

BRITISH ACADEMY LECTURE

## Revenants and Migrants: Hardy, Butler, Woolf and Sebald

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THE IDEA OF THE REVENANT has in it always something of the uncanny: that which cannot be placed, present out of time, a projection that marks otherness. It is as though the odd word is there to disguise how common is the experience of coming back, or trying to do so, an experience disturbing indeed in its commonality. Dictionaries describe revenants as those who return to a place after long absence; or those who return from the dead or seeming dead: the two significations slide across each other. The word retains a sense of foreignness, a French word that has never been fully assimilated to English, that shuns domestication. The action ‘revenant’, returning, has become a being, a revenant.

In almost all English dictionaries that include the word, ‘revenant’ appears next to ‘revenge’, and the cross-contamination of those concepts is illuminating. Vengeful return has been a motor of drama since the *Oresteia*, with telling modern examples in Friedrich Durrenmatt, *The Visitor* (1956), Harold Pinter, *The Home-Coming* (1964) and Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987). (To quote Randle Cotgrave, whose 1611 *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* is the most revealing source for the presences and shadows in the term ‘revenant’, here on ‘Revenche’, the next word on his page: ‘Revenge, requital; returne of as good, or as much as was brought.’)<sup>1</sup> But today I want to concentrate not on vengeance but on survival, whether genetic or in narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Revenant: m. ante: f. Returning, reverting; reviving; increasing; rising; comming againe’; ‘Revenir: To revert, returne, come backe, or agine; also, to revive, or come to himself after a

When we speak of revenants the word places us in the position of those who see them, not those who *are* them. That positioning has told one gripping story: of ghosts, of apparitions, of those suddenly, fugitively, there again in a particular moment and place—back from the dead. These others come back, figments of our desire or dread, induced by memories long buried, flashed across the brink of life. Yet also themselves, sullen and autonomous, not to be done away with by the blink of an eye, making demands by their presence. Rilke captures that doubled sense of the revenant as desired yet intrusive:

‘Requiem for a Friend’ opens:

I have my dead, and I have let them go,  
and was amazed to see them so contented,  
so soon at home in being dead, so cheerful,  
so unlike their reputation. Only you  
return; brush past me, loiter, try to knock  
against something, so that the sound reveals  
your presence. Oh don’t take from me what I  
am slowly learning. I’m sure you have gone astray  
if you are moved to homesickness for anything  
in this dimension.<sup>2</sup>

[REQUIEM FÜR EINE FREUNDIN

Ich habe Tote, und ich ließ sie hin  
und war erstaunt, sie so getrost zu sehn,  
so rasch zuhaus im Totsein, so gerecht,  
so anders als ihr Ruf. Nur du, du kehrst  
zurück; du streifst mich, du gehst um, du willst  
an etwas stoßen, daß es klingt von dir  
und dich verrät. O nimm mir nicht, was ich  
langsam erlern. Ich habe recht; du irrst  
wenn du gerührt zu irgend einem Ding  
ein Heimweh hast. Wir wandeln dieses um;  
es ist nicht hier, wir spiegeln es herein  
aus unserm Sein, sobald wir es erkennen.]

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trance; also, to swell, rise, or increase, as dough by leavening, or flesh by parboiling; also, to profit, benefit, or yeeld increase; also, to resemble; also, to fit, suite, or agree well with’, Randle Cotgrave, *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611), reproduced with introduction by William S. Woods (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1950), no page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell, bilingual edition (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 72–3.

The revenant here, as so often in such story, hints insidiously at her own presence, ‘tries to knock against something’, tries to re-enter the world of the senses and make herself known.

But the word ‘revenant’ signifies also those who return alive after long absence, who may have *seemed* dead so unknown were their movements. And here the subject position latent in the word can shift. Now we recognise the experience of return delayed, *alongside* Rip Van Winkle or Odysseus—return so long delayed indeed that recognition fails. Returning is often a dangerous thing to do: it risks disappointment, or disclosure, even as it promises renewal, or requital. It may be a lacklustre experience in which memories fail to stir, or where remembered places are changed beyond recognition. Or it may open up again experience so poignant that it sets life on a different course. The pleasures of return are often in the material details that survive or the street names that now form a litany. If there are people still there to be found, the risks and pleasures multiply.

To begin with one of the most famous stories of travel and return home, *within* the human life-span: the last phases of the *Odyssey* are concerned with bafflement, the failure to recognise, the struggle to renew. The failure of others to recognise Ulysses is famous, but he too fails to know himself. Before Ulysses reaches his own court he is set down, still sleeping, from on board ship by his hosts. He is back in Ithaca, in a cove with a long-leaved olive tree and a cavern sacred to the Naiads. When he awakes, at last on his native shore, he fails to recognise it:

everything in Ithaca, the long hill-paths, the welcoming bays, the beetling rocks and the leafy trees, seemed unfamiliar to its King. He leapt to his feet and stood staring at his native land. Then he groaned, and slapping his thighs with his hands he cried out in dismay: ‘Oh no! Whose country have I come to this time?’ . . . ‘They said they would put me down in my own sunny Ithaca, and then they carry me off to this outlandish place.’

