studies I have been studying for over a decade (Strong-Wilson, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2021). In writing about Kafka and Sebald, I am not interested in the influences of Kafka on Sebald’s writing, nor of examining Kafka’s several appearances in Sebald’s narrative writing as a character, nor too, in Sebald’s creative (mis)readings of Kafka—all three being subjects that others have taken up (e.g., Medin, 2010; Zisselsberger, 2007). Too, given its argument, this paper focuses less on the literary works themselves than on the permutations between Kafka’s and Sebald’s lives as writers and their self-perceptions as authors whose writing shared the characteristic—highly pertinent to *currere*—of being autobiographically-informed.

Kafka’s fiction has been read as a form of indirect autobiography (Stach, 2013b, p. 431)—as Sebald’s narrative prose works have also been (Anderson, 2003; Singer, 2023). Kafka and Sebald shared the belief that the working through of difficult issues arising through one’s “biographic situation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 36) occurred through the writing of literature, that is, in a narrative mode. Narrative is a dominant form used in studies based on *currere* (Fowler, 2006) in research as in teaching (Grumet, 2004). What can narrative writing offer to the scholar and/or teacher educator preoccupied with self and world, where such preoccupations incline towards a melancholy state of mind? In his diary, Kafka referred to “[t]he strange, mysterious, possibly dangerous, possibly redemptive comfort of writing: it is a leap out of murderers’ row” (in Stach, 2013b, p. 424). For his part, Sebald said, in 2001, in a speech delivered just before his untimely death: “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship” (Sebald, 2006, p. 215). For his part, Pinar (2011) has understood *currere* as a potentially “redemptive” space (p. 99). A main purpose of this paper is to consider the contribution of the reading and writing of literature—of and by Kafka and Sebald—to the reading and writing of narrative within projects of curricular subjective and social reconstruction (and especially those focused on difficult subjects).

I inquire into how the reading of literature—especially of literary works by authors who perceived themselves as on the periphery, in other words, as at odds with their world and therefore, too, with themselves (which is not uncommon in study of difficult subjects)—can provide deeper insight into the self-study that *currere* sets in motion. Both Kafka and Sebald were drawn to signs of catastrophic forms of change, which they acutely felt in themselves and also perceived outwardly: again, themes that resonate strongly with *currere*, with its focus

on subjective reconstruction as implicating social reconstruction. This sensitivity made both into authors drawn to melancholy, melancholy being the darkness that they—and their narrators—recursively needed to work through. The paper begins by making a case for how Kafka and Sebald—both literary lights—saw themselves as writing out of the shadows—of peripheral, out-of-the-way spaces—and how this self-perception, with its attendant heightened sense of vulnerability, seemed necessary in order to explore a subject that has been, and continues to be an important focus for *currere*, and curriculum theory, namely: attention to the self and the self's orientation towards the world. Writing narratively, through *currere*, usually involves a becoming vulnerable (Chambers, 1997; Grumet, 2004). I mull over this question by invoking Pinar's paper on Kafka; central to his interpretation of Kafka, using a *currere* lens, was the significance to self- and other-awareness of attentiveness. I suggest, through my reading of Kafka's and Sebald's writing, that while inattention (to oneself; to others) is one danger, curiously vigilance can be, too. Ultimately, both Kafka and Sebald seem to be saying, we are all unreliable narrators of our own and others' stories—my paper offers short samples from their writing to exemplify this—but where literary writing—that is, the narrative mode—nevertheless paradoxically remains the *only* space in which to more fully or deeply address this unreliability and sense of vulnerability and precariousness in the world. I suggest that this was true for Kafka and Sebald; and may also be true of those writing and researching using *currere*, and where melancholy becomes a necessary companion in that process of making of oneself vulnerable through writing, especially in writing to difficult subjects.

Being on the Periphery

Even though this is not a study of influences of one author on the other, we need to understand what may have drawn Sebald to Kafka so as to appreciate how Kafka and Sebald are aligned with one another in ways suggested by this paper. The name of the protagonist in W.G. Sebald's unpublished novel, his first literary text, was Josef (Sheppard, 2010, p. 71), which is the first name of the main character in Kafka's *The Trial*. Sebald published two scholarly essays in English on Kafka, both on *The Castle* (Sebald, 1972, 1976). (He wrote several others, published in German). Looking at the courses he regularly taught for over three decades as Lecturer in German Language and Literature in the interdisciplinary School of European Studies at the University of East Anglia, three were devoted exclusively to Kafka (Turner, 2010, pp. 130-1). They were the only courses within Sebald's repertoire that focused exclusively on study of one author (the other courses were topic-based), signalling the importance Sebald accorded to Kafka. Sebald taught a Franz Kafka course consistently from the late 70s onwards. In the course, as per Sebald's syllabus, students were expected to "read Kafka ... with as much patience and persistence as they can afford"; further, they were advised to start reading during the vacation period preceding the course (Sebald's May 1977 Syllabus; in Turner, p. 132). Students were implicitly discouraged by Sebald from becoming entrapped in the "hypertrophic body of secondary literature" (p. 132). Only in the 2001-02 course, called "Reading Kafka's Novels," which would have been interrupted by Sebald's untimely death in December 2001 due to a car crash—do we also see a curated list of secondary literature. "Essential reading" remained of Kafka's narratives, and especially of *The Trial* and *The Castle*, with each class focused on several chapters in turn. Sebald was not greatly enamoured of scholarship generally—he confessed to not having the patience to write it—but he was particularly critical of the secondary literature surrounding Kafka, which he thought had missed the point.

