Figuring Collectivity in the Age of Climate Crisis

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Abstract

Figuring Collectivity in the Age of Climate Crisis

Maximilian Chaoulideer
2021

This dissertation confronts a contradiction that has come to define human life over (at least) the past quarter millennium: though we have, collectively, become the first species to inscribe ourselves into the geological record, we have, individually, diminishing power over the shape of the world toward which we blindly work. While imperial expansion and unfettered fossil fuel extraction threaten to undermine the material conditions of all human life, there is, I argue, a more fundamental problem manifest in anthropogenic climate change, one that poses a representational challenge. Because of its own globality, the threat posed by something as diffuse and total as the climate seems to demand the articulation of an equally global subject: the human as a species. What does it mean, however, to represent the everyday experiences of individuals as unified by such an abstraction? While some scholars have argued that this abstracted collectivity poses a challenge to the traditional tools of humanistic representation, this dissertation begins with the claim that experiencing ourselves as a species is a problem of representation. Climate change, I argue, exposes the inadequacy of a social totality emptied of its determinacy and demands that we represent our universality through the materiality of our everyday phenomenology. If we are to take a humanistic approach to the ecological crises we face, we must begin by developing new figures for the unity of our social world.

I confront this representational problem through three pivotal moments over the past century in which thinkers have turned to the figurative power of language to articulate and address the frailty of their social worlds. These moments, I argue, articulate a poetics of emancipatory collectivity adequate to our current crisis.
The first chapter turns to the moment when philosophy transformed its static conceptual environment (Umwelt) into the lived world (Welt). By following Martin Heidegger's development of "worldliness" during the 1920s, I show that his central figure, ekstasis, dissolves the totalizing threat, not of a specific historical form of political life, but of the very methodological approach of all metaphysics. More than the individuated unification of selfhood, I argue, ecstasy articulates the spatio-temporal universalization ("worlding" as he called it) of any given moment of experience. This figure of phenomenological worldliness, then, not only placed philosophy back on the firm ground of everyday experience, but uncovers, contra Heidegger's own conservative derailments, the coherence of "authenticity" (Eigentlichkeit) in the collective rearrangement of our embodied worldliness (Weltlichkeit).

The second chapter explores the political possibilities of this ecstasy through Hannah Arendt's inversion of Heidegger's enclosed individualism into a theory of porous collectivity. Arendt subverted the Heideggerian antagonism between selfhood and the social world, I suggest, by insisting that our entanglement in an endless "web" of the actions of others grounds our own capacity to act. In order to explore the inherently poetic character of this narrative web, I turn to a close reading of Hans Fallada's 1947 novel of life in Nazi Berlin, Jeder stirbt für sich allein (Every Man Dies Alone). I read the novel as an attempt to poetically weave together the threads of responsibility and complicity that National Socialism had so successfully torn apart. It offers, then, a world in which the reified and totalizing disfiguration of collectivity under Nazism becomes legible in its everyday fabrication and, therefore, its potential transformation into a world that could once again figure the possibility of freedom.

The third chapter seeks to more directly understand how the material threat of climate change challenges our modes of political and poetic representation. I suggest that 10:04, a recent autofictional novel by Ben Lerner, offers a helpful starting point by navigating the alienation characteristic of urban
bourgeois consumers. Against the allure of various pseudo-political salves to this alienation, Ben, the protagonist, diagnoses his consumptive passivity as a function of the “bad forms of collectivity” that the global economy imposes upon him. To illuminate the stakes of this gesture, I return to the key Marxian dialectical figure of our “social metabolism” between labor and the world as a whole to argue that Lerner’s project exhibits a kind of metabolic poetics. Lerner’s novel, I argue, reactivates consumption simply by reconfiguring the universalizing mechanism in which it latently participates, revealing the dialectical relation between the individual and the arrangement of its world.

Through close readings of these figurative re-animations, this dissertation insists that humanistic methods are necessary to any approach to our contemporary global crises that hopes to remake our world with an eye toward justice, joy, and collective freedom.
Figuring Collectivity in the Age of Climate Crisis

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This dissertation is an exercise in re-inscribing the seemingly isolated scraps of everyday life into the world of relationships, institutions, pressures, and possibilities that far precede and exceed them. The least I can do is to try to acknowledge the nearly unbounded web of others to whom this document is indebted.

Though nominally my “advisor,” Rüdiger Campe has really been the midwife to every element of this project. He has encouraged my undeveloped intuitions, gently redirected my confusions, read every word I’ve written with his rare combination of generosity and honesty, and humbly offered his limitless wellspring of knowledge at every turn. It goes without saying that this dissertation would have been unthinkable without him.

Paul North has always known what my work is about before I have. He has found coherence in even my most disorderly babbling, homing in on buried moments of importance and freeing me to shed the superfluous. I have his vision to thank, in particular, for the framework of the introduction. I would not have come to Yale had it not been for the passion of Martin Hägglund; he took me seriously before I deserved it and engaged with me for hours on the finer points of Heidegger’s theory of finitude before I had even decided to join the program. The first chapter is entirely indebted to the countless afternoons and tireless commitment to precision that he offered throughout.

At the risk of cliché: my writing would be little without my students. They have deepened and complicated my relationship to many of the texts that are key to this project. In particular, I would like to thank the students in my class on “Food Politics and Neoliberalism” whose questions, critiques, and hypotheses greatly enriched the interpretations underlying the third chapter.

Countless colleagues and friends have formed the ongoing dialogue within which this dissertation is but one thread. The workshops, seminars, and conversations within the Environmental Humanities program at Yale completely changed my approach to the material world and profoundly expanded the methodological and political horizons of my work. At the heart of my academic existence are the intellectual friendships that have made all the anxiety and jargon worth it: without Ole, Cecilia, Adrian, and Anna, I wouldn’t have found meaning in Germanistik; without Dario, the life of the mind would be joyless; and without Zach, I would have no one with whom to look forward to retiring.

Above all, I would have no thoughts at all were it not for my unreasonably giving and brilliant parents, and would have no reason to continue to ponder our world without the purpose I draw from my comrades in life, Felix and Lorena.

This only indicates a tiny fraction of those whose labor and love have made this possible. You know who you are — thank you.
Introduction:

Phenomenological, Political, and Poetic World-Making

It was a thrill that only built space produced in me, never the natural world, and only when there was an incommensurability of scale — the human dimension of the windows tiny from such a distance combining but not dissolving into the larger architecture of the skyline that was the expression, the material signature, of a collective person who didn’t yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts, even in their most intimate registers, were nevertheless addressed. [...] Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity — whenever I looked at Manhattan from Whitman’s side of the river I resolved to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.

Ben Lerner, 10:04

The practical creation of an objective world, the fashioning [Bearbeitung] of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious species-being. [Animals] produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally [...] they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature. [...] In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.

Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

This dissertation confronts a contradiction that has come to define human life over (at least) the past quarter millennium: as humanity has attained unprecedented influence over the material face

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(I will mark all omissions in quoted text with bracketed ellipses to distinguish them from ellipses in the original.)

of the planet, fewer and fewer individual humans have retained the power to participate in determining the future of their world. Though we have, collectively, become the first species to inscribe ourselves into the geological record, we have, individually, diminishing power over the shape of the world toward which we blindly work. In fact, the tension runs deeper: the very notion that any particular person belongs to a “species” — a universally homogenous we — and, furthermore, that this species has its home in the “globe” — a universally homogenous world — has only become thinkable as the colonial and extractive ambitions of a few European communities have set off irreversible globalization and global warming. The emergence of the “Anthropocene” is inextricable from the birth of an anthropos sufficiently unified to affect the globe as a whole.

At one level, then, the problem is that imperial expansion and unfettered fossil fuel extraction threaten to undermined the material conditions of all human life. This problem of self-erasure is, perhaps, the great technocratic challenge of our times, with virtually every corporation and international body investing its hopes for a livable future (and its own continued relevance) in scientific and technological alternatives or correctives, hoping that strong enough guardrails will keep us in the so-called Goldilocks zone.

There is, however, another problem manifest in anthropogenic climate change, one that poses a representational challenge. Because of its own globality, the threat posed by something as diffuse and total as the climate seems to demand the articulation of an equally global subject. What does it mean, however, to act as a species? How do we represent the everyday experiences of individuals as unified by such an abstraction? The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty notes the friction between this abstraction of the natural sciences and the descriptive and analytic tools of the human sciences:

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species […] one never experiences being a concept. […]
Climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world.\(^3\)

Beneath the technocratic problem of exceeding our natural limits,\(^4\) then, lies the representational problem of placing the particularities of human history within the abstractions of natural history. Responding to climate change as a species posits a universal that overwrites our particularity, threatening our very “capacity to experience the world.” Where Chakrabarty seems to accept this abstracted collectivity as a challenge to humanistic representation, this project begins with the claim that this abstraction is a problem of representation. Our “figure of the universal” is not a fixed form but a dynamic process: we continuously make and re-make our universality through the particulars of our every-day participation in collectivity: we figure our particularity as universal. Far from subsuming human differences by naturalizing the collectivity of humanity, climate change, I argue, exposes the inadequacy (and the danger) of a collectivity emptied of its determinacy and demands that we figure the universal through the material specificity of our “experience of the world.” If we are to take a humanistic approach to the ecological crises we face, we must begin by developing new figures for the unity of our social world. Understanding this poetic challenge — and considering strategies for overcoming it — is the primary goal of this project.