Of course, one explanation of his failure to recognise his homeland is that this is the fault of Pallas Athene who, we are told, ‘had thrown a mist over the place’. But it is also because paths, bays, rocks, and trees, do not declare themselves as a single inevitably known landscape as a group of buildings might. Ulysses has been away so long, seen so many constellations of natural forms, that the once familiar has become (in Rieu’s translation) ‘outlandish’. Some translations give simply ‘another place’, some emphasise ‘a strange place’ and the slide is performed, as in English, between another (a further example of the same kind) and an Other (foreign, unlike, not to be absorbed). Odysseus is himself ‘outlandish’, a revenant, perhaps doomed to be not a returning traveller but a migrant

still. Not knowing where he is, we are told, 'his thoughts turned to his native land, and, homesick and grieving, he dragged himself along the shore of the sounding sea'.<sup>3</sup> Returned at last to his 'native land' (which we know, guided by the narrator, but he does not) he still feels himself utterly alien, 'homesick and grieving', alongside the 'sounding sea' with its obliterative universality.

Even after he knows where he is and has been recognised by his dog, the cowman and the swineherd, the old nurse, his son Telemachus, and perforce the suitors, Penelope resists. To her this figure may indeed be a revenant, a dangerous figuration of desire, delusive, perhaps a damnable imposter. Penelope is numbed, silent, bewildered. She dreads imposture: many men have sought to usurp Odysseus in her affections, sometimes by disguise. She has become fixated on resistance and cannot turn herself away from it. New experience seems hollow, not beguiling.

In Monteverdi's opera 'The Return of Ulysses' (1640) this scene of resistance becomes immensely long, a protracted searching out of certainty, tracking the renewal of love at last reached in the intertwined 'Si, Si' of the final bars. The scene is the heart of the plot and at its climax is the discovery of the great bed immoveably planted, its first bedpost a still-living 'long-leaved olive tree' like that in the cove at his landing. But though this couple reach the bliss of accord, Odysseus's experience of frailty and decimation during his years of travelling is expressed in a metaphor of shipwreck that draws attention to how few reach such an ending: Penelope says: 'You have convinced my unbelieving heart.' Immediately:

Her words stirred a great longing for tears in Odysseus' heart, and he wept as he held his dear and loyal wife in his arms. It was like the moment when the blissful land is seen by struggling sailors, whose fine ship Poseidon has battered with wind and wave and smashed on the high seas. A few swim safely to the mainland out of the foaming surf, their bodies caked with brine; and blissfully they tread on solid land, saved from disaster. It was bliss like that for Penelope to see her husband once again. (p. 306)

The mindscape of shipwreck and survival swings to and fro between Odysseus and Penelope, shared alike as 'blissfully they tread on solid ground, saved from disaster': among the very few who reach shore.

Return is, in this realistic image, improbable, achieved against the odds. Monteverdi's reading draws both on the psychological acuity of Homer's text and on the bluff humour of incongruous expectations. In

<sup>3</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu, revised D. C. H. Rieu, with new Preface (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 174.

that, it is closer to Samuel Butler's insistence on the humour of Homer than to the circularity of Levinas's complaint that in the *Odyssey* 'the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures—which in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home'.<sup>4</sup> Samuel Butler imagined the author of the *Odyssey* as 'a young, ardent, brilliant woman' laughing in her sleeve and bored with the interminable male stories of the *Iliad*. In his captious way Butler does pinpoint the unillusioned quality of Penelope's reception of Odysseus on his return. She has had to endure separation for twenty years and so has avoided giving him too much thought:

Penelope . . . on being asked by Ulysses on his return what she thought of him, said that she did not think very much of him nor very little of him; in fact, she did not think much about him one way or the other. True, later on she relents and becomes more effusive.<sup>5</sup>

The concepts of return and of migration may appear to be twinned. But as the metaphor of the shipwreck sharply reminds us, migrants have no guarantee of return. And this is true not only of those who must flee their homeland in time of war and disturbance but also of all those who leave a native place for other prospects. It may indeed be true of all who move from childhood into adulthood. Travellers may return but migrants move on, to settle, if they are fortunate, in a quite new place. The impossible longing to return is one of the crucial themes of our present era with its crowded trajectories of migration across the world. It is tracked too in the fascination with genealogies and family history, given a kind of scientific substance by the realisation of the continuity of descent made evident in DNA. The theme is not new, though the conditions and technologies that propel migration may be: returning has always been a difficult matter. And not only the return of the repressed.