As many acknowledge, Sebald was not the best scholar. He disliked footnotes—as well as theory (for the sake of theory); his shelves featured no works by French post-structuralist and deconstructive critics, for instance, who would have been popular during the time in which Sebald was completing his doctoral studies then teaching university literature classes. Sebald could be opinionated, polemical, provocative—even, heretical. For Sebald, narrative proved to be the more creative, and socially acceptable, outlet in working through his ideas: one that he came to trust more than scholarship. As Schütte (2023a, b) points out, Sebald always considered himself as on the periphery; he was drawn to ideas that were themselves peripheral and out of fashion. He gravitated towards study of minor authors—among which Kafka (despite his stature) can be numbered; I explain. Through most his writing life, Kafka struggled to be recognized; unlike his close friend Max Brod, who was very socially successful as a writer, publishing 37 books—fiction, poetry, plays, essays—at the time he delivered Kafka’s eulogy (in total, 83 books—of varying quality—by the time of his own death; Pawel, 1984, pp. 110-111), Kafka’s subject and style obeyed no other ethic than his own strict, internally-driven criteria (Stach, 2013a, b), and he started many works that remained unfinished—including key works like *The Castle*. It took a long time for Kafka to be recognized as an original and leading voice (Stach, 2013a).

The presence of *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, the only poststructuralist theoretical work found on Sebald’s shelves (Thompson, 2023) signalled how Sebald’s interest may have been piqued by this angle taken on Kafka. In their book, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) elaborate various criteria that mark minor literature, central to which is that such literature is political. It is political in the particular sense that they elaborate of coming out of a “cramped” social space, with its “intrigue” located in a “family triangle” connected in turn to other “triangles—commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical” (p. 17), which exactly describes the narrow circumference of Kafka’s world, as captured by Thieberger, a Jewish scholar with whom Kafka later studied Hebrew. In a conversation Thieberger had with Kafka while overlooking Kafka’s Prague neighbourhood, Thieberger recorded:

once, as Franz and I were standing at the window looking down on Old Town Square, he pointed at the buildings and said: “This was my high school, the university was over there, in the building facing us, my office a bit further on the left. The narrow circle...” and his finger described a few small circles, “this narrow circle encompasses my entire life.” (cited in Pawel, p. 4)

In other words, rather than focusing on a protagonist located in a social milieu, it is the milieu itself that first shapes the protagonist’s (and writer’s) experience—which is also descriptive of Sebald’s perception of the salience of the small Bavarian village in which he was born and grew up in filtering what he (as a German) was able to see—and not see.

The epithet of “minor literature” actually comes from Kafka himself, who wrote (in one of his diaries) that one of its goals is a “purification of... conflict” such as that between father and son (one of the overriding conflicts in Kafka’s life, this from an early age): “What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death” (Kafka, 1911 as cited in Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 17). Kafka developed a knack for writing closely and intimately about matters of everyday life, in an almost disarming way, but that reverberates in precisely an

opposite, uncanny and unsettling direction. It was a mistake, Stach (2013b) maintains, for Max Brod (Kafka's best friend and the first editor of Kafka's posthumously assembled works) to give the impression that Kafka's writing was abstract—aphoristic think-pieces and intellectual puzzles—whereas the very opposite was true. His writing was “deliberate” and “controlled” in “giving linguistic and aesthetic form to experiences,” Stach (2017) affirms (p. 68), but first and foremost in processing his own psychic journey:

Every question and reply arose from a network of highly personal experience. Even the most abstract problem throbs with the pain of creaturely existence and the torment of neurosis. (Stach, 2013b, p. 373)

Sebald's prose style is different—frequently described as baroque—but likewise grounded in a myopically close-up view, whereby as further narratives are told, the narrator feels as if under a bell-jar (one of Sebald's preferred metaphors), pressed by the significance of the stories for his own life and story but unable to gain sufficient higher ground to see the matter more clearly. The tie-ins with Sebald's own life were further accentuated in the English-speaking world by translations of his German works being published in quicker succession, giving the impression of “fragments of a great confession” (Medin, 2010, p. 96).