By locating the problem in our figuration of collectivity as opposed to our biological preservation, we can begin to disambiguate the notion that we act as a “species.” So long as the threat we face is to our biological existence, we can only ever hope to respond as a biological agent, fighting to preserve our increasingly inhospitable habitat with the blunt instruments of our animality. In a critique of Chakrabarty’s rejection of the traditional tools of humanistic analysis, Slavoj Žižek points


\(^4\) This is not to belittle the importance of the fact that our planet is becoming biologically uninhabitable for us. To pejoratively call this a “technocratic” issue is simply to point out, as Marx does in the epigraph above, that so long as we are occupied with maintaining the material conditions of our self-preservation, our capacity to act freely will remain a liability that threatens us instead of an opportunity that liberates us.
out that “our growing ability to transform nature around us, up to and including destabilizing the very framework for life” is actually a “paradoxical outcome of the very exponential growth of our freedom and power.” Because we got ourselves into this predicament through the misadventures of our freedom to transform our world as we see fit — and not through the brute ascendancy of our animalistic power — this naturalized notion of ourselves as a “species” misdiagnoses the problem. Žižek draws upon the Marxian distinction between the universally transformative capacity of human production and the merely physical reproduction of animal activity. While all other animals “produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young,” Marx argued, “man produces universally”; animals “produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature.” It is in this “practical creation of an objective world, the fashioning [Bearbeitung] of inorganic nature” that the human animal expresses itself as a “conscious species-being.” At first, this sounds very much like either a Promethean license for humanity to fashion whatever it pleases or a Lockeian imperative to actualize oneself by working the land. This freedom, however, is a fragile thing, and can easily turn on itself, becoming more of a

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6 Indeed, because of this tempting misreading (and the very late publication of certain key texts), Marx was long condemned by environmental theorists as a reckless Promethean who advocated for the unbounded exploitation of the natural world for human purposes. This reading was enabled by the Western Marxist insistence that dialectics could not be extended beyond the social realm to the natural. This one-sided position, enshrined by Georg Lukács and repeated by many in the Frankfurt School, led Alfred Schmidt, in his highly influential account of nature in the work of Marx, to dismiss Marx’s insistent materialism as a confusion that belied his actual conviction that the social world necessarily dominates the natural one (Alfred Schmidt, Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx (1962; repr., Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1993). It was only with the careful exegetical and historical work of Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster that this consequential confusion was definitively refuted. For a direct critique of Schmidt, see Paul Burkett, “Nature in Marx Reconsidered: A Silver Anniversary Assessment of Alfred Schmidt’s ‘Concept of Nature in Marx,’” Organization & Environment 10, no. 2 (1997): 164–83. For a broader disentanglement of Proudhon’s mechanistic naturalism from Marx’s dialectic account of the “metabolic” exchange between man and nature, see John Bellamy Foster, Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 126–40. Thanks to their work, Marx has been rightfully restored as one of the most radical theorists of social-material co-dependency.

7 As I will argue, this fragility of freedom is a function both of its inherent sociality (freedom’s universalization in figuring collectivity, is, essentially, a matter of collective figuration) and, perhaps more importantly, of its appropriative character. Because our freedom is actualized in the transformation of nature, we are forever in danger of misdirecting that power to our own self-detriment. Because, in other words, we stand in a “metabolic” relation to our (socio-material) world, our power to transform the world is always a matter of externalizing
liability than an asset. Indeed, labor under capitalism has “reproduced the whole of nature” more fully than ever before, only to have limited our capacity to act freely. This limitation is not to how much we are able to transform the material of our world (there, by definition, we excel) but to how we transform it. Our freedom has undermined itself, then, not for want of collective material force but by creating bad forms of the “whole of nature” in which our individual labor is no longer legible as transformative.

This is the paradox (or internal tension) of our tendency toward universal transformation: it can generate alienating forms of collectivity that obscure the very mechanism through which any particular moment of labor could figure itself as participatory in transforming the whole. This was Marx’s response to liberal notions of individual freedom: human activity is free because it continuously represents itself, in each instance, as universal, as fashioning an entire world. But inscribing freedom into the creation of a social and material world also illuminates its vulnerability: if its universality disguises or strategically forgets its own contingency, our freedom extinguishes itself. Because we figure our universality by continuously arranging and re-arranging the particulars of our lives as unified, pursuing freedom is an ongoing collective process in which we can (and must) constantly re-figure ourselves as universal, a precarious representational dialectic that is always susceptible to becoming dis-figured. This was Marx’s diagnosis of capitalist production: the only world toward which any instance of labor can work is the world market, a form of collectivity that strategically severs any material instance of labor from its transformative potential (this is why he insisted that the proximate alienation of the worker from their product is always also the universal alienation of the worker from their “species-being”).

ourselves (Entäußerung as Marx, and Hegel before him, put it), which threatens to collapse into alienation (Entfremdung) at any moment. See chapter 1 for an extensive discussion of this tension arising from always being outside of ourselves, and see chapter 3 for an exploration of Marx’s notion of metabolism (Stoffwechsel).
In this sense, Chakrabarty is right: the abstract concept of “species” postulated as a biological category certainly does offer a form of universal collectivity, but one that perpetually escapes representation: we “never experience it as such” because it stands above life in the way that a concept stands above any particular, obscuring the mechanism of its own figurative construction (and, therefore, of its potential transformation). “In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species-life,” reducing the universality of his species-being to that of a static category, a pre-defined genus like any other. Because of this, the hallmark of alienated labor is the reduction of our freedom to the animalistic struggle to simply reproduce ourselves without perishing — something at which we are, thanks to our freedom, rather inept. The fact that we need to struggle to secure the basic material conditions for our biological survival is a symptom of our alienation from the freedom of our figurative universalization. Underneath our preoccupation with techniques of survival lies a suffocated struggle for new poetics of emancipatory collectivity.

Far from standing in contradiction, then, the totalizing unification of human activity under the pressure of the global market and the threat of global warming is responsible for our individual inability to represent our everyday lives as transformative of the world. We have achieved “bad forms of collectivity” within which everyday activity appears impotent and irrelevant, subservient to the work

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8 The political consequences of this are clear and grave. Without the ability to coherently represent our everyday lives as participating in a single project of collective transformation, we are left with little more than the “lifestyle politics” of ethical consumerism and localistic attempts to carve out a private microcosm of moral purity and sovereignty in lieu of a public world in which to negotiate structural differences and inequalities. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with composting, supporting local businesses, riding one’s bike, sending one’s kid to public schools, boycotting problematic corporations, or going vegan. Without a clear sense of how these each belong to the unifying project of universal self-determination, however, they are reduced to siloed actions that tend toward self-righteousness, elitism, and further obscuring the structural issues they are meant to address. This neoliberal fantasy of replacing the challenge of collective politics with the clarity of individual choice is both a symptom of and a contributor to the figures of our social world in which our everyday lives are increasingly unrecognizable as anything other than subservient. See chapters 2 and 3 for extended discussions of this substitution of individual ethics for collective politics.
we leave to the technocratic experts to keep us alive, thereby sacrificing the flourishing of collective freedom for the mere self-preservation of “resilience” and “sustainability.”\textsuperscript{9} Though we have plenty of (“global”) figures through which to intuit the totality of our world, the dialectical relation between any particular moment of labor and the transformation of the world as a whole has been broken.

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Of course, critiques of globalization have been in no short supply over the past few decades, leading scholars, politicians, and activists to propose a raft of alternative geographies to organize identity, community, and economy. This concern with the erosion of “place” has been particularly influential in theorizations of ecological crisis, where calls to “reterritorialize” our lives have become increasingly common. While nostalgic appeals to territorial identity have been thoroughly critiqued by political and cultural theorists, who instead celebrate “hybridity,” “diaspora,” “cosmopolitanism,” and other forms of border-crossing, (re)establishing attachments to particular locales has nevertheless become central to environmental discourse today.\textsuperscript{10} Partly because the political focus of environmentalism has, from its outset, been the conservation of specific landscapes under threat from industrial pollution, urban expansion, and the enclosure of public lands for corporate exploitation, it has tended to respond to the many faces of globalization by reifying and celebrating the local as a more natural scale of organization. That “the environment” tends to refer to our physical surroundings already suggests that the concept is, quite literally, grounded in the organization of space by

\textsuperscript{9} It is no surprise that these terms are most often used by corporate or state bodies to garner public praise for minor adjustments to business as usual. “Resilience,” in particular, has come under fire for normalizing our material peril and advocating a regressive attempt to simply maintain systems as they are, replicating the vulnerability of those already marginalized. See, for example, Danny MacKinnon and Kate Driscoll Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness: A Critique of Resilience Policy and Activism,” \textit{Progress in Human Geography} 37, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 253–70.

\textsuperscript{10} For an excellent overview and critique of this environmentalist tendency toward localization, see Ursula K. Heise, \textit{Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
purportedly natural (in the sense of pre-political) categories: biome, ecosystem, watershed, landscape, etc.\textsuperscript{11} In the American context in particular, contemporary debates over conservation, land use, and planning continue to obscure the brutal history of indigenous genocide and land dispossession. The enduring legacy of figures such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold ties environmentalism to a fetish of wilderness that is strategically apolitical, rejecting the contestation of boundaries and sovereignty and instead retrenching in a stubborn “land ethic.”\textsuperscript{12} Though these defensive maneuvers clearly recognize that reductive and ahistorical forms of collectivity fuel corporate and cultural imperialism, they respond by retreating into a localist, moralist, even tribalistic ethos of autonomy, sacrificing the project of universal freedom for a sense of immediate coherence.

The other side of environmentalism’s growing skepticism of universality is its indictment of our transformation of nature as such. These critiques of “anthropocentrism” and human hubris are often buttressed by a nostalgic appeal to nature’s originary holism.\textsuperscript{13} This ecological sensibility only intensified after the release of the first satellite images taken of the earth from space in the late 1960s, offering a deceptively plain view of the smooth spherical unity of the globe. The iconic \textit{Blue Marble}

\textsuperscript{11} For an extended exploration of the reliance on “bioregionalism” within the larger context of environmental attachments to place, see Lawrence Buell, \textit{The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 62–96. See also chapter 1 for a more detailed examination of the spatial limitations of “the environment.”

\textsuperscript{12} For a succinct history of the peculiarly American strain of environmental imagination and policy as an expression of a chauvinistic frontiersmanship and mythic agrarian yeomanship, see Jedediah Purdy, \textit{After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). He provides a particularly clear account of how Muir, Leopold, and other turn of the century faces of the conservation movement coopted and simplified nineteenth-century American transcendentalism to maintain imaginative control over American land in a post-frontier era. (Purdy, 116–52, 188–227.)

\textsuperscript{13} The emergence of this view in the latter half of the twentieth century is generally traced to the philosopher Arne Naess, whose influential “deep ecology” has ensured that virtually all strains of environmental imagination and politics are marked by some tendency toward conservation. It comes as no surprise that Naess’s thought emerged from a group of thinkers in the 1960s concerned primarily with pollution, overpopulation, overconsumption, the destruction of “wilderness,” and the general encroachment of humanity into every corner of the natural world (Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, and leaders of the Sierra Club, to name a few). For a brief history of this movement by one of its own proponents, see George Sessions, “Deep Ecology, New Conservation, and the Anthropocene Worldview,” \textit{The Trumpeter} 30, no. 2 (2014): 106–14.
image from 1972 became the visual backdrop for the environmental movement, representing the beauty and magnitude of “Mother Earth” as much as its fragility. The absurdity of using an image whose scale entirely (and perhaps strategically) obfuscates human inhabitation to advance a movement decrying human-induced catastrophe reflects the elitist and ineffectual naïveté of simply overwriting our uneven political geography with the smooth natural topography of the planet. Replacing globalization’s destructive totality with a harmonious, if fragile, natural whole — further popularized by Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis and other appeals to global connectivity — undermines the critique of human overreach by insisting on our relative insignificance from a “deep ecological” perspective.