I want to take some examples of how over the past hundred years or so certain writers have engaged anew with the idea of reappearance. In some cases, this reappearance confirms the impossibility of return. The writers on whose works I draw (necessarily briefly and through particular examples) are Thomas Hardy, Samuel Butler, Virginia Woolf, and W. G. Sebald. I am not primarily searching out a line of continuity between them, though some continuities will emerge, despite their diversity. Rather, I shall

<sup>4</sup> *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Butler, *The Humour of Homer and Other Essays*, ed. R. A. Streatfeild (London: A. C. Fifield, 1913), pp. 78, 79.

examine the very different pressures in this topic of reappearance and how they each make meaning, often discomfiting meaning, from it. New versions of heredity, new mass migrations and extinctions, have combined with old stories of coming home, or of finding no home there. Running through all my examples is the lure of narrative and the written, which may allow life and death to co-exist in a manner impossible to the body. Many of the most compelling narratives of the past century distrust the comfort offered by their own powers of resurrection.

One shift that produces new ways of thinking and feeling about return and reappearance in the nineteenth century is the relating of evolutionary theory to forms of memory, including the genetic memory that produces shared features down the family generations and, more disputed, shared actions and behaviours. Here Samuel Butler offers some extraordinarily provocative insights, insights that have gained in value over the years since he lived. His method is to couch argument in paradox and to challenge the reader to resist.

In the *Origin of Species* Darwin emphasised the inevitability of species extinction, and refused to accord human memory, or any organism's memory, a significant place in evolutionary history. Most such history had occurred long before humans were present to survey or imagine it. And natural selection paid scant respect to processes of learning. Accommodation between organism and environment was crucial, but evanescent. Surviving above all required progeny and variety, but learnt experience within the single lifespan could not be incorporated in future generations. Most previous species, Darwin contended, had vanished from the face of the earth. What forms future life might take were unknowable, so profuse were the sequences of possible evolution. Once gone, species cannot return, though some few may endure almost unchanged across aeons. 'All true classification is genealogical' was Darwin's strong claim, but it is balanced by the knowledge that most of what has ever been on earth has vanished, unknowably.<sup>6</sup>

Heredity, Butler argues, is on the contrary a mode of memory. This is not quite a question of Lamarckian self-help though he does acknowledge Lamarck's influence on his thought. Butler emphasises the role of unconsciousness in this genetic memory: 'It is not likely that the moth remembers having been a caterpillar, more than we ourselves remember

<sup>6</sup> I develop this argument more extensively in 'How Do History and Memory Shape Each Other?', Session 3 of *Asking the Right Questions: A Colloquium Celebrating the 50th Anniversary*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Kenneth R. Manning (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, 2001), pp. 65–72.

having been children of a day old.<sup>7</sup> *Life and Habit* has at the climax of its argument a series of statements whose sense relies upon his inverting the usual assumption that the past has been left behind. Instead, he argues, the past lies always in wait for us embedded in the future. This can have happy phases, as in youth:

A living creature well supported by a mass of healthy ancestral memory is a young and growing creature, free from ache or pain, and thoroughly acquainted with its business so far, but with much to be reminded of.

It is the young and fair, then, who are the truly old and experienced; it is they alone who have a trustworthy memory to guide them. (pp. 298–9)

Experience, in Butler's view, is not contained and recollected only within the single life span; it extends laterally as well as over time. He writes in the *Notebooks*:

Everything knows something and has had some experiences; and everything is a record of its own experiences; knowledge and condition are as convertible as force and heat.

At the same time, Butler emphasises repeatedly that 'the phenomena of heredity, whether regards instinct or structure [are] mainly the memory of past experiences, accumulated and fused until they become automatic.'<sup>8</sup> Memory, that is, need not imply personal recollection; rather it is a process of sustained learning by forebears that declares itself in the individual organism. This was a view that Freud took also, in *Moses and Monotheism* and even as late as *Civilisation and Its Discontents*: for him, though, the earlier layers of tribal experience still held in the brain are primitive, and tend to return the human to primitive forms of behaviour. That is not Butler's view. Indeed, his emphasis on the cleverness of all organic forms makes him chary of describing any behaviour as primitive: 'Crystals know a lot, and they occur early in the scale of evolution. Look at snow crystals' (*Notebooks*, p. 176). In *Erewhon* he writes appreciatively of the 'low cunning' of potato tubers creeping towards the light. 'The potato says these things by doing them, which is the best of languages. What is consciousness, if this is not consciousness?'<sup>9</sup>

Butler collapses the borders between consciousness and the unconscious to emphasise that instinct is the enacting by the organism of

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (1877; repr. London: Wildwood House [1981]), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Samuel Butler's Notebooks*, Selections edited by Geoffrey Keynes and Brian Hill (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon or Over the Range* (1874; repr. London: Jonathan Cape [1945]), p. 193.

experiences already performed by other progenitors and here manifest again. The past is renewed and enacted by the present.<sup>10</sup> And this is where Butler begins to dig a trap for himself. He delights in the knowingness of other life forms and the dependence of that knowingness on assimilated experience that requires no questioning to appear again full-blown. But he is driven to argue that there is a 'continued existence of personal identity between parents and their offspring through all time' (p. 97); this does well enough when the subject is animals or moths or trees but becomes claustrophobic for him when it applies to humans. In *The Way of All Flesh* young Ernest is suffocated by his parents taking possession of him and expecting him to act out their accumulated experience, their prejudices or prejudgements. So alien yet so close, they threaten to usurp his identity and to reappear as him, or worse, as him become them.