If Sebald was not widely accepted as a scholar—and especially not in what is known as Germanistik (German studies), remaining on its sidelines even after he had become an accomplished author—this is also attributed to the fact that he elevated to importance what was considered as naïve, non-serious criticism, namely, the biographical relation between a person's life and their writing (Schütte, 2023a).¹ One example (beyond the most obvious one) of the integral relation Sebald discerned between one's life and work—the details of Sebald's narrator's life bear an uncanny resemblance to Sebald's and Sebald often interpolated the image of himself for the narrator—can also be found in Sebald's thoughts on the poetry of Ernst Herbeck (1920-1991). Herbeck's poems showed an empathy towards animals and especially towards the hare; Herbeck had a harelip (cleft palate). In one of his academic essays, Schütte (2023a) says, “Sebald analyses an autobiographical prose text by Herbeck about a family meal in the course of which a hare is consumed”—which Sebald reads as exemplifying a dysfunctional family dynamic, one in which—and here a further tie-in with Sebald's own life and preoccupation is apparent—“everyone is at once victim and perpetrator” (p. 163). Herbeck became an institutionalized schizophrenic whose poetry, which was often composed spontaneously, was disregarded by the literary establishment because seen merely as a form of “writing therapy” (Schütte, 2023a, p. 162).

Thus, even though Sebald's writing has attained a stature of greatness, comparable (in its own way) to Kafka's, both authors remained minor, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of engaging in narrative writing that manages to resonate politically by staying close to an intimately lived ground. One way in which this was achieved was through a subjective presence—a narrator—whose perspective is limited and unreliable. I choose the figure of the narrator because narration is central to autobiographical writing, while the unreliable narrator is common to both Kafka and Sebald (as well as to the scholarship surrounding study of their narrative works). This unreliability is further tied, in profound ways, to a world that is considered as askew. Sebald certainly read in Kafka a depiction of a world gone awry. As Sebald commented in one of his published essays on Kafka (in German; the English translation is Uwe Schütte's; Schütte became a leading Sebald scholar and was originally one of Sebald's students), in one of his critiques of Kafka scholarship:

The hypotheses which Kafka explores in his stories of transformation are of crucial concern at a time like the present, when humankind seems poised on the verge of a far-reaching mutation. It is strange how little critical attention has thus far been paid to this, despite the fact that it is precisely the epistemo-logical dimension of anticipating a radically altered human species which most persistently occupied Kafka. (Sebald in Schütte, 2010, p. 171)

I turn next to consider examples of how the figure of the unreliable narrator in both Kafka and Sebald exemplify their unreliability, as expressed through a deep-seated anxiety and impending sense of catastrophe (that follows them or that they follow). This unreliability is in turn related to how they pay attention to themselves and the world around them and what escapes or evades their attention; attentiveness (*viz.*, awareness of self and others) in *currere* and curriculum theory is considered as an attitude integral to how the critically-aware subject is constituted.

Unreliable Narrators and Attentiveness in Kafka and Sebald

As already noted, Kafka's literary work was first examined in curriculum theory by Pinar, in his 1976 essay on *The Trial* (Pinar, 1976/1994). There, Pinar used *currere* to analyze the life of K., a well-established bank manager who is arrested but never told what he has been accused of. Pinar's analysis shows how certain literary works can serve as useful sites for a *currere* lens: the lens illuminates the story, even as the story provides access to a psychic process—or its stalling, in the case of K. The novel tracks K's response to the situation in which he finds himself (Kafka, 1994/2019b). Pinar discerns that K's being arrested is not simply what 'happened to' K but the biographic situation in which K was already in: "One comes to understand the sense in which K. is in fact arrested. He is arrested intellectually, psychologically, and socially" (p. 33). While being (formally) arrested unsettles K's previous complacency about his life, it does not do so in productive ways. By this "focusing of attention upon experience" (p. 37), Pinar notes, Kafka's writing very usefully portrays the complex, sometimes tortuous, inner workings of subjectivity.

We see something similar at work in the Sebaldian narrator, who is a walker and through his perambulations, meets others and hears their stories, which are told in periscopic fashion. A periscopic technique was something that Sebald learned from Austrian novelist, Thomas Bernhard, and consisted in an indirect mode of narration. In Sebald's narratives, the stories take the form of extended accounts of listening to others, sometimes represented as in their own words, sometimes mediated through the narrator's telling or re-telling. Hutchinson (2006) likens the resulting narrative shape to egg boxes in a crate, because each story becomes nested within the other, side by side, but without explanation. Indeed, the narrator, as he walks, is in the process of trying to sort through their meaning but this happens obliquely, even unconsciously. There is a felt significance to the stories, which seem to converge. Mostly, what the narrator is aware of is his mental and physical state: his feelings of confusion, vertigo and unwellness.