The problem with these modes of environmental imagination, then, lies in their presupposition of the very universal equality that they seek to achieve, thereby obscuring the actual difference and inequality on which globalization feeds; they foreground our exploitation of nature over our self-exploitation, failing to see them as one and the same process. In doing so, the politics of environmental concern is redirected from the question of how we collectively transform our world to how much we transform it, offering little more than the self-abnegation of reducing our “footprint” and cultivating a sense of humility as simply one animal among others. Because this brand of

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14 For a survey of the history of these “allegories of connectedness” and their ambiguous, if not outright contradictory, politics, see Heise, Sense of Place, 22–28. I also treat this ideology of aerially constructed unity (and its relation to gridded infrastructure) at greater length in chapter 3.

The easy assimilation of The Blue Marble to liberal fantasies of a global harmony achieved by sufficiently abstracted coordinates is wonderfully encapsulated in the musings of the economist Barbara Ward, who speculated, soon after the release of the satellite images, that the natural holism they offered could override even the most bitter political divides of the Cold War:

> When the astronauts spin through more than a dozen sunrises and sunsets in a single day and night; when the whole globe lies below them with California one minute and Japan the next; when, as they return from space, they feel spontaneously, with the first Soviet spaceman: “How beautiful it is, our Earth”; it is inconceivable that no modification of consciousness or imagination occurs, no sense that quarrels are meaningless before the majestic yet vulnerable reality of a single planet carrying a single species through infinite space. (Barbara Ward, Spaceship Earth (Columbia University Press, 1966), 146.)
environmentalism does not propose alternative forms of universal collectivity, it is left with the same replacement of (social) emancipation with (natural) self-preservation.

This dissertation sets out from the premise that responding to our global ecological crises demands that we begin to create new figures of our universality that do not obscure our uneven social geography but, instead, actively negotiate it. If, that is, we hope to move beyond mere biological sustainability and work toward a more just form of collectivity, one in which we can all participate as self-determining beings, then the work we face is less a refinement of our technical tinkering than a reclamation of our poetic creativity.

Two questions emerge here that will guide this dissertation. First: how does anthropogenic climate change challenge epistemological, liberal, and mimetic notions of political and poetic representation, casting the fragile reciprocity of individual and totality into starker relief? And second (which simply poses the question from the other direction): how might philosophical and literary figurations of the world as a totality help illuminate ways in which our ability to reproduce the whole of nature can lead, not to increased inequality or even self-destruction, but to the universal freedom of collective self-determination?

In order to address these questions, this project turns to three pivotal moments over the past century in which thinkers sought to articulate the political and conceptual alienation of modern life as a fundamentally poetic problem: as a problem of the linguistic figuration of a collective world out of the material particularity of everyday life. Each captures a kind of environmental poetics, I argue, not by representing ecological crises per se, but by articulating the challenges to representation itself that these crises raise.

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The first chapter turns to early-twentieth-century phenomenology in order to revisit the moment when philosophy transformed the conceptual environment (Umwelt), which it had posited
for epistemological assurance, into the lived world (Welt). Beginning with the neo-Kantian metaphors of conceptuality “enveloping,” “surrounding,” or “enclosing” particularity, I suggest that the philosophical Umwelt played a largely figurative role in bridging the chasm between lived thingness and ordered conceptuality, between matter and form. Already in this rather stilted hylomorphism, “environment” named a methodological strategy for linking the materially particular and the discursively universal. I undertake a sustained close reading of Martin Heidegger’s inheritance and redeployment of this problem, arguing that he turned to phenomenology to reground philosophical inquiry in the fullness of everyday activity. Phenomena, he argued, already contain their own structuring logos, and the study of those phenomena could be read directly off of the appearances themselves. This methodological short-circuiting of the epistemological concerns of the entire Kantian tradition not only gave philosophy a new footing but also offered a vocabulary in which the relation between lived particularity and organized conceptuality was transformed into the reciprocal constitution of self and world.

By following Heidegger’s development of “worldliness” during the 1920s, I show that his notion of ekstasis offers more than a temporal unification of selfhood and is, in fact, a key figure for establishing the spatio-temporal universalization (“worlding” as he called it) of any given moment of experience. Worldliness (Weltdlichkeit), therefore, is a mode of collectivity in no way opposed to the organization of life around selfhood (Jemeinigkeit); because we are “always outside of ourselves” as ecstatic beings, the intelligibility of any experience, however small or particular, rides on its ability to understand itself as participating in the world as such. The chapter concludes by exploring the undeveloped potentialities of ecstatic selfhood, suggesting that for all of his resistance to the idea, Heidegger actually opened the door to a radically embodied account of action: one in which we are delimited not by the scope of our flesh, our immediate influence, nor our sensory boundaries, but by the worldly horizons posited by our capacity (and need) to raise the question of the whole of our lives.
Moreover, contra Heidegger’s own conservative derailments, this ecstatic embodiment points philosophy toward the project of navigating a world in which we do not live alone and over which we are anything but sovereign. If we are to speak of “authenticity” (Eigentlichkeit), it can only emerge from the collective rearrangement of our world, a task from which Heidegger hid but that many others took up in the years that followed.

The second chapter explores the work of one such inheritor of both the Heideggerian promise and its ugly lapse into a fetish of tribal autonomy: Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s transformation of Heidegger’s enclosed individualism into a theory of porous collectivity, I argue, is condensed in her inversion of existential guilt into political responsibility. While Heidegger traced our radical dependency on people and matter outside of ourselves to an originary indebtedness (Schulden) to our future selves (emergent from our orientation toward our own death), Arendt insisted that our entanglement in an endless “web” of the actions of others grounds our own capacity to act (our “natality”). This web, constantly made and remade as a fabric of stories through which we motivate, justify, and position ourselves, allows any given instance of human activity to place itself within the realm of the public sphere, a space whose mediation of all action enables us to act as potentially equal, and therefore free, beings. By subverting the Heideggerian antagonism between selfhood and the social world, Arendt also re-describes our propensity toward alienation as the substitution of the private for the public sphere. In place of his existential concern over confusing the contingent stuff of the world for our self, Arendt illuminates the grave danger of trading the difficult, but emancipatory, negotiation of political life for the easy but tyrannical economy of domesticity. The struggle for better forms of universal collectivity, in other words, must always override the allure of tribalistic factions that replicate the totalitarianism of the family.

In order to explore the inherently poetic character of this “web of stories,” I turn to a close reading of Hans Fallada’s 1947 novel, Jeder stirbt für sich allein (Every Man Dies Alone). I read the novel
as an attempt to poetically weave together the threads of responsibility and complicity that Nazism
had so successfully torn apart. This narrative fabrication of Berlin as a coherent and navigable
collective — legible in the lives of even the smallest and most disempowered of its residents — offers,
I suggest, a glimpse of the Arendtian web of political action: a single public world in which everyday
life can be successfully inscribed into the larger tangle of interdependencies that conditions it (and that
it always seeks to produce anew). Though, diegetically, the novel tells the story of a failed resistance
to the Nazi party, I show that, formally, it offers a powerful recuperation of the democratic
mechanisms of collective reproduction at a time when that power seemed to have been monopolized
by a select few. By opening up the quiet drama of life garrisoned within one townhouse to show its
implications for lives across the city, Fallada reveals the highly political domesticity buried in the
domesticated politics of Nazi Berlin. In this sense, he reassembles the city such that its relations of
trust, fear, and vulnerability are visible in their contingency and plasticity. At its best, the novel offers
a world in which the reified and totalizing disfiguration of collectivity under Nazism becomes legible
in its everyday reproduction and, therefore, in its potential transformation into a different political
world that could once again figure the possibility of freedom.

The third chapter builds on this ecstatic re-figuration of those aspects of our material
existence that we most often coopt in attempts to localize and enclose our individuality — our bodies
and our homes — in order to more directly understand how the material threat of climate change
challenges our modes of political and poetic representation. I suggest that 10:04, a recent autofictional
novel by Ben Lerner, offers a helpful starting point by navigating the alienation characteristic of urban
bourgeois consumers. Though the novel is bookended by Hurricanes Irene and Sandy and littered
with scenes that take place against the backdrop of the “sinking city” of New York, I argue that if this
work of literature is environmental, it is not because it represents severe weather events but because
it takes on the challenges that those phenomena pose to representation. Lerner’s protagonist, Ben, an
explicit and playful fictionalization of the author, finds himself trapped in the isolation and passivity of urban consumption. Against the allure of various pseudo-political salves to this alienation, however — which offer a superficial unification of production and consumption through localized economies and informed shopping — Ben diagnoses his consumptive passivity as a function of the “bad forms of collectivity” that the global economy offers him. His consumptive alienation lies in his very inability to arrange the fiction of his life into a coherent world. Thus, it is his poetic activity that offers the possibility of his participation in rearranging the world differently. Fiction, as evidenced by Lerner’s place in the recent revival of realism in American “New Sincerity,” does not make its world simply by imagining possible futures and inhabiting alternate realities: it performs, in a more active and flexible manner, the arrangement of daily life into figures of worldly totality that characterizes all language. The poetic (re)constitution of our world is not, therefore, secondary to some external reality, but is the very process of universalization that undergirds all human activity.

Consumption, then, is inherently alienated because the world to which it belongs obscures its own poetic constitution; globalization neuters Ben by hiding the figurative mechanisms by which it continues to reproduce itself and thereby naturalizing a mode of collectivity that is, in fact, entirely contingent and constructed. Lerner’s novel reactivates consumption simply by exposing the figurative mechanism in which it latently participates, revealing the dialectical relation between the individual and the arrangement of its world. To illuminate the stakes of this gesture, I return to the Marxian notion of our “social metabolism” between local and global, the organic and inorganic body, political and natural, to argue that Lerner’s project exhibits a kind of metabolic poetics. Such a poetics resolves, as Lerner does through Ben, to make “bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.”