That is the deathly aspect of Butler's insistence on lineage as re-enactment, and individuality as controlled by 'the one great personality of life as a whole'.<sup>11</sup> In *The Way of All Flesh* this is reinforced by narrative tenses that freeze the seeming future as already enacted, intractably performed. In contrast, the undescribed future is for Butler at least capable of being construed as liberation, since memory may by then have undergone a process of transformation akin to the activity that moves caterpillar into butterfly. These are frail hopes: stronger in his work is the push of the past making its appearance renewed in present beings, sometimes occupying them to their detriment.

The emphasis on heredity and the reappearance of past family traits has often taken the form of nightmare in the twentieth century. The fear of occupation, of insurgent elders reappearing under the skin, haunts the poetry of the Colombian poet Jose Manuel Arango (born 1936) too. In 'This Place in the Night' he compellingly experiences his father in his own body (I quote from the translation by Anabel Torres):

sometimes  
 I see in my hands the hands of my father  
 and my voice  
 is his voice  
  
 a dark terror  
 touches me

<sup>10</sup> 'His past selves are living in him at this moment with the accumulated life of centuries.' Butler quotes and dates this statement from *Life and Habit* as June 1874 in *Unconscious Memory* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1910), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Life and Habit*, p. 102.



perhaps at night  
 I dream his dreams

and the cold fury  
 and the memory of unseen places

are just him, repeating himself  
 I am he, who returns

face of my father, suspended  
 under the skin, over the bones of my face.<sup>12</sup>

But these dark dreams of the body are not the only mode of re-appearance: writing can refresh being too. Reviewing Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* in 1919 Virginia Woolf uses the language of plant breeding to describe Butler's way of pre-empting our best thoughts.

Then, again, we had fancied that some idea or other was of our own breeding. But here, on the next page, was Butler's original version, from which our seed had blown. If you want to come up afresh in thousands of minds and books long after you are dead, no doubt the way to do it is to start thinking for yourself. The novels that have been fertilised by *The Way of All Flesh* must by this time constitute a large library, with well-known names upon their backs.

This power of reappearace, 'coming up afresh in thousands of minds and books long after you are dead', she associates with his uncompromising originality, 'awkward, opinionated, angular, perverse', yet 'more alive'; what she elsewhere, in 1925, calls his 'quizzical and caustic humour'.<sup>13</sup> As Andrew McNeillie notes, using a similar metaphor, Butler was 'a writer of seminal importance to Bloomsbury' (III, p. 60). One novel that pulls on Butler's work both on family lineage and on the lateral relation of memory to the individual and the species is Woolf's own *To the Lighthouse*, which she began to write in 1925 and published in 1927. When she first imagined the work she wrote in her Diary:

This is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St. Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished*, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 'This Place in the Night': poems by Jose Manuel Arango, trans. Anabel Torres, Elinor Shaffer (ed.), *Comparative Criticism*, 23 (2001), 283–99.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Way of All Flesh', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 1919–24, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 59 (first published *TLS* 26 June 1919); 'The Two Samuel Butlers', *ibid.*, vol. IV, 1925–28 (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 9 (first published *Nation and Athenaeum*, 11 April 1925).

<sup>14</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 1925–30, ed. Anne Olivier Bell with Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), pp. 18–19.

By the time she has experienced the writing of the book, the family relations within it have shifted and a kind of forgiveness has begun, most strikingly in the pushing aside from the centre of Mr Ramsay, and by his silence at the book's close as they sail at last to the lighthouse, just when his children expect him yet again unbearably to quote Cowper's poem 'The Castaway'. Cam has two stories in her head as she peels her hard-boiled egg: they are eating their lunch here on the boat in the sun 'and they were also making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck'. That story spills across into recollected actuality:

'That was where she sunk,' said Macalister's boy suddenly.

'Three men were drowned where we are now,' said the old man. He had seen them clinging to the mast himself. And Mr. Ramsay taking a look at the spot was about, James and Cam were afraid, to burst out:

But I beneath a rougher sea,

And if he did, they could not bear it; they would shriek aloud; they could not endure another explosion of the passion that boiled in him; but to their surprise all he said was 'Ah' as if he thought to himself, But why make a fuss about that? Naturally men are drowned in a storm, but it is a perfectly straightforward affair, and the depths of the sea (he sprinkled the crumbs from his sandwich paper over them) are only water after all.<sup>15</sup>

Shipwreck again, but now no Poseidon as in the *Odyssey* who 'battered with wind and wave and smashed on the high seas'; no self-referring poetry; no raising of the language of the matter; no lowering: an even acceptance of passing, from the person who has so frantically questioned throughout the book how long he can last, *we* can last, not just as individuals, but also as books, as ideas, as achievement, as species. Earlier he thinks: 'The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare' (p. 41). Mr Ramsay accepts at the book's close that 'the depths of the sea are only water after all', that men die and do *not* come back, that the simple exhalation of breath, 'Ah', means most.