Sebald's prose has been called labyrinthine and all of the walker's perambulations seem to be located within a labyrinth, one that maps onto the dense winding pathways in his own mind/brain. Thus, while Sebald's narratives present a productive space in which to study the effects of encounters with the world/others on the subjective space that is the narrator's psyche, this through the lens of *currere*, it does so by continually suppressing the narrator's own autobiographical story; or, the narrator suppresses it. While suppressed, it is nevertheless

everpresent, through the narrator's presence and mode of perception. What we see and hear, then, even as we/the narrator bear witness to others' often traumatic stories, are the effects on the narrator, whose implication may initially seem remote but is closer than either narrator or reader might anticipate. In other words, Sebald's narrator is (and acts like) an implicated subject (Rothberg, 2019), even as the kind of psychic work in which he engages also makes of him a concerned one (Strong-Wilson, 2021): someone ethically concerned with others' stories and his responsibility as listener and as agent, much like Sebald himself, indicated by the degree to which he keeps returning to this subject/these subjects' stories and prioritizes their telling. Like the narrators in Kafka's stories, though, the vision of Sebald's narrator is occluded first and foremost by himself: his own psyche (as it is in Kafka's stories). In Sebald's writing, it is his own history that is a major source of distraction—but too, his ability or inability to come to terms with the past (and its merging with the present). We can see this more clearly by putting into relation stories by Kafka and by Sebald, which will also help show how attention is treated in each author's construction of their narrator/protagonist. I deliberately juxtapose a place in Sebald's writing in which he seems to be invoking, or echoing, Kafka.

Kafka's (1997/2019a) *The Castle* begins: "It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay deep in snow. Nothing could be seen of Castle Hill, it was wrapped in mist and darkness ... K. stood for a long while on the wooden bridge that led from the main road to the village, gazing up into the seeming emptiness" (p. 3). Kafka never finished writing *The Castle*; indeed, the text stops in mid-sentence. However, the pattern of the story is established here, in the opening paragraph, in which a man, K., arrives at a village, in the dark, ready to assume the land surveyor position for which he believes he has been hired—and soon discovers that no such certainty exists and that he is unable to gain access to the Castle or anyone with power and authority to resolve the situation. In short, the pattern is (as in *The Trial*—Pinar, 1976/1994) an absence of movement. "In daylight the castle had lain before him like an easy target," K. thinks, resolving "to let no difficulty in the journey or indeed concern about the return journey deter him from pressing on" (p. 39) but the obstacles placed in his path and both his obstinance as well as arrogance prove to be insuperable. K. tries many means to gain direct access to those responsible but is frustrated at every turn, resisted by others (e.g., landladies), or distracted by them (e.g., his amorous liaisons). On the rare occasion when he seems to approach the ones he has been told would be in a position to perhaps resolve the matter once and for all, namely the officials Klamm and then Bürgel, K. falls asleep.

Duttlinger (2022) has pointed to how K. (whether in *The Trial* or *The Castle*) is beset by a willful blindness, which causes him to miss important social cues or overestimate his own power. She suggests that the course of events, while initially seeming to be wholly external to the protagonist, set in motion by forces outside of his control, instead mainly "come from within, springing from a set of psychological dynamics" (p. 91). The protagonist seems bent on missing moments that might prove life-changing otherwise called (from the Greek) "Kairos", which she explains, "designates the opportune moment, which cannot be predicted or brought about, but which has the power to change the course of one's life" (p. 118). Through analysis of the role that attention plays in Kafka's narratives (a focus of her book, which looks at various authors across different periods of time), Duttlinger concludes that for Kafka, just as the smallest of inattentions can have dire consequences, there is also no guarantee that vigilance will produce the desired results. The consequences of attention/inattention were matters that would have been of great importance to him in his job at the Accident Insurance Bureau, she notes; Kafka himself was involved in publishing on this subject and drafting policies on the at times disastrous implications of human errors and how to best prevent accidents at work (pp. 94-5).

Another example, which I pull from one of Kafka's (1946/1971) later short stories, entitled "The Burrow," explores how vigilance provides no guarantee of not making errors of judgment. The story centers on an unnamed animal who has created an underground home that would seem to be impregnable, however the animal is beset by fears of being caught off guard: "the most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over" (p. 327). He is distracted by small noises that he initially assumes come from his neighbours, the mice ("small fry" —p. 347), and that he has tolerated before, but that now build to a crescendo in his mind, assuming the shape of a large predator: "this growing-louder is like a coming nearer" (p. 351): "it only remains for me to assume the existence of a great beast" (p. 354) ... who "is encircling me" (p. 354). No resolution is provided (the story was unfinished and not published during Kafka's lifetime) but as with Kafka's other stories, any change in frame of mind seems unlikely, here on the story's own terms, as the protagonist/narrator escalates in its state of paranoia.²

We cannot know entirely if the animal's fears in the story are well-founded or if they are self-induced, however that would seem to be Kafka's point. We live inside of our own 'burrows'; the world comes to us as we perceive it. As depicted in several of Kafka's literary works—*The Trial*, "The Judgment" or "The Hunger-Artist," the consequences of self-enclosure can be dire, with the protagonist being killed, killing themselves, or simply disappearing. Such intensely-focused attention is not the same as "wide-awakeness," which in curriculum theory (including in *currere*) entails "an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements" (Schutz cited in Greene, 1978, p. 163) grounded in "cognitive clarity, and existential concern" (Greene, 1978, p. 48), however the lines between these states can easily become blurred in the ordinariness of everyday life, lived moment by moment, within a subjectivity that remains ours, and ours alone—a burrow that is also an enclosure.