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At the heart of this project lies the conviction that humanistic methods are necessary to any approach to our contemporary global crises that hopes to remake our world with an eye toward justice, joy, and collective freedom. This, as I understand it, is the great promise of the “environmental humanities,” a burgeoning field that takes ecological crises to be the most important current challenge to humanistic practice while insisting on those very practices as the key to successfully navigating those crises. Though I often define this project in opposition to the thinkers who have helped shape this field of inquiry, I only do so in hopes that such local skirmishes will help to keep the field, taken as a coherent whole, open to its own continuous reconfiguration.
CHAPTER ONE

Ecstasy:

Exceeding the Phenomenological Environment with Martin Heidegger’s Discovery of the Embodied World

I. Introduction: Disembodied Phenomenology

II. Heidegger’s Discovery of the World
   1. Beyond Erkenntnis: Phenomenology in the Middle Voice
   2. Erlebnis: Emil Lask’s Categorial Environmentality
   3. Ereignis: Heidegger’s Eventive Worldliness

III. Heidegger’s Disfiguration of the World
   1. Teppich and Boden
   2. Dasein: Ontology’s Distribute First-person

IV. Embodied Re-figuration of the World
   1. Anonymous Collectivity
   2. Ecstatic Embodiment: Figuring Dasein Collectively
I. **Introduction: Disembodied Phenomenology**

This chapter begins with a rather simple, and by no means original, observation: Dasein, the Heideggerian characterization of the human condition, lacks a body. Perhaps better: Dasein is “in the world” but not embodied. There is, in fact, a cluster of omissions related to this: Dasein isn’t born despite being “thrown” into the world, doesn’t fall in love despite being defined by “care,” doesn’t have a hand though it famously hammers away, doesn’t have a childhood and doesn’t age though it is essentially temporal, and, most markedly for our purposes, though Dasein is clearly employed (or at least hard at work) and part of a community, it is only tenuously, at best, part of a social world. It is never fully clear whether Dasein is human, whether it (he? she? I? we?) is even alive.

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2. This omission is noted with particular frequency in the literature on Heidegger’s larger failure to make zoological sense of our being, exorcizing our animality and our bodies with it. See, for example, David Farrell Krell, Daimon Life : Heidegger and Life-Philosophy (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1992), 152. For a complete bibliography of the literature on Heidegger and animality as a failure to theorize embodiment, see Aho, Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body, 2–3.


4. The fragile balance between a structural elucidation of the conditions for the possibility of meaning and the fact that that structure is “in each case mine” opens Heidegger to frequent misinterpretation, or co-opting. As
To call these omissions, any good Heideggerian would immediately say, is to confuse the project of fundamental ontology with psychology, sociology, biology, or philosophical anthropology. Dasein is a structure that explains the conditions that allow for the determinations I have accused Heidegger of neglecting: loving, having children, aging, being marked by race, class, or (dis)ability, in short, belonging to a particular socio-historical world. Dasein, the Heideggerian insists, is neutered because the ontological project it enables is meant to ground these situated particularities — what Heidegger calls “ontic” facts. The simple answer from within the Heideggerian ontological project to the misguided observation above is that, far from omissions which would leave Dasein disembodied, extra-social, ageless, genderless, emotionally indeterminate, let alone dead, these attributes are simply inappropriate to it; the term “Dasein” is designed to avoid precisely these determinations of biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology from seeping into the project of phenomenological ontology. To maintain that something has been omitted is thus to demand something that Heidegger

John Haugeland sees it for example, Dasein is simply “the grand pattern” of normativity which is instantiated in any given “subpattern”: not only am I Dasein, but “chemistry is Dasein — and so are philately, Christmas, and Cincinnati.” (John Haugeland, Dasein Dislosed (Harvard University Press, 2013), 9.) Though he later amends his position to include fewer “subpatterns,” the interpretive pressure is clear: the ontological foundationalism of Heidegger’s project runs the risk of severing ontology from phenomenology, leaving us with an analysis of patterns rather than of meaningful human experience.


Belonging to such a world (or being such a world) is, I will argue, precisely what it means to be embodied. Dasein’s bodily indeterminacy thus encapsulates and precipitates all of the others.

And indeed, the moment Heidegger speaks most openly about “the body” is in his Zollikoner Seminare, which were given to a group of psychologists between 1959 and 1969 (published 1987) and were prompted by psychiatrist Medard Boss’ desire to ground psychology in the Daseinsanalytik. It would seem that the missing analysis of Leiblichkeit comes, to put it bluntly, with the application of ontology to the concerns of a particular field: in this case, psychology’s worries about the rootedness of consciousness in matter. Some recent discussions about embodiment in Heidegger hold onto these seminars as some kind of lost trove of insights that finally expose what Heidegger really had to say on the matter (Oliver Cosmus, “Die Leiblichkeit im Denken Heideggers,” in Die erscheinende Welt: Festschrift für Klaus Held, ed. Heinrich Hüni and Peter Trawny (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002), 71–86; Cristian Giocan, “Heidegger’s Phenomenology of Embodiment in the Zollikon Seminars,” Continental Philosophy Review 48, no. 4 (2015): 463–78; Cathrin Nielsen, “Pathos Und Leiblichkeit. Heidegger in Den ‘Zollikoner Seminaren,’” Phänomenologische Forschungen, 2003, 149–69.). Needless
diligently withholds: in a certain sense, it necessarily places us outside or beyond the methodological parameters of Heideggerian ontology. This chapter will therefore be equally concerned with its departure from the Heideggerian framework as with what that framework makes possible in our understanding of the slippery and overdetermined term “embodiment.”

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But why be concerned with embodiment to begin with? And why turn to Heidegger of all theorists? Perhaps most importantly, why question the absence of the former in the latter? To adequately pose this last question, it may help to clarify what I do not want to make of these omissions, or indeterminacies. While this intervention is not, in the end, exegetically motivated, I will be thinking with conceptual tools developed by Heidegger, and so will be thinking with and out of him for the most part. The early Heidegger will provide the majority of my textual and conceptual material, though the questions I bring to his texts pick out the basic methodological tensions that shape *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, subsequently referred to as “*SZ*”) as well as the seminars of his that lead up to it. Thus, my aim is not to fill in his gaps or to find unexplored answers to them — to get Heidegger “right” — nor to expose some hidden insight of his and prove that he was indeed a (let alone the) philosopher of embodiment. These omissions instead provide openings onto new lines of thought, ways out of and against the Heideggerian grain using his own insights and methodological radicality. My aim, therefore, is also not to augment the Heideggerian project or to apply it to a new domain. I do not wish to ask the questions Heidegger did not think to ask, but those which he was unable to. The omission of *Dasein’s* embodiment (and with it, the entire spread of worldly indeterminacies) is, as I have already said, this frantic search misses the structural reason for Heidegger’s omission, as though he simply hadn’t had the space or opportunity to treat *Leiblichkeit* any earlier or more centrally, but luckily left his thoughts in an extensive footnote to a group of psychologists. This analysis will take a different tack, identifying the point at which *Leiblichkeit* is structurally excluded from ontology and tracing the consequences of this in *Being and Time* itself.
noted, far from an oversight: the terms of his ontological phenomenology render all “ontic” questions (those which objectify our Being by specifying and situating it) derivative and distracting. In some sense, then, I turn to this absence to understand why ŠZ refuses to further determine Dasein as human Being in its situated life, in its “facticity” as he puts it.

In this interpretive prodding, however, a strange irony will come to reveal itself and provide the clue, immanently, to the methodological friction between his phenomenology and his ontology. Heidegger, infamous for his neologisms and strained vocabulary, bent his language toward the coincidence of experience’s particularity and Being’s absolute structure. And yet, out of fear of reifying or reducing the structure of Being to any given instance of it, his phenomenology, fully trained on taking a “leap into the world at all,” jumps right through it. Just as Heidegger found a vocabulary to describe the reciprocal determination of the philosophical self and the particularity of its world, just as he articulated the possible poetic universalization of factical experience as the organization of world as such, he emptied it by prioritizing ontological form over phenomenological matter.

And yet, buried in this tension, I suggest, is a methodological key to describing the immanent universality of the phenomenological world. Though Heidegger uses the figure of “ekstasis” to articulate the temporal unity of Dasein, I argue that it is just as much a figure of spatial unity, a way of describing our material particularity (our embodiment) as inherently universalizing (worldly). By uncovering an ecstatic description of our embodiment, this chapter seeks to develop a spatio-temporal figure that brings the factical and the formal, the first-personal and the universal, into a dialectical relation of reciprocal constitution and coherence. As I will show, this gesture is key to grounding the universal geography of ecological crisis in everyday practice: Heidegger was, at heart, overcoming the regnant hylomorphism of the philosophical environment (Umwelt) — whose form enclosed the factical matter of lived life—, thereby leaping into the world (Welt) as such.

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This friction between his phenomenological attention to particularity and ontological insistence on formal structure is apparent already in the observation with which Heidegger begins SZ: “Dasein is ontically ‘nearest’ to itself, ontologically farthest away; but pre-ontologically certainly not foreign to itself.” This observation both opens the way to ontology and sets the terms of its task: while we do not walk around the world with an articulated ontology, we do relate to our world ontologically; the structure of those relations is precisely the aim of an explicit ontology. The starting point for Heidegger’s project is thus precisely this pre-ontological familiarity with the world: a phenomenology of the “everyday.” As he puts it, the “roots” of ontological analysis are ontic, meaning that “the question of Being [Seinsfrage] is nothing else than the radicalization of an essential tendency of Being [Seinstendenz] that belongs to Dasein itself, namely, of the pre-ontological understanding of Being [Seinsverständnis].” But this pre-ontological character of ours is a mixed bag: while our ontic immersion in the world gives us this pre-ontological predilection, this absorption actually tends to obstruct our ontological self-understanding. Why? Because “Dasein tends to understand its own Being in terms of the being to which it is essentially, continually, and most closely related—the ‘world.’”

Thus, the peculiar situation we find ourselves in is a total (pre-ontological) familiarity with the world, a familiarity that furnishes the “roots” for the development, through radicalization, of an answer to the Seinsfrage, and yet it is precisely these familiar relations with things that also cause us to mistake the things for the relations, beings for Being. That is, our relation to the Being of the things in our world, which marks us as pre-ontological, is also that which has precipitated a deep confusion about our own

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8 Heidegger, Being and Time, 16/16. I will be citing Joan Stambaugh’s translation, which, though much more readable and accurate than the more standard one by McQuarrie & Robinson, mysteriously fails to consistently distinguish between the most important pair of terms: Sein (Being) and Seiendes (being). Luckily, this is easy to amend through capitalization, which I will do even when her translation does not. Pagination will refer to the Stambaugh edition followed by the standard German Niemayer edition (e.g. “106/108”), and all other references to Heidegger will refer to the German pagination of Klostermann’s Gesamtausgabe (GA).