That acceptance is set alongside quite another scene taking place while they are sailing to the lighthouse. Lily Briscoe, the painter, not part of the family—though deeply bound in love to them all and especially to Mrs Ramsay, now dead—is ruminating on her work. She is living the imagined past of the Ramsays as she struggles to start again painting her picture. That picture has been in process since the beginning of the book

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, text edited by Stella McNichol with introduction by Hermione Lee (1927; repr. London: Penguin [1992]), pp. 222–3. Further page references in text.

and was originally to have shown in repose Mrs Ramsay and James, then seven, now seventeen. It has passed through various stylistic vicissitudes, with a certain satiric dash from pointillism, to post-Impressionism, to cubism. And here she is back at the beginning again, struggling past evasion and beauty:

But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. (p. 209)

As she broods and works in the open air just outside the house, she hears light noise from within the drawing room—the squeak of a hinge, a flounce of air, ‘somebody was sitting in the chair’.

For Heaven’s sake, she prayed, let them sit still there and not come floundering out to talk to her. Mercifully, whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little. It was interesting. (p. 218)

But then: ‘Her heart leaped at her and seized her and tortured her.’

‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she cried, feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay—it was part of her perfect goodness to Lily—sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat. (pp. 218–19)

This is revenance ‘on a level with ordinary experience’. Woolf makes no fuss about the crossing of the border here from death to life: she is wise in this, since writing alone can let such reappearance happen without change of register. So quiet is the crossing back into the body that it moves beneath the reader’s radar. Mrs Ramsay is for that necessary time re-embodied ‘she sat there quite simply’, she ‘cast her shadow on the step. There she sat’ (p. 235). Woolf’s often repeated epiphanic phrase: ‘There she was’ is here more sharply focused: ‘There she sat.’ Presence is given its full weight. Donne’s ‘A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucie’s Day’ is fleetingly evoked:

If I an ordinary nothing were,  
As shadow, a light, and body must be there.

Mrs Ramsay has returned; her shadow (twice invoked) proves that ‘a light and body must be there’. The serenity with which Mrs Ramsay materialises owes everything to art in its fullest sense: writing allows, or seems to allow, the dead to be here; painting gives them tactile presence. That

full somatic reappearance makes possible for Lily the adverse act of abstraction that will complete her picture and close the book:

She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. (p. 226)

Mrs Ramsay is now at last absent, her ghost laid (the steps are empty). A year after she published the novel Woolf wrote on her father's birthday:

I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. . . . He comes back more as a contemporary.<sup>16</sup>

Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* registers the recalcitrance of the family survivor, the beating-down of old dictators. Woolf instead allows silence to supervene on the urgent demands of family. Mrs Ramsay reappears not to them but to her *friend*, the artist, Lily. Blood, it seems, is *thinner* than paint and water. The artist only can conjure the dead to come back, and compose them. And this can be truly described only in fiction, which is love and pretence at once. What matters is equal presence: 'He comes back more as a contemporary.'

Like Butler, Hardy perceives menace as much as fruitfulness in the recurrence of the family face. Hardy's poem 'Heredity' captures the confidence of the captiously re-embodied:

I am the family face;  
Flesh perishes, I live on,  
Projecting trait and trace  
Through time to times anon,  
And leaping from place to place  
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can  
In curve and voice and eye  
Despise the human span  
Of durance—that is I;  
The eternal thing in man,  
That heeds no call to die.<sup>17</sup>

The family face becomes a kind of trickster leaping in wayward fashion across time and place (Through time to times anon / And leaping from place to place / Over oblivion). But the poem's rhyme sequences

<sup>16</sup> *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. III, 1925–30, p. 208.

<sup>17</sup> *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, edited James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 434.

chasten that claim to eternity: ‘on’, ‘anon’, end in ‘oblivion’, and ‘eye’, ‘I’, reach ‘die’. The family face crops up not in one but many places as families scatter and migrate. It is disembodied (flesh perishes) yet deathless. It may go unrecognised. That is when dispersion has become chronic and generations do not know each other.

The plot of reappearance often draws on just that loss of cultural and somatic memory, as, recently, in Mike Leigh’s film *Secrets and Lies*. In the case of Hardy’s own novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a painful instance, while *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* shows how the seeking back into past family grandeurs with the guarantee of the family face can bring calamity in its wake. The wry comedy of *The Well-Beloved* is founded on the reappearance of a face across three generations of unlike women. I have written elsewhere about the forces and fissures in *The Return of the Native*. But it is Hardy’s poems that particularly interest me in my present argument. The poems rely on time-warps, on the traps laid by rhyme, and often dwell on the actuality of return to *places* where no return to palpable human *being* is possible.