In Sebald's writing, the narrator is frequently unwell. His book, *The Rings of Saturn*, opens in a hospital room, and the narrative represents an account, scene by scene, of a nervous breakdown that we know has come but that we (and he, the narrator) never see coming, even as the narrative retrospectively unfolds (Sebald, 1998). The reader follows in the narrator's footsteps as he walks through East Anglia. Feelings of nausea and vertigo signal the onset of potentially important moments of insight and recognition, indicative of a preoccupation, deep-seated, that is troubling and without apparent end (melancholy, which I discuss in the next section). However, any insights are hazy, further re-embedded within the narrative rather than pulled out and seen and looked at. In Sebald's (1999) "Il Ritornia in Patria" in *Vertigo*, which is among the most explicitly autobiographical of Sebald's narrative texts, the narrator is returning to W., his home town (which was also Sebald's: Wertach). The plan to go there seems produced through a moment of almost inadvertent attention—a spur-of-the-moment decision—rather than a deliberately-formed intention. The journey by bus, then by walking, is recounted and then, once close to the place, which, as in Kafka's *The Castle*, also occurs in the almost darkness, the narrator arrives, stopping to contemplate the place and his feelings and memories at being precisely there, before crossing the bridge to enter town:

It was dusk by the time I crossed through the Plätt. (p. 182)

Darkness now descended on the road. In former times, when it was made up with crushed limestone, it had been easier to walk on, I remembered ... Like a luminous ribbon, it had stretched out before one even on a starless night... (p. 183)

I stood for a long time on the stone bridge... (p. 183)

And then the narrator remembers the gypsy camp that used to be beside the road and how, when he was young, in crossing the bridge to reach the swimming pool (“built in 1936 to promote public health”), his mother used to pick him up and carry him at that exact point and how, even as a child, etched in him is the memory of how the gypsies looked at him and his mother: “Across her shoulder I saw the gypsies look up briefly from what they were about, and then lower their eyes again as if in revulsion” (p. 183). The next page then features a photograph pulled from the family’s photo album, which contains pictures his father the soldier took during the war, including one of a Gypsy woman holding a young child in her arms, smiling at the camera (p. 184). The contradictions in the scene are audible, deafening even, however the narrator only takes them in obliquely and indirectly: as a feeling unsettled. Sebald’s narrator senses that his nostalgic memories of the road into his hometown are suspect and unreliable. The memories are unstable, but along with it, he implicitly understands, the past also is, with its horrors that are masked in the details of everyday life: a mother bringing her child to swim at the pool, one constructed to adhere to Nazi race laws and exclude others—like the gypsies, who at that time were not by the bridge but behind barbed wire, with all that that entailed under Nazi rule. However, this awareness is embedded at the level of narrative detail—and the narrator’s general feeling of unease, in coming to this place, and of remembering these things.

The story concludes with the narrator, now back home in England, dreaming of being in a place and on a road described in very similar terms to the one that the narrator remembered in *W*: “I dreamed that I was walking through a mountainous terrain. A white roadway of finely crushed stone stretched far ahead and in endless hairpins went on...” (p. 261). The hairpins presage the ups and downs of the road through a place the narrator recognizes as the Alps, which is where he (and Sebald) grew up, in the province of Bavaria. The narrator experiences vertigo at seeing chasms that he had never witnessed before. He then remembers a text, one on the Great Fire of London, written by Samuel Pepys. He writes as if present there, in a church in that fire, and about the desire to escape towards the water. And then after—and this is the concluding thought to the book: “a silent rain of ashes” as far as the eye can see (p. 263). We are in London, but we are also in Sebald’s childhood, with his memories of fires and the rubble of cities—this produced by the Allied bombing, itself an effect of Germany’s war and indirectly, of course, the fires and the ash are emblematic of destruction, genocide, the Holocaust in which not here but elsewhere Sebald notes that, among countless others, Kafka’s sister (the one Kafka was closest to) perished.

In Sebald’s writing, then, the attention of the narrator is entirely subsumed within events that, though not perhaps of his making, are ones to which he integrally belongs, and his attention is continually drawn back *there*, to the confined, and confining, even suffocating, space of his psyche, which remembers and feels, but without entirely knowing why. In Kafka’s writing, the narrator/protagonist is continually brought back to their own psychic limitations, as well as to the restrictive parameters of the world in which they move. The vigilant attention to their own feelings in both Kafka’s and Sebald’s narrators produces a certain kind of wide-awakeness, but one that is entirely enclosed within the world in which they remain stuck. Both authors, too, are quite masterful at implicating the reader within that world that is depicted close-up. Arguably, as per *currere*, wide-awakeness involves not only attunement to the moment, but distantiation: “It takes a kind of distancing, an uncoupling from your practical interests, your impinging concerns, to see what we sometimes describe as the qualities of things, to make out contours, shapes, angles, even to hear sound as sound” (Greene cited in

Pinar, 2011, p. 101). However, this is precisely what can be difficult to accomplish, narratively, as in life. Melancholy comes from just such an inability to disentangle the overlapping threads of who we are (subjectively) from what we produce (e.g., as represented in writing) and what the world produces (e.g., that is disastrous, catastrophic or otherwise unsettling).