9 Heidegger, 12/13, 13/15.

10 Heidegger, 15-16/15.
Being for as long as we have tried to develop an explicit self-understanding in terms of our Being, an ontology. Our pre-ontological familiarity with the world both allows for and obscures ontology itself.

This is a rather ingenious methodological opening for Heidegger’s purposes. It explains both why ontology is so much as possible (because of our pre-ontological understanding), and why it has always been misunderstood (for the very same reason). Fundamental ontology must therefore make the peculiar movement, first, into and through the ontic details of our absorption in the world (“world,” again, here naming that which we most often mistake ourselves for: those things objectively present: beings) and only then into a second stage of radicalization, which lifts the veil of self-misunderstanding and “discloses,” not just that absorption in the world, but the meaning of that absorption. To get at that meaning — the task of the second half of \(SZ\) — therefore requires a careful extraction of ourselves from the world, a distinction between the world and its meaning (\(Welt\) from \(Weltlichkeit\),” as will become clear). The first “division,” the pre-ontological roots of the text, is, therefore, a thorough phenomenology of this “world,” though one that is always trying to avoid objectification and preparing the ontological radicalization of the second division, which turns to an analysis of “the worldliness of the world.”

But, as Heidegger is well aware, his ontological analysis is itself a mode of relating to the world and is thus not simply a philosophical project, but a mode of Being (“Seinsmodus”). He names it “Eigentlichkeit,” which is alternately translated as “authenticity” or “ownedness”; it is both a first-personal mode and an evaluation of genuineness or actuality, grounded in the “Jemeinigkeit,” or mine-ness, of our Being. Heidegger famously insists that its counterpart, “inauthenticity,” “does not signify a ‘lesser’ Being or a ‘lower’ degree of Being. Rather inauthenticity can determine \(Dasein\) even in its fullest concretion, when it is busy, excited, interested, and capable of pleasure.”

\[\text{11 Heidegger, 42/43.}\]
however, have a modal priority: “inauthenticity has possible authenticity as its basis.” And this modal priority, that one could understand oneself authentically — truly, ownedly, in terms of oneself, jemeinig — is also its ontological priority. Authenticity’s ontological priority is also the priority of ontology: the Seinsfrage comes before, makes possible, the Daseinsfrage.

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I can now restate my earlier observation that Dasein is dis-embodied in terms of the axis of in/authenticity. Dasein cannot be bodily because it serves as an analysis of human Being predicated on the separation of authenticity from inauthenticity, Jemeinigkeit (mine-ness) from Weltlichkeit (worldliness), ontological from ontic self-understanding. The claim of this chapter, however, is that embodiment is exactly that spatiality (“Being-in,” as Heidegger calls it) that allows for the distinction (though not the separation) of mine-ness and worldliness to begin with. Following on this point, I show that Heidegger’s phenomenology obliquely makes possible a notion of embodiment (namely “ecstatic” embodiment) that alleviates the fear of lapsing into ontic banalities, the very fear that animates Heidegger’s desire to cast phenomenology as “fundamental” ontology to begin with and pulls the poles of in/authenticity apart to the point of rupture. Ecstatic embodiment, then, names the spatial co-constitution of self and world and the derivative possibility of alienating them from one another.

This also begins to answer the dual questions of, on the one hand, why embodiment is the necessary starting point for a reevaluation of the relation between ourselves and our world and, on the other, why Heidegger is a fruitful place to go for this. To frame this project as an attempt to unify

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12 Heidegger, 249/259.

13 As I suggest elsewhere, this is what places Heidegger’s project in such surprising proximity to Marx’s theory of alienation: it is our propensity to define ourselves by the way that we reproduce the “whole of nature” that is both the condition for our freedom and the fragility that so often leads to alienation. See note below on the proximity of ek-stasis to Ent-äußerung and Ent-fremdung as well as the introduction and chapter 3 for more extensive discussions of this in Marx.
two sets of distinct entities, individuals and their material environments, produces the very problem it seeks to overcome. Heidegger’s phenomenology, beginning with everyday experience of the world and not with a pre-given subject (or object), circumvents these objectified terms and the unnecessary gulf between them.

The first part of this chapter will follow the Heideggerian phenomenological starting point to track its evasion of the paralyzing dualism generated by the insurmountable gap between a subject and its objectified world (its environment). Though this fear of objectification is responsible for Heidegger’s neutered terminology, it also allows him to replace the originary moment of phenomenology, understood as the cognitive relation between a subject and an object, with the rich experiential relations of our world.

Doing away with the transcendental subject does not, however, erase the first-personality of Heidegger’s methodology. Quite the contrary, to say that ontology is possible only as phenomenology is to root the former in the one for whom things show themselves, in the disclosive being: in me. The Seinsfrage may ontologically precede the Daseinsfrage, but the former can only ever be articulated through the phenomenology of the latter. The possibility of explicit ontology is, therefore, pent up in our everyday pre-ontological worldliness, the starting point for Heidegger’s circuitous route back to subjectivity. His is not a psychologized or objectified subject, but a thoroughly ontological one: Dasein comes to show itself as my Being as I come to understand myself ontologically.

Thus, Heidegger’s opposition between mine-ness and worldliness is not between self-understandings differentiated by their reference to different sets of entities. Authenticity does not (or is at least not meant to) name the object (the “what” as he puts it) of our self-understanding, a shift
from the things out there to the one right here. It names a *mode* (the “how”) of relating to the very same things. But this, too, even if not yet reified into something like “an individual” and “its environment,” sets the ground for a modal distinction between a self-understanding that is *eigentlich* and one that is *weltlich*, a distinction whose ontological consequences are not easily kept from lapsing into ontic ones. Heidegger’s remarkable phenomenology of the everyday (of Being-in-the-world) therefore sets two countervailing processes in motion at once. Descriptively, it uncovers our essential entanglement in the world, what Heidegger calls our “ecstatic” Being-in-the-world, which offers an understanding of self and world as co-constitutive aspects of a single existential process. Because of the strength of this entwinement of ecstatic Being, however, this phenomenology initiates an equally powerful normative analysis of our need to extricate, isolate, and individuate ourselves from this world. The possibility of this first-personal extrication becomes the possibility motivating our entire Being.

Critic Stephen Crowell describes this quite clearly:

> Because features of Dasein’s being – including selfhood as Being-with-others – are existential possibilities [...] a Kierkegaardian reversal of the traditional solipsistic problem emerges: The question is not how an individual subject transcends its solipsistic condition toward genuine encounter with the other; rather it is how an initially undifferentiated anonymous “they-self” can become individuated. [...] Individuation begins with the collapse, in anxiety, of the they-self and the intelligibility of its taken-for-granted way of doing things.15

Without necessarily subscribing to the existentialized reading of Heidegger that this passage suggests, the irony, or at least the tension, in Heidegger’s method remains quite clear: the thick fabric of Being-in-the-world (being “busy, excited, interested”) is marked from the beginning by a fragility, a loose thread (“anxiety”), which, if tugged upon, quickly unravels the whole thing. The axis of in/authenticity

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14 This is what sets him apart from the tone of the “existentialists,” though is also his point of proximity. I will leave the success of Heidegger’s departure from Kierkegaard an open question that I will address from one side only.

is predicated on this latent fragility of our involvement in the “average everydayness” of our life in the world: a rich Welt reduced to an objectified Umwelt.

The second part of this chapter will follow these latent cracks in Weltlichkeit that seem to so totally account for our lives but, in Heidegger’s ontology, instead open onto this new dualism: the polarity of in/authenticity. Reinstating, though in an entirely new form, the old Kantian claim that time is the form of interiority and space that of exteriority, Heidegger reopens the chasm between self and world. Despite the explicit spatiality of the figure, “ecstasy” remains an exclusively temporal matter in SZ, grounding our (ontic) spatial dispersal in the world. Where Heidegger sees our temporality emerge from an ontological crack in the spatiality of our worldliness, I will ask whether there is not a pre-ontological co-dependency not only of spatiality and temporality, but of Weltlichkeit and Jemeinigkeit. Methodologically speaking, the question is whether the neutrality of his analysis of the everyday, in fact, lasts too long, forcing a false polarity because of his insistence on the priority of ontology. In short, I ask whether Heidegger’s pervasive fear of objectifying and psychologizing our Being and the resultant priority of Sein over Dasein is necessary for the phenomenological project that he unfolds. More specifically: does the worldliness of the first division not already contain the (spatio-temporal) ecstatic structure that is purportedly only introduced in the second division? If so, an entirely new way of understanding the junction between self and world offers itself. This junction, which I will suggest is better described as a unified fabric in which self and world are inextricably woven together in first-personal experience, is precisely what “ecstatic embodiment” makes intelligible. The “condensation,” as Heidegger puts it, of life in the unity of (first)-personhood is, then, a process animated and constituted by worldly particularities, and in no way at odds with or separable from them. To say that phenomena achieve a possible unity under the umbrella of Jemeinigkeit does not, in other words, place the coherence of selfhood and the material plurality of the world at odds, but underscores the reciprocal dependency of unifying the world and unifying the self. Our material self-
organization (our embodiment) arranges itself against the furthest horizons of our world (ecstatically). Because our embodiment is ecstatic, in other words, we figure the coherence of ourselves through the coherence of our world — and project the horizontal contours of our world in every moment of our everyday experience. If ecstasy, as Heidegger argues, is to be a figure for the wholeness of the self, it must, as I will argue, be a figure of the Weltlichkeit of the self and the Gemeinigkeit of the world.

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Here, the political stakes start to become clear. Contrary to the self-reliance characteristic of existential retreats into selfhood, this integration of the constitution of self and the constitution of world reveals the essential sociality of this project. As Heidegger is keen to point out, the project of establishing coherence is ongoing, inherited, forever unfinished. Our everyday lives contain the seeds for their universal significance — and are continuously thwarted in that process — because they intervene in an already established flow of poetic infrastructure, a durable yet malleable structure of collective figuration.