*The Voice*

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,  
Saying that now you are not as you were  
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,  
Standing as when I drew near to the town  
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,  
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness  
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,  
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,  
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,  
Leaves around me falling,  
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,  
And the woman calling.

‘Let me *view* you then’: but instead of *apparition* Hardy seeks out the endurance of primordial sounds: the hiss of leaves and the bunched ‘oo’ of the wind rhyming with, and inducing, the presence of the woman once longed for then wearied of, now dead and regretted. The slantwise rhymes prolong auditory memory beyond its four-second decay: ‘woman much

missed' re-emerges in 'listlessness' and 'wistlessness'; the voice calling 'oo' emerges from the stream of sounds. The word 'you' generates a fundamental sound, within and beyond human communication, that runs through the poem. 'you', 'you', 'you', 'drew', 'you', 'would', 'knew', 'you', 'air-blue', and last the 'Wind oozing thin'. The sound is naturalised. It is the wind; it is the woman, perhaps. Rhyme, with its free oscillation back and forth through time, its discovery of kinships in unlike and far parted words, enacts the pulse of reappearance. So that despite its often melancholy compacting of sense, its activity can produce reassurance. It allows the almost lost to reappear, or to be heard again.<sup>18</sup>

In Hardy's poems the unillusioned knowledge of human transience takes, in the main, a domestic form. Only *The Dynasts* (1903–10) attempts a global scope, with a cranked-up vocabulary that strains to match the sounds of war and the manoeuvres of diplomacy. It is not easy to read, though from time to time it achieves a surreal intensity in its downward gaze. Europe's armies creep across the plains of the Napoleonic wars. Here return is retreat, staggering away from Moscow. The narrative 'stage-directions' tell us

What has floated down from the sky upon the Army is a flake of snow. Then comes another and another, till natural features, hitherto varied with the tints of autumn, are confounded, and all is phantasmal grey and white.

The caterpillar shape still creeps laboriously nearer, but instead of increasing in size by the rules of perspective, it gets more attenuated and there are left upon the ground behind it minute parts of itself, which are speedily flaked over, and remain as white pimples by the wayside.

*Spirit of the Years*

These atoms that drop off are snuffed-out souls  
Who are enghosted by the caressing snow.<sup>19</sup>

Men fall and die and are covered with snow, simply atoms 'snuffed-out', mere pimples by the wayside, yet part of a macabre social organism. Hardy risks much in this strange epic (written over the decade to 1910), an epic which combines distance and outrage. His method strains towards cinema; he needs 'Spectacle' to track what he calls 'the Great Historical Calamity, or Clash of Peoples, artificially brought about some hundred years ago' (p. vii). He was to live through the next such clash and presages

<sup>18</sup> Hardy, *Complete Poems*, p. 285.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts An Epic-Drama of the War with Napoleon, in Three Parts, Nineteen Acts, & One Hundred and Thirty Scenes* (first publication of all three parts, 1910; repr. London: Macmillan [1915]), pp. 355–6.

the worse to come.

As I have briefly demonstrated, Butler, Hardy and Woolf, the three writers with whom I have so far been concerned, have a number of biographical and written links between them. That is not so for the fourth writer to be considered. W. G. Sebald is par excellence a European writer, writing always in German while domiciled in Britain for the thirty years of his writing life, intensely responsive to places and their troubled histories, whether villages in Suffolk or capitals like Prague or Paris. In one fundamental particular, Sebald never became a migrant, though his central subject is the life of migrants and he lived so long abroad. He continued to write in his native tongue. Many migrant writers move to their fresh language, make claims on it and change it. Sebald preserved a German that could bear the brunt of new calamities while ceremoniously drawing on the velleities of past custom.

He also explores in *Austerlitz* the threshold position of a fiction that draws on shared historical events while imagining a life marked by romance features. These features include the common psychological fantasy of the child who imagines his parents not to be his parents and himself to have come from another more fascinating family, here tragically proved actual; the beloved servant who waits across the years for the miraculous reunion, here (as in the *Odyssey*) marvellously achieved; the Orientalist guide to a hidden chamber (the man with the white turban); the repeated chancy reappearances of Austerlitz himself to the narrator who has no story of his own; the passive enregistering of a life by an entirely reliable (*impossibly* reliable) narrator with an extraordinary memory of each conversation, a narrator who may be the disguised fiction-writer himself. Sebald draws on the reach of our incredulity to produce a work absolutely authentic in performance. The spectral narrator keeps pace in his prose with dream recurrences and public happenings alike so that the book's motion is like that of a dream, the reader's own dream, while yet its events (often terrible events) and its buildings are perturbingly vouched for by external record. By invoking historical record and romance at once, Sebald encompasses two kinds of belief. He needs the old long stories of return to mark the modern horrors of the holocaust, and European dispersion.