Melancholy and *Currere*

Both Kafka and Sebald shared a melancholic outlook, one attributed to their particular “biographic situation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 36). Sebald was born in Germany on May 18, 1944, a year and place of birth that overshadowed his life, having inherited the burden of the implications of his “compatriots’” actions—an ironic yet deliberately-chosen, and factual, word on his part (Sebald, 2001). Sebald could never forget—or allow himself to forget—being born German, in Germany, in the wake of the Second World War, to parents who were complicit in Nazism; his father fought in campaigns as part of the Wehrmacht. Sebald’s relationship with his father was a difficult one, for this reason, but also because the two were quite different in personality and interest. This was also the case for Kafka, who as the eldest (and only) son, might have been expected to inherit the family business, but who disappointed his father in that regard—and in just about every other way (Pawel, 1984; Stach, 2013a, b, 2017). Theirs was a strained relationship, one that affected Kafka’s vision of himself and that Kafka wrestled with throughout his life (Stach, 2017). Throughout his life, Kafka was subject to frequent illness and personal crises, this as he tried to balance his primarily nocturnal writing with his daytime job in an insurance company (the Worker’s Accident Insurance Institute)—work at which he apparently excelled; even when he indicated he wanted to retire, the Institute preferred to grant him extended leaves rather than to see him leave entirely (Stach, 2013b). Kafka saw his job as interfering with his first vocation, as a writer of literature—a vocation that he pursued, discretely, from a young age, and then more intensively while in university, studying law (Pawel, 1984). However, time—and competing obligations, along with unwellness—always seemed to interfere (Stach, 2013a, b).

One of Sebald’s English essays on Kafka opens by commenting on a studio photograph, in which a 5- or 6-year-old Kafka is dressed in a sailor suit, brandishing a straw hat in one hand, a walking stick in the other. The photograph is incongruously set in a tropical, greenhouse setting, with large palm fronds in the background. Walter Benjamin summarizes: “Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape prearranged for them, and the auricle of a big ear seems to be listening for its sounds” (Benjamin 1969/2007, pp. 118-9), the latter referring to Kafka’s ears, which were invariably prominent in photographs. The focus, though, is on Kafka’s gaze. Sebald points to how “critics have singularly failed to come to terms with this gaze, they have overlooked the yearning, fearful images of death which pervade Kafka’s work and which impart that melancholy whose onset was as early as it was persistent” (Sebald, 1972, p. 22). This notion of “petrified unrest” (Benjamin’s phrase) fascinated Sebald (cited in Medin, 2010, p. 140). For Sebald, as for Benjamin (with whose oeuvre Sebald was intimately acquainted), melancholia was “less an affective state but rather a specific stance of perception and ultimately of knowledge” (Banki, 2023, p. 186), which is an interesting thought with respect to a *currere* process.

In an oft-cited passage, Sebald ties melancholy with “resistance”; it has “nothing in common with a desire for death,” he explains. Rather, it represents a “rethinking of a calamity in

progress" (cited in Zisselsberger, 2007, p. 297)—to return to this paper's opening, the idea of mutation. Kafka's works are also dogged by a feeling of impending disaster, the direction of which is uncertain ("mutation"). Sebald returns to the same preoccupations, time and again, across his several prose writings and books of poems. Writing was something he felt bound to do, however he described it as painfully slow as well as draining. Writing to melancholic subjects was one he deemed unavoidable; necessary, even. Evidence from Kafka's diaries and letters attest to the fact that fear drove Kafka's writing, and was perhaps even the condition for its being able to be called into being (Stach, 2013a,b). Kafka wrote on fear in his letter to Milena Pollak, one of his lovers: "I do not know its inner laws, only its hand on my throat." Even if he acknowledged it as "*the most terrible thing I have ever experienced and could experience*" (italics in original), he also speculated: "It really is part of me and perhaps the best part" (Kafka in Stach, 2013b, p 375). *Currere* is a process that entails perpetual returns to the preoccupations that drive us, including the emotions (like fear; like perpetual unrest) that may lie behind them. (Medin (2010) suggests that Sebald reads Kafka through his own fear of "eternal wandering" and especially wandering "on the wrong side" of the river—p. 91)—implicitly, of life, of history.