Yet Heidegger builds up worldliness in SZ through isolated spaces of work: the craftsman in his shed privately hammering away, the self-sufficient farmer pulling at his beets in the field. Out of this pastoral fantasy of a world defined by extra-social utility (“Zumhandenheit”), however, no ontological crack emerges.16 It is only because these isolated scraps of meaning, these small private spheres of experience, are, in fact, suspended within the shared social fabric of worldliness that fragilities emerge. According to Heidegger, it is the “anonymity” of social norms, described in his infamous exposition on “das Man,” that exposes the social fragility described by Crowell. If that were the case, the tendency for my understanding of worldliness to collapse into an objectified understanding of world would not

16 Other than the infamous broken hammer, that is. As I argue below, unless the broken hammer somehow evinces the fragility of the shared configuration of meaning, the anxiety behind a tool coming apart remains dependent upon the fluid and fragile social fabric in which its functionality is inscribed.
rise out of a tension between mine-ness and worldliness as such, but between mine-ness and “they-ness.” Worldliness would be alienating simply because it is structured by figures that I did not choose for myself. In that case, the polarity of self and world would be a problem of what contemporary philosophers would call practical reason: a matter of the source of normativity and the grounds for justifying our actions. Philosophy would be less concerned with articulating the poetic fabric of the world and more interested in establishing the basis upon which we could build a sense of self not susceptible to the fragility of the “anonymous” norms handed down from the “they,” norms rooted in nothing other than their own pre-existence. To use the terms that Heidegger himself suggests, to separate the world into the first-personal “Ich-Welt” and the enclosing objectivity of the “Umwelt” necessarily also severs the former from the social “Mit-Welt,” a position as conceptually unclear as it is socially problematic.

This is, however, the language with which one is left if personhood is severed from its social world, if one tries to read the coherence of meaning off of a formal structure that stands outside of our particular figures of collectivity (outside of history). Though this may remain somewhat nebulous, it should already be clear that the apparent insufficiency of Weltlichkeit to account for itself must be the analytic focal point for understanding the sociality of selfhood. It is at this point that thinking of the possibility of meaning in terms of embodiment becomes useful, if not imperative. If we are to find mine-ness already within everyday worldliness (the material Umwelt as much as the social Mitwelt), their coherence must arise from the same process of phenomenological figuration. To be embodied is precisely to see the reciprocity not as a contingent coincidence but as a constitutive co-constitution.

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Though this will become abundantly clear in what follows, a quick word is in order on what I do not mean to indicate by the spatiality of embodiment (and of which the qualifier “ecstatic” is meant to steer us clear). The first obvious, though necessary, point is that the ecstatic body does not point
toward objectification. Of course, so long as one has a psychologized or interiorized sense of subjectivity, “the body” will always serve as a reification of some intangible mind/spirit/soul and will be eschewed as a vehicle for letting the ontic bleed back into the ontological.\textsuperscript{17} Heidegger’s phenomenology allows us to avoid precisely this starting point and therefore to return to an understanding of embodiment which is freed of this spatial dualism. “Ecstatic” is a way of characterizing our spatiality, our Being-in-the-world, which does not proceed outward from a (definitionally immaterial) kernel to circumscribe an objective realm of selfhood or sovereignty, thereby delimiting ourselves from the world (whether through flesh, private property, or extensive sovereignty of any kind). A preliminary claim is, therefore, that ecstatic embodiment has nothing to do with spatial extension or bridging distance, but with a practical entanglement in a socio-material world whose unevenness and plasticity grounds any sense of proximity and distance.

Embodiment, this chapter suggests, is the \textit{medium},\textsuperscript{18} or spatial fabric, within which self and world can be placed in opposition or be left to operate in tandem. To be the medium in which and

\textsuperscript{17} For this reason, “embodiment,” finally no different than the Latinate “incarnation,” is rather misleading: the prefix suggests that something disembodied is \textit{given} a bodily form. The German “\textit{Leiblichkeit}” is much better (also bringing out its parallel to “\textit{Zeitlichkeit}”), but “bodiliness,” “bodiedness” or any other nominalization which avoids the prefix is no more a part of the English lexicon than the German term itself. As I note below, there is no particular need for this process of \textit{embodying} or \textit{incarnating} to mediate between the spiritual and the material; it can, just as well, name the process of rearranging materiality around a particular principle of self (a discrete body).

\textsuperscript{18} If this mediality is not again to lapse into objectification, it must be distinguished from a seemingly related role embodiment plays for other phenomenologists, but which has an entirely different ontology (spatiality) as its basis: the body as \textit{mediator} between two worlds (e.g. the will and representation, the spiritual and the physical, the inner and the outer, consciousness and reality, organism and environment). The body as mediator is a kind of liaison between two otherwise unrelatable worlds, a fortuitous hybrid thing which is both objective and subjective, perceptive and understanding. Merleau-Ponty may come the closest to thinking of the body medially, but because the worldliness he establishes is \textit{perceptual}, the resultant medial body remains fleshy, and thus still acts as a kind of condensed “schema” of the successful rapport between my intentionality and my world. (He in fact uses “medium” himself, though in the context of claiming that “my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facts because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense \textit{I am conscious of world through the medium [moyen] of my body}” (Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, 94–95 my emphasis,). Here, the body still functions as a portal between worlds). The Heideggerian phenomenology points to the unified substrate upon which such dualisms can be entertained. Bodily mediality as a grounding substrate is thus essentially different from, and even the condition for, the possibility of any idea of mediation.
through which the multiplicity of worldly particularities is experienced is to take up the collective fabric within which the vicissitudes of history, the unevenness of power, the possibilities of change and determination are woven and given form. While we are not sovereign, not cleanly discernable agents, we are also the only ones who can take responsibility for and partial ownership of what our world can and will look like. If there is a project of selfhood, of working toward the coherence of lived experience, it lies in navigating and re-figuring the modes of collectivity that my particular embodiment affords me and demands of me, a project of participating in the reproduction of a shared world as opposed to solidifying the conditions for individual autonomy. We must arrange the world such that we can place ourselves in it; “the world” is a figure for describing matter in terms of ourselves. Embodiment, far from a fixed object, is a process through which we discern ourselves in the material particularities of the world, of em-bodying (or in-carnating) the world as our own.¹⁹ The project is, in other words, not so much existential as it is poetic.

If our moment is marked by a crisis of worldliness, manifest in ecological crises that reduce our capacity for collective self-legislation to the struggle for self-preservation, we must re-describe the apparently “natural” fragilities of our environs as the fragility of our world — the fragility, in fact, of our capacity to discern the world as our own and, therefore, ours to (re)make anew. We don’t need to cultivate an ethic of stewardship over the natural world, nor to press for a politics of liberal equality

¹⁹ “Ecstatic embodiment” is, in this sense, a redundant phrase. To say that we are always outside of ourselves is nothing more than a description of the fact that we shape ourselves by appropriating the world as our own. We are the occasion, the medium, through which the material of the world takes shape as a world at all (as my world). Heidegger calls this material appropriation Ereignis (which I will discuss below), reminding us that this material appropriation is itself already a matter of self-formation (it is somewhat more buried in the English: the stem “proper” reflecting the eigen of selfhood). This is, as I noted above, Heidegger’s unexplored point of contact with Marx, for whom the freedom of the self was only possible by making the “inorganic body” of the material world one’s own “organic body.” To reiterate, because the internal coherence of our self (Ereignis) is achieved through the arrangement of externality (ek-stasis — what Marx, following Hegel, called Entäußerung), we are also always vulnerable to disturbing this fragile dialectic of self and world. Entäußerung always threatens to become Entfremdung. Though this particular constellation of terms demands a rigorous investigation of its own, I will touch upon it when returning to this embodied dialectic in Marx’s figure of “metabolism” in chapter 3.
or freedom from the vicissitudes of the world. The fissure in our geography is not between the human and the material, but in our capacity to figure them as reciprocally constitutive. A phenomenology of ecstatic embodiment does not yet offer a determinate politics for averting climate change, but it does allow us to re-articulate fear over the quality of our natural world as concern with the inequality of our social world. The tools for addressing resource extraction, pollution, soil degradation, and rising sea levels are no different than those for negotiating trade deals, corporate regulation, land rights, and labor conditions. An ecstatic phenomenology reclaims environmental issues from the technocratic hands of the objective sciences and reminds us that they are a political matter of our inability to collectively, and therefore freely, remake ourselves through our world.
II. Heidegger’s Discovery of the World

1. Beyond Erkenntnis: Phenomenology in the Middle Voice

The great achievement of — and challenge for — Heidegger’s early philosophy was almost entirely methodological. Unlike the other progenitor of twentieth-century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger was uninterested in establishing a new body of knowledge. Indeed, Heidegger went far out of his way to avoid any confusion between his study of phenomena and any empirical or metaphysical doctrine. Phenomenality no longer served as an epistemological assurance as it had since Kant, bridging the distinct ontological realms of “self” and “world” through a successful harmony of heterogeneous domains (paradigmatically, inner and outer). Instead, Heidegger worked to re-inscribe the act of appearing into the articulation of that appearance: phenomenality was to be inseparable from phenomenology. While the prominent neo-Kantians contemporary to Heidegger grappled with the disruption and displacement of experience in the moment of its philosophical articulation, Heidegger worked to develop a language for phenomenality that was already ordered: one which contained its own logos. This methodological reorientation, I argue, allowed Heidegger to “leap back into the world,” as he went on to put it, placing philosophy back into the practice of everyday life. I will begin, then, with a brief word on the basic problem Heidegger faced in his phenomenological method and his use of an arcane grammatical form — the Greek middle voice — to try to chart his proposed new path forward.

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20 Phenomenology’s inheritance of classical transcendental philosophy is a long and intricate story. By focusing on Heidegger’s transformation of (the spatiality of) appearance, I am, inevitably, leaving out many facets and important figures. For an excellent overview of the afterlife of Kantianism in early phenomenology, especially in the work of Edmund Husserl, see the recent collection: Faustino Fabbianelli and Sebastian Luft, eds., Husserl Und Die Klassische Deutsche Philosophie: Husserl and Classical German Philosophy (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014). For a classic analysis of the Husserlian relation to Kant and Kantianism, see Iso Kern, Husserl und Kant: eine Untersuchung über Husserls Verhältnis zu Kant und zum Neukantianismus (1964; repr., Heidelberg: Springer, 2011).
In his well-known etymological interpretation of phenomenology at the outset of _SZ_, Heidegger traces a plurality of meanings carried by the word “phenomenon” back to that of “self-showing” (selbst zeigen). Both Erscheinung (appearance), the “announcing” of something that does not show itself, and Schein (semblance), the way something shows itself falsely, are possible “only because something claims to show itself in accordance with its meaning at all, that is, claims to be a phenomenon. [...] The original meaning (phenomenon: what is manifest [das Offenbare]) already contains and is the basis of phainomenon (“semblance”).” In addition, Erscheinung (as well as “bloße Erscheinung,” mere appearance) has yet another valence, indicating not simply a false self-showing but something which does not show itself at all: the noumenal. Here, too, the idea that the phenomenon indicates (that is, connects two separate things) relies on a notion of self-showing inherent to the one thing that shows itself.