Among the three earlier English writers I have discussed, Hardy is the one concerned with migrants (for migration happens within the nation more often than beyond it) and in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he powerfully communicates the forced displacement of the poor. Hardy's training as an architect also gave him a very specific

recognition of time passing and enduring in the body of buildings. His feeling for the volume, the history, the materiality of built environments comes somewhere close to that of Sebald for whom buildings and their vanishing are the repository of shared secret knowledge. Buildings cannot return. Once gone they are gone for good, however much pious imitation supervenes.

In Sebald's writing the intensity of recall of vanished buildings produces something very like a shudder. He evokes them and their spaces until they crowd into the reader's mind as revenants. Who would ever have supposed that Liverpool Street Station could become a site of such dark rapture? Sebald writes about buildings that have vanished in a way that only ageing natives might, so that he begins to seem native to many different groups of people. (To the French, Austerlitz is not only a battle but a railway station, to the British Liverpool Street Station is a mark of the change from old to new.) Buildings are meaningful because, gone or present still, they carry with them a freight of passing human life. That is particularly so of railway stations; this work is full of them, and their waiting rooms, from the 'salle des pas perdus' at Antwerp Centraal Station, with which the book opens, to Nuremberg station near its end. The narrator first remembers the time before Liverpool Street Station was at all; then remembers forward, as elegy:

The little river Welbrook, the ditches and ponds, the crakes and snipe and herons, the elms and mulberry trees, Paul Pindar's deer park, the inmates of Bedlam and the starving paupers of Angel Alley, Peter Street, Sweet Apple Court and Swan Yard are all gone, and gone now too are the millions and millions of people who passed through Broadgate and Liverpool Street stations day in, day out, for an entire century. As for me, said Austerlitz, I felt at this time as if the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing.<sup>20</sup>

Der Wellbrookbach, die Wassergräben and Teiche, die Sumpfhühner, Schnepfen und Fischreiher, die Ulmen und Maulbeerbäume, der Hirschgarten Paul Pindars, die Kopfkranken von Bedlam und die Hungerleider von Angel Alley, aus der Peter Street, aus dem Sweet Apple Court und dem Swan Yard waren verschwunden, und verschwunden sind jetzt auch die nach Abermillionen zählenden Scharen, die tagein und tagaus, während eines ganzen Jahrhunderts durch die Bahnhöfe von Broadgate und Liverpool Street zogen. Für mich aber, sagte Austerlitz, war es zu jener Zeit, als kehrten die Toten aus ihrer Abwesenheit

<sup>20</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001), pp. 187–8. All further page references are in the main text, W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001), pp. 190, 192.



zurück und erfüllten das Zwielficht um mich her mit ihrem eigenartig langsamen, ruhlosen Treiben. (pp. 190–2)

Austerlitz has discovered his own name only in his teens and knows nothing of his past beyond his life with his sad foster-parents in Wales. The beginning of revelation comes one Sunday morning, during the recent years when (as we well know) Liverpool Street station was being knocked down and renewed. He idly watches and then follows ‘a man who wore a snow-white turban with his shabby porter’s uniform’:

... I suddenly found myself on the other side of the tall fence, facing the entrance to the Ladies’ Waiting-Room, the existence of which, in this remote part of the station, had been quite unknown to me. . . . I hesitated to approach the swing doors, but as soon as I had taken hold of the brass handle I stepped past a heavy curtain hung on the inside to keep out draughts, and entered the large room, which had obviously been disused for years. (p. 189)

Entering this theatre of memory (one that outside times of crisis or destruction would be forbidden to a male person) Austerlitz sees his child self and his future foster-parents and, for the first time, understands that he came to Britain in the summer of 1939 on one of the last *kindertransporten*.

I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting-room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern on the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the end-game [of my life, in the German] would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time. . . .

And I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don’t think I would have known him, said Austerlitz. (pp. 192–3)

Tatsächlich hatte ich das Gefühl, sagte Austerlitz, als enthalte der Wartesaal, in dessen Mitte ich wie ein Geblendeter stand, alle Stunden meiner Vergangenheit, all meine von jeher unterdrückten, ausgelöschten Ängste und Wünsche, als sei das schwarzweiße Rautenmuster der Steinplatten zu meinen Füßen das Feld für das Endspiel meines Lebens, als erstreckte es sich über die gesamte Ebene der Zeit. Vielleicht sah ich darum auch in dem Halbdämmer des Saals zwei im Stil der dreißiger Jahre gekleidete Personen mittleren Alters, eine Frau in einem leichten Gabardinemantel mit einem schief auf ihrer Haarfrisur sitzenden Hut und neben ihr einen hageren Herrn, der einen dunklen Anzug und einen Priesterkragen um den Hals trug. Ja, und nicht nur den Priester sah ich und seine Frau, sagte Austerlitz, sondern ich sah auch den Knaben, den abzuholen sie gekommen waren. Er saß für sich allein seitab auf einer Bank. Seine Beine, die in weißen Kniesocken steckten, reichten noch nicht bis an den Boden, und

wäre das Rucksäckchen, das er auf seinem Schoß umfassen hielt, nicht gewesen, ich glaube, sagte Austerlitz, ich hätte ihn nicht erkannt. (pp. 196–7)