What, then, to make of the photograph of Kafka at four years old (Stach corrects Benjamin about the age—Stach, 2017, p. 75), which both Sebald and Benjamin interpret in a certain, melancholic way? Studio photographs were standard at the time, Stach (2017) notes, this for aspiring middle-class families, who shared them among themselves, as signs of their success or hoped-for success. Stach's book features another one, taken of a 5-year old Kafka, this time standing beside the replica of a sheep. Does the young Kafka look anxious and ill at ease in these trumped-up surroundings? Undoubtedly, however it is difficult, Stach says, to interpret their meaning reliably among the many other photographs (e.g., of daily life) that were not taken. More reliable, Stach suggests, are written documents: Kafka's diaries, his stories (p. 76). Conversely, photographs and images assume an important place in Sebald's oeuvre, including as part of his stories, perhaps in the wake of Walter Benjamin's own interest in the image (a strong influence on Sebald) and too, of Roland Barthes (2010), with his notions of the image as *studium* or *punctum*, as introduced in *Camera Lucida*: *studium* is the response elicited by images that interest us; *punctum* by those that (emotionally) pierce us. The one of Kafka would seem to have been of the latter kind for Sebald. Photographs thus ought not to be discounted as signs, here, of a potential disturbance or of a mind preoccupied with disturbance or (as this is a photo of a child) presaging a state of feeling disturbed. In a letter to Felice Bauer, a person to whom he was perpetually engaged yet never married, and even though he held a job that implicitly assumed that the world could be rendered more stable through developing policies to address, even avoid, accidents, Kafka wrote that he had no plans for himself (and therefore, none that could also include Felice, was the unwritten implication). He explained:

I cannot step into the future; crashing into the future, hurling myself into the future, stumbling into the future, those are things I can do; and best of all, I can lie still. But plans and prospects—I truly have none; when things go well, I am entirely absorbed by the present; when things go badly, I curse even the present, and most assuredly the future! (cited in Stach, 2017, p. 71)

For Sebald, likewise, the future looked grim and bleak, experienced first as an unsalutary past, which cast its shadow over present and future. And yet both Sebald and Kafka found a certain meaning in literary writing—as do their readers: insightful, allegorical commentary on situations being lived through that likewise can often feel profoundly indecipherable, which is entailed, too, in *currere*, in working through preoccupations that inform subjective and social reconstruction, and where that working through also often tends to happen narratively.

Redemption, or Restitution, through Literature?

Literature's use, as Hutchinson (2022) has pointed out, lies in its uselessness; that is, it does not set out to *be* useful. To "live by literature" is "to make a purpose out of something that refuses purpose"—indeed, it is this refusal that "power[s]" fictional discourse *and* our purposeful turning towards it (p. 4). The Norwegian writer Karl Knausgaard, in a speech given in London in 2022, was more specific: the novel's role, he explained, has been "to wriggle underneath...overarching narratives, to break them down ... to get closer to the concrete experience of reality." This concrete experience—of writing close to the bone—is evoked in both Kafka's and Sebald's narratives, as already intimated. Any change, Knausgaard said, as if echoing Pinar (2023), "comes from within" and this is where fictional writing would seem to seek to go—and helps us (as readers) go as well. "Stuck inside ourselves we wither," Pinar (2023) warns; a "praxis of presence promises to extricate us from self-enclosure" (p. 3): from feeling complacent about change or resisting change. This is a central question: of how narrative explores self-enclosure but can, just perhaps, provide a way through it, or at least, as much as is possible, given (as Kafka portrays in "The Borrow") that the self is itself an enclosure—a sleeve through which the world is discerned.

In a compelling book, Anderson (1992) argues for the importance of clothing to understanding Kafka: the man and his work. Kafka was a man who paid attention to his clothing and strove to dress well, Anderson documents; he also grew up in an environment (his father's store) that was devoted to supplying clothing accessories. However, the work of writing was something different entirely. In one of his notebooks (1918), Kafka wrote the following parable: "Before setting foot in the Holy of Holies you must take off your shoes, yet not only your shoes but everything" (cited in Anderson, p. 4). You must take off your coat and all of the clothing that you travelled in, he wrote. And then you must take off "your nakedness and everything that is under the nakedness and everything that hides beneath that, and then the core and the core of the core, then the remainder and then the residue and then even the glimmer of the undying fire" (p. 4). Anderson draws the analogy to writing: "The writer must strip off all his 'clothing', all the false coverings of the empirical self, in his search for the 'undying fire' of aesthetic truth, the 'Holy of Holies'" (pp. 4-5). To be (such) a writer is to be utterly vulnerable, exposed. One of the first iterations of *currere* was in the context of its being a "poor curriculum," one that strips away life's masks so as to "overcome their resistance to experience, perception, expression" (Grumet, 2015, p. 88). This is what fiction would seem to help accomplish—or auto/biographically-informed fiction, which sustains that thread of intimate relation between lived experience and writing. For all of his life, Kafka read memoirs and biographies (Pawel, 1984, pp. 123, 159; Stach, 2023), while Sebald did much the same: writing to others' lives provides the narrative texture of his prose works. Both were drawn towards auto/biographical writing. Neither wrote literary works that were memoirs; rather, the pull was downwards, and inwards, to a mode of writing obliquely, yet persistently even obsessively, about characters facing psychic demons and dilemmas: situations prompted through their own modes of perception and biographically-constituted perspectives as well as by the world in which they found themselves. We can learn from their autobiographically-driven narratives.