To add to this tangle, the sense in which phenomenology is a science of phenomena turns the screw of self-showing yet again. Heidegger insists that if we are to understand logos as discourse, it must be understood as “apophantic speech” (apophainesthai, from the same verb out of which “phenomenon” arises): “discourse ‘lets us see,’ apo … from itself, what is being talked about. In discourse (apophansis), insofar as it is genuine, what is said should be derived from what is being talked about.” In this reinterpretation, logos, far from the imposition of the form of our experience on the matter of the world, lets things show themselves as they are; logos is, to use one of Heidegger’s favorite terms, disclosure. Phenomenology, translated literally as apophainesthai ta phainomenonai, is, then, a

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21 Heidegger, _Being and Time_, 27/29.

22 “Appearance, as the appearance ‘of something,’ thus precisely does not mean that something shows itself; rather, it means that something which does not show itself announces itself through something that does show itself. Appearing is a not showing itself.” (Heidegger, 28/29.) This echoes the Kantian notion that phenomena carry a negative within them: not falseness but something that could never show itself, something that can only ever be apprehended through its mediation in another thing: its appearance.

23 Heidegger, 31/32.
method of description that is disclosive of the way things are in themselves. Or, as Heidegger puts it in his hopelessly obscured attempt to read off of the Greek, “das was sich zeigt, so wie es sich von ihm selbst her zeigt, von ihm selbst her sehen lassen” (“to let that which shows itself as it shows itself from itself be seen from itself”).

Beneath the surface of Heidegger’s unpalatable hyper-reflexive formulation lies the difficulty of translating the verb *phainesthai* into German (or any other contemporary Indo-European language). It is not that we moderns have lost the notion of manifestation or coming to light, which “to show itself” seems to capture well enough. The problem makes itself clearer in the derivative senses of phenomenality, which require the separation of the thing from its coming to light (that which appears from appearance, that which really is from semblance). There is a tension between the part or aspect of the object that finds its determination in a foreign light, as a mediated heteronomous thing, and the aspect that remains in total darkness as autonomous, immediate, indeterminate. This was the core problem that Kant’s critical epistemology sought to navigate: these two are not simply divergent or contrary but are, despite their schism, meant to refer to one and the same thing and thus must stand in some kind of relation. We can think of an object either in its noumenal or its phenomenal aspect, but never both at the same time. In its phenomenality, we speak of it in relation to a subject (us): we think of, see, experience, or misunderstand something, and always in relation to a web of other entities that are similarly determined by their relation both to the experiencing subject and to each other. To speak of the thing in its noumenality, however, we must refrain from invoking any subjectivity or other entity external to the object in question: the thing in itself can, in fact, not be spoken of beyond its formal possibility because any predicative determination would attach it to some external context.

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24 Heidegger, 34, my translation.
(cause it to appear under some foreign light). It is, properly speaking, not even an object, entity, being, or anything that could belong to a typology, but simply a bare thing (Ding, as Kant insisted).

But, as Heidegger points out, if the thing as withheld from the light, as non-appearing thing, is to have any relation to the appearance, both must rest upon a common ground of things that do in fact appear, and not in any mediated sense but in themselves. Thus, before the complete independence of the Ding-an-sich and the total dependence of the Erscheinung lies a third modality of coming to light within a context that is nevertheless immediate. It is this mode, neither active nor passive, neither autonomous nor fully heteronomous, which Heidegger tries to capture with the fullness of reflexive objectivity (sich zeigen so wie es von ihm selbst her zeigt). This reflexive objectivity is, therefore, simply “allowed” (gelassen) to come to light by a merely facilitating subjectivity. This facilitation of reflexivity is Heidegger’s approximation of the grammatically untranslatable form of the Greek phainesthai: the middle voice.25

Heidegger does not make much of his appeal to the middle voice, at least not explicitly,26 but it is worth taking a slight detour to consider what exactly it means for phenomenology to speak in the middle voice. Though Heidegger does not himself take on the full import of this methodological gesture, the mediality of the middle voice, I will argue, establishes a discursive space in which phenomenality is the disclosure of the world as such. Our embodiment of this (poetic) disclosure allows the seemingly isolated phenomena of everyday life to figuratively open onto the world as a whole.

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25 The relation between the fantasy of “(im)mediacy” and the “mediality” of the middle voice is neither incidental nor direct. I return to this below when discussing Emil Lask, for whom this was a very explicit issue.

26 Heidegger, Being and Time, 27/28, 31/32 are the only two instances in which he refers to the grammatical form directly. “Mediality” is not an operative term in Being and Time; to the degree that it is present, it is buried underneath the question of Being.
Voice indicates the focus, or priority, of an action, relating the verb to the effective agent(s) and the affected object(s). The active and passive voices are distinguished by the semantic focus they place, through syntax, on the subject or object, respectively:

**Active:** Felix broke the computer.

**Passive:** The computer was broken [by Felix].

Though these ostensibly describe the exact same process, in the former case Felix is the clear focal point, while in the latter he is merely incidental to the focus on the computer. Though the “middle” voice sounds as though it should strike a balance between the two, it really functions as a different kind of alternative to the active than the passive, one that doesn’t simply invert subject and object (by making the semantically active subject the grammatical object and vice versa), but by turning away from the question of agency altogether toward the fact of the process itself:

**Middle:** The computer broke.\(^{27}\)

While we can always ask *who* broke it, the priority of the statement is simply to indicate the fact of its breaking: it points to or uncovers the process itself.

As indologist Jan Gonda explains, the medial\(^{28}\) in both Greek and Sanskrit was essentially a grammatical turn toward the person or thing *in which* something happens and away from the source or

\(^{27}\) Grammatically, this is a plain old active sentence, though the verb is a so-called “ergative” verb, one which can be used transitively or intransitively to refer to the same action: in this case, the computer breaking. “To open,” “to cook,” “to shave,” “to reflect,” and many other verbs can be used in this way. When English still had the “passival” form, many verbs were expressed in this fashion: “the house is building,” “the food is eating” etc. Though these are by no means middle constructions, they do steer the verb away from the source or cause of the action and to the fact of the action itself.

\(^{28}\) The adjectival form of “the middle” already points away from the idea of standing between or being an “intermediary” and towards that of the more radical *mediality* (in German: “*medial*” from “das Medium”) of an action understood as an event.
actor responsible for setting that event into motion. Gonda calls this an “eventive” formulation, in which

something comes or happens to a person (or object), befalls him, takes place in the person of the subject so as to affect him etc., without any agens being mentioned, implied, or even known. Very often the subject is a person or living being and the process may take place even contrary to his wishes, unintentionally, more or less automatically.

Common examples in Greek of being befallen in this way include a number of bodily events (πτάρνομαι (to sneeze), ερεύγομαι (to belch), ἐγείρομαι (to awake), γίγνομαι (to be born), ὀλλοῦμαι (to die)) or moments of pathos (μαίνομαι (to be furious), ἀιδοῦμαι (to be ashamed), ἔλπομαι (to hope), ἔραμαι (to love)). It is not that I generate fury or am the cause of it in any direct sense. Nor am I overcome by some unnamed foreign power, Fury, who courses through me and causes me to become furious. It is, of course, perfectly reasonable and ordinary to ask about the source of my fury, about who is originally responsible for producing it, and one could likely establish some pretty concrete answers. But when I speak of myself as being furious in this eventive voice, I am precisely not speaking in terms of etiology: I am already furious and it is this fact that I am a furious person, a furious thing, a locus of fury, that is expressed.

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The middle continues to be used in a number of contemporary non-Indo-European languages (Malay, Marind of Papua, and Toba Batak of north Sumatra, to name a few). See Gonda, 182–83.


30 Gonda, “Reflections on the Indo-European Medium I,” 49. Note that because the agent is not even implied, this is not to be confused with a passive formulation that simply displaces the subject out of the sentence in a moment of mystery or incomplete information. In saying “The computer was broken” we are still invoking an (unnamed) agent who broke it, who is, in some sense, the (semantic) focal point of the sentence despite being absent grammatically.

31 Gonda, 50; Gonda, “Reflections on the Indo-European Medium II,” 177.
There is, then, nothing exclusively medial about any of these verbs: it would be strange to deny that mothers give birth, that a sound awakens me, or that a sneeze always comes as a reaction to some irritant. But no matter how indebted birth is to a mother’s birthing, there is an important sense in which she is not the agent in question when we speak of someone being born. The baby is certainly not the subject, but also not the object. That is what is so magical about birth: chemical-physical origins and even the most complex causal explanations can never fully account for the moment in which something entirely new comes to be: a life begins, a fact that can be explained in terms of all sorts of prior conditions but that is, in a deeper sense, an event of its own, comprehensible only in terms of that life itself.

But this is not to say that the event is brought about internally, either: it would be equally misguided to try to speak reflexively of a child bearing itself or bringing itself into the world. Though the passive formulation of “being born” might suggest this, it is really only the inversion of the active “the mother bore the child” with the mother the unnamed but implied agent standing just outside of the utterance. The middle voice steers clear of any such ascription and simply names the birth as an event of its own. It takes place, we might say, in the baby; the baby is the medium (or “site,” as Heidegger calls it in his later works) of birth but not its perpetrator or recipient. The intentions of an agent or any other such external cause, the middle voice insists, are not the appropriate explanatory tools for understanding the emergence of life.

Does the middle voice then simply bracket what came before, ignoring what lies outside, and in this sense reduce the verb to a pure here and now, cut off from any spatio-temporal embeddedness? If so, the middle voice would not seem particularly helpful in avoiding Kant’s epistemological isolation and reification of phenomenality. But the middle voice speaks of a phenomenon not as an object but as an event, and thus doesn’t properly speak of a thing at all. (Again, this is why reflexive formulations
are a misleading translation of the middle voice: they not only re-introduce an efficient cause, but, in so doing, must also revive a robust object for that agent to act upon.)