The child he has been, and has forgotten being, comes back. ‘There he was.’ After the undulations of manifold complex sentences we reach a pinpoint statement: ‘He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side.’ The knowledge suddenly seized will reel back (reel forward) into a search for self, for parents, for all the memories expunged by mass forced migration and mass murder. When memories are utterly expunged, return is no longer possible: the wanderings of Austerlitz, including his exploration of archives, are Sebald’s magnificent attempt to salvage as imagined history that which individually has been lost for ever, and which he knows to be lost.

At every turn in the narrative, sinister or restorative, railways trundle across Europe with their freight of people taken to destruction or rescue, or simply to their daily business. When at last Austerlitz visits Germany near the end of the book he comes out of Nuremberg station and enters that most compelling and typical of twentieth-century encounters: encounter with a crowd of which the individual is a submerging part. This mass is connected by simple propinquity: being there together.

As soon as I had emerged from the underpass in front of the station I was swept along by a huge crowd of people who were streaming down the entire breadth of the street, rather like water in a river bed, going in not just one but two directions, as if flowing simultaneously up-and downstream. (p. 313)

Sebald conceives time as ‘flowing simultaneously up- and downstream’ so that the expected and the achieved, the living and the dead, déjà-vu and prolepsis, the yet-to-be-known and the obliterated abut one another; or, as the narrator later declares, ‘the border between the living and the dead is less impermeable than we commonly think’ (p. 395). This is also the writer’s challenge to oblivion. Ceremonial, paradoxical, comic and melancholy: the persistent return of narrative in this novel—the endless formal rehearsing of Austerlitz’s life into the ear first of the narrator and then through the narrator’s fictive total recall—into our minds, is an assuaging of the *worse* knowledge that darkens the book. Not only individuals but whole communities have been expunged from memory, and that loss is ordinary, as Darwin also knew, as well as sometimes hideous.

The diagrams and photographs that haunt Sebald’s works, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, produce a kind of family memory in us, a memory blurred by its anonymity, and yet insistent in its demand for recognition. It is as though the reader is intimately to blame for the massive loss of memory

produced by time and migration, as well as conscious extermination. The narrator writes in *The Emigrants* of looking through a photograph album:

Since then I have returned to it time and again, because, looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them. (p. 46)

In *Austerlitz* reparation strains human memory to the utmost. Austerlitz himself near the beginning of the book regrets the memorylessness of objects:

The darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. (pp. 30–1)

Sebald moves subtly across tenses, winding perfect and imperfect, completed and recurrent together, plumbing the distant pluperfect past, the subjunctive and the conditional, drawing them all into the present of reading, with its incipient futures. The reader is implicated in these lives which we did not know while they were lived but which now are lodged in us.

In narrative at least, the winding pathways between vanished times and people and those still to come can be inscribed within a single sentence:

It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision. (p. 261)

The living are the revenants here, glimpsed only occasionally by the dead across interlocking spaces. In his rapt exploring prose Sebald's narrator is here imagining the condition more pithily described by Samuel Butler in the *Notebooks*.

The dead are often just as living to us as the living are, only we cannot get them to believe it. They can come to us, but till we die we cannot go to them. To be dead is to be unable to understand that one is alive.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Butler, *Notebooks* selected, arranged and edited Henry Festing Jones (London: A. C. Fifield, 1912), p. 357.

Not all migration is loss nor is all return disaster. That we know well from daily life and from some rare works of art. Reappearance can be joy: think of the end of *Fidelio*, prisoners released, the loving couple heroically reunited; or Leontes' cry when the statue of Hermione proves to be herself: 'Oh, she's warm!' To an even greater degree than theatre the intimacy of writing and reading allows the past to seem restored in ways not possible to the bodily organism; so it risks false reassurance. In resistance to that too easy assuaging, the writers I have drawn on, and many others, have braced their narratives against the persuasive power of story, refusing quite to allow the reader to dwell in the free realm of timeless recovery that fiction can induce. Not everything can be brought back, or reappear, however intimate the art. Pope also recognised that in the volta-face of the final couplet in his long complimentary poem to his friend the painter: 'Epistle to Mr. Jervis with Dryden's Translation of Fresnoy's Art of Painting'. That poem was the starting point of my thinking for this lecture. The poem praises the arts of poetry and painting and looks back towards eminent predecessors as well as celebrating current beauties. After such praise we reach at last the tonic realism of loss. The person, the loved and known individual, has vanished irreplaceably.

Alas, how little from the grave we claim  
Thou but preserv'st a Face, and I a Name.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works*, edited Herbert Davis with an Introduction by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 633.