The stories of both authors addressed mutation, in the sense of the psychic contortion and distortion produced in them by living in this world, one informed by disaster of one kind or another. In Kafka's stories, characters desperately try to control and influence the course of

events, even as they remain blind or oblivious to the part they may play in producing a certain state of affairs. In Sebald's narratives, characters are likewise overcome by what happens to them. The narrator tries to grapple with the significance of events, in others' lives and his own, but there too, the task proves insuperable; the narrator senses his own implication, even owns it to a certain degree, however also seems to know that, in not being able to escape it, it presents a shroud between what is felt and what is alternately possible.

In writing so close to the bone, each nevertheless found in writing (and apparently only in writing) what Kafka called redemption and Sebald called restitution. The redemption afforded by writing for Kafka came through being in an alternative space—that “leap out of murderers' row”—constituted by a vantage point—“higher” but for all that not necessarily “keener”—but that was “obedient to its own laws of motion” (cited in Stach, 2013b, pp. 424-5). Life here is likened to death row: a site where we are condemned by our own thoughts, actions, histories. Biographers like Pawel and Stach have both documented the extent to which Kafka, from a very young age, berated himself for his failures and shortcomings. Upon being interviewed after publishing the three volumes comprising study of Kafka's life (an endeavor that consumed 18 years of his own life), Stach commented that Kafka was both puzzled as well as motivated by the question: How do we get through life? (Stach, 2023).

Sebald, too, was pursued by the sense of his life being over, or over-determined, even before it got started, well-captured by Ozick (1996) on rendering Sebald's vain attempts to escape the “ineradicable, inescapable, ever-recurring, hideously retrievable 1944” of his birth. His patrimony—and all that he inherited with it: a “dark fatherland” (Sebald, 2006, p. 207)—became as a backpack that he said he could never put down, and that he began to address in a different way when he started writing, relatively late in life (his 40's), through prose fiction. Writing did not relieve the burden of the past (which was also of the present); if anything, writing intensified it. He stated, in that prescient speech he gave in Stuttgart a few short months before his death and that is called “An Attempt at Restitution,” that “I have kept asking myself... what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run” (p. 210)—connections like those that link the day of his birth (May 18, 1944) and Ottla's (Kafka's sister) arrival in Auschwitz—and “why can I not get such episodes out of my mind” (p. 210). It is a preoccupation—and a question—to which there is no answer, not even in the writing of literature. However, literature was the only space in which Sebald found some “attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts” (p. 215). Restitution was chosen as response to “the memory of those to whom the greatest injustice was done” (p. 215). Restitution entails a giving back or making of reparation for what was lost or taken (OED, 1973). Sebald implies that his writings, such as they are, are his “attempt at” restitution: a giving of his life (in writing) to the lives of others. Redemption likewise consists in an offer. As Stach (2013b) observes, Kafka originally wrote “redemptive purpose of writing” but then changed it to “redemptive comfort” (in Stach, p. 425), thus suggesting that the offer, being more a feeling than an action, was limited.³

What we might draw out, by way of conclusion, and with the help of a *currere* lens, is that autobiographically-informed or *-driven* narrative writing (like Kafka's, like Sebald's of writing on the edge, the periphery) represents a life pathway as well as a response to difficult questions and issues. In such literature, we can find analogies and allegories—not for solving, still less for becoming fully attentive to and vigilant about the world and ourselves in it—but a certain space within which to grapple with the complexities of living in the world—and to support feeling the need to do so. Reaching a possibly “redemptive” space for the “reaggregation” of

experiences, as Pinar (2011) himself notes, “constitutes the labor of subjective reconstruction” (p. 99); it is the work of *currere*. Kafka’s and Sebald’s (peripheral) ways of working with narrative teach that there are no guarantees in such writing for redemption, nor for restitution; we are all unreliable narrators, yet we are all narrators. To follow Sebald’s cue, the melancholy that would seem to need to accompany such writing signals not a morbid fascination with death and demise but a willingness to become vulnerable through narrative: a baring of oneself to seek ethical forms through which to convey one’s persistently returning preoccupations.

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Orcid ID

Teresa Strong-Wilson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6823-4909>

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Notes

¹ Given his interest in autobiography and autobiographical narrative and, too, his belief in life experience as educational, Sebald may have felt at home in curriculum theory; curriculum theory is one place where critical engagement with Sebald's narrative prose is finding a home: Strong-Wilson, 2015, 2021; Strong-Wilson et al., 2023.

² Stach (2013b) links Kafka's story of "The Burrow" with the enemy from within—the labored breathing that was Kafka's own as he struggled with the tuberculosis that would end his life; as such, the "actual, terrible core [of the story] is biographical"—p. 549.

³ Others might judge better, in Kafka's case, based on the writings he left behind. Anything that was not published Kafka told his friend Max Brod to destroy; however, Brod fortunately did not (Pawel, 1984; Stach, 2013b).