This becomes clearer when we consider the relation between these different voices. It would be misleading to say that the computer, or even the broken computer, is the thing common to all statements, simply spoken of in different modalities. But even if not a thing, there does still seem to be some kind of commonality between the expressions “Felix broke the computer,” “the computer was broken,” and “the computer broke:” the breaking of the computer. The act, the event — the phenomenon — of the computer breaking. But this verbal phrase, too, could be taken either as a way of further determining the object “computer” (now with the predicate “being broken”), or as the encounter of brokenness in an entity that is only determinable as a computer because it is something that usually functions. But this ambiguity is actually clarifying: the object underlying the former (“computer”) itself emerges as a product of the latter (the brokenness of something that we expect to be useful). How would we be able to speak about a computer if we did not already have the more fundamental experience that the computer works, breaks, is expensive, etc.? The very idea that those determinations are categories we apply to some naked noumenon to build up the concept “computer” is predicated on an experience of the computer being in some kind of relation to me.

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This begins to make better sense of Heidegger’s distinction between phenomenon and (mere) appearance ((bloße) Erscheinung). The active sense of a thing appearing in some way — a sense whose tenuous epistemology relies on the division of the hidden agent (noumenon) and the visible product (appearance) — is derivative of the medial and single sense of a phenomenon as event. Thus, the very possibility of active descriptions of things is predicated on the actuality of medial facts or events. This is, to use another term of some importance to Heidegger’s inheritance of the Kantian problem, the “facticity” of the world.
Insisting on this facticity of birth — to stay with this example for a moment — as the essential focal point of the event (and not something prior or external, caused or intended) does not, however, cut the event off from the particular set of limitations and possibilities formed by the socio-historical world in which it occurs. The eventiveness of birth does not question the fact that a baby is born into a specific world whose particularities are co-constituted by endless others in a complex web of interrelated events. Moreover, because the mediality of the middle voice articulates the basic relational experience of the world upon which specific active (or passive) statements are founded, the eventive needn’t be augmented by the active to account for the historicity, contingency, and embeddedness of a phenomenon. The mediality of the middle voice already contains, immanently, a much stronger kind of interrelation and interdependence than any chain of causal or intentional links could establish.

If phenomenality already contains the logic of its own appearing, what work does phenomenology do? What kind of relation between speaker and phenomenon does medial speech exhibit? What kind of logos does “disclosure” make possible over and above the phenomenon’s own eventiveness? If we follow Heidegger’s translation of the middle voice into the language of facilitation — logos as “allowing” something to “show itself” — speaking in the middle voice would seem to impose its own kind of distance, perhaps even greater than in the active. The speaker, no longer integral to the process of appearing, would be marginal and detached, merely pointing to a thing in its eventiveness — a midwife, so to speak.

32 Recall his painstaking elucidation of phainesthai into a knot of reflexives: “das was sich zeigt, so wie es sich von ihm selbst her zeigt, von ihm selbst her sehen lassen.” This isn’t just unwieldy, it obscures the radicality of his own method: reflexivity works not by backing away from the question of agency but by making the agent the object of its own action; it is a thoroughly active voice in which the object just happens to also be the subject. By reinterpreting phenomenality reflexively, Heidegger seems to have undercut the power of the middle voice and obfuscated its mediality. The problem becomes clearer when we turn from the middle voice as a grammar of phenomenality towards the middle voice as the voice of phenomenology. That is, to think of mediality not as a characteristic of a phenomenon but as the structure of phenomenology itself. I will return to this at length below.
This is the challenge Heidegger grapples with in the methodological opening of _SZ_. Though the grammatical move from object to event carries the seed of a radical phenomenology, it is by no means sufficient. The seemingly straightforward grammatical gesture raises questions it is not fully equipped to answer: are events entirely isolated moments, nodes of relation, or a medium of appearances? What, in other words, is the experiential medium in which certain relations appear and others do not? If the simple Kantian answer (the a priori forms of cognition common to all creatures of rationality) is no longer adequate, the question remains critically unclear: _whose_ phenomenological medium this is? This “who?” is the essential methodological concern (and discovery) of Heidegger’s project. It is, I argue below, also the question his ontology almost entirely smothers.

This challenge of articulating the medium of experience through which philosophy could describe particular phenomena in the world as immanently organized is, in fact, a recapitulation of a methodological problem with which Heidegger’s neo-Kantian contemporaries were grappling. To understand how Heidegger’s ostensibly ontological project came to develop a worldly phenomenology, we must go back more than a decade to his early encounter with this problem: how to develop a philosophical vocabulary with which to accommodate facticity and logicity.

2. **Erlebnis**: Emil Lask’s Categorial Environmentality

Heidegger inherited the term “facticity” from the neo-Kantian attempt to account for those shards of irrationality that escape clean subsumption under the Kantian apparatus. Beginning with Fichte, the question of what to make of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the empirical and the a priori seemed a fundamental challenge to the smooth operation of Kantian epistemology. _Faktizität_ was the word Fichte used to describe the raw “thisness” of the empirical that could not be brought under the a priori predictability of cognition. Facticity was needed to allow for novelty,
creativity, unpredictability: for the caprice of history. The basic shape of the problem hadn’t changed a century later in the hands of the prominent neo-Kantians contemporary to the young Heidegger. His mentor, Heinrich Rickert, and a fellow student of Rickert’s, Emil Lask, made a particular impression on him. While Fichte had introduced the term to name the totally irrational — the mysterious remainder outside of everything ordered and cognizable — it had already undergone a partial revolution in the writings of the young Lask.\footnote{This short history of the term as appropriated by Heidegger is indebted to the marvelous work of Theodore Kisiel. See Theodore Kisiel, “Why Students of Heidegger Will Have to Read Emil Lask,” \emph{Man and World} 28, no. 3 (1995): 197–240 (especially 200-203). Also helpful is Theodore Kisiel, \emph{The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time} (University of California Press, 1995), particularly 26-34.}

To put it simply, Lask saw in bare facticity not something \textit{outside} the categories of knowledge, but something \textit{beneath} them. Facticity, Lask suggested, may have referred to raw empirical intuition, the unanticipated “thisness” of the particular, but that did not mean it lacked categorial order.\footnote{Note the early glimmer of worldhood here, with the spatial problem of relating facticity and logicity: \emph{Where} does particularity come from? \emph{In what context} is eventiveness possible? In place of Kantian logical space, a more developed topography of experience sprouts out of this relation \emph{between} the factical and logical, a relation that shows itself to be — even if only metaphorically — environmental.}

With this observation, the neo-Kantian problematic began to bleed into the phenomenological. It was Husserl who, in 1900, first introduced the notion of a “categorial intuition” to make sense of the experience of what we might call the syntax of things: the \textit{and}s, \textit{or}s, \textit{many}s, \textit{this}s, \textit{is}s and other grammatically connective but experientially fundamental aspects of any intuition.\footnote{See Edmund Husserl, \emph{Logische Untersuchungen} (1900; repr., Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2009) Band VI, §§40-46.} Categorial intuitions accounted for the fact that we do not experience the world as an assemblage of nouns but as a network of facts. Lask adopted this idea of a categorial intuition to suggest that the brute facticity that Fichte had taken to be merely empirical was itself already categorial. The thisness — the \textit{pre}-cognitive particularity — of a thing was not to be understood as empirical barrenness beyond the realm of experience, but as furnishing the basic moment of anything being present to us
at all (as he put it, the “es gibt” that must be in place for any further objective determination). This placed facticity not outside of knowledge but squarely underneath it as the “pretheoretical something [vortheoretisches Etwas]”\(^3\) that grounds our cognition and provides us with the most fundamental moment of experience.

Lask saw in facticity the unmediated ground of cognition: not the irrational, but the immediate. While our sensory intuition of objects, Lask suggested, is mediated by the form of our experience (the categories under which objects become objects), our pretheoretical experience is of the form itself, of the syntax of experience, and is thus mediated by nothing at all: “the immediate experience [Erleben] is a sheer ‘living’ ['Leben']” in which we lose ourselves in the pretheoretical something, and is therefore a “not knowing [Nichterkennen], an unknowing [unwissendes], an unreflective, in this regard naive [...] comportment, an experience [Erleben], which doesn’t ‘know’ what it ‘does’ or ‘lives’.”\(^3\) In a more mystical expression, which Heidegger himself took up, Lask described this moment of sheer living as “pure absorption in the specific [reines Aufgehen im Spezifischen]” and compared it to “ethical, aesthetic, religious devotion [Hingabe].”\(^3\) In Hingabe, we literally give ourselves over, find ourselves fully dissolved and immersed in the matter at hand. We are absorbed in the meaning or value of the form in which our knowledge of objects can be successfully mediated.

It is worth noting how peculiar this gesture is: by following the trail of sheer thingness, of brute facticity whose thorniness seemed to preclude its ever having a relation to our conceptual subjectivity, Lask unearthed a level of objectivity (a level, it turns out, before objectivity) saturated with value, the form “in” which we “live” and through which we know things. The similarity to Heidegger’s

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\(^3\) Emil Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre: eine Studie über den Herrschaftsbereich der logischen Form*, ed. Friedrich Kaulbach (1911; repr., Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 191. Only small portions of his work have been translated into English, so all translations here are mine.

\(^3\) Lask, 191.

\(^3\) Lask, 191.
methodological approach is already clear: Lask, burrowing through the layers of objectivity mediated by conceptuality in search of a bedrock that would require no mediation at all, formulated a primordial experience that bears a striking resemblance to the grammatical explication of the middle voice. Our “dissolution” in the particular reserves the “Etwas” for a moment before conceptual determination and theoretical ordering, a pure event in which we are immersed.

Is there not, however, a terminological opposition here? The middle voice showed itself, after all, to be essentially medial while Lask pursued the experience of total immediacy. Only somewhat. Immediacy (Unmittelbarkeit) was desirable to Lask because mediation (the bridging of heterogeneous realms through the forms of cognition) posed a problematic moment of reflective distance and therefore could not ground itself. Because of this, immediacy seemed to promise the final closure of the gap between the empirical and the a priori. Immediacy, we might say, was simply Lask’s counterpoint to the active voice of cognition, providing the connective tissue between disparate phenomena without changing the register or structure of those phenomena themselves.

The way Lask described this union isn’t, however, what we might expect of an “unknowing, unreflective” experience of total dissolution. Recall the idea of a categorial intuition and the thought that facticity grounds logicity precisely because it is the experience, not of an object, but of the form itself through which objects can come to be known. This experience is, crucially, not Erkenntnis but Erlebnis: facticity’s categorial form is that with which objects are determined but also that in which we live. If the problem Lask faced was validating our application of the categories to things (knowledge’s object formation), immediacy succeeds not by eliminating or circumventing categorial forms

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39 As Kisiel points out, Lask is directly drawing upon the important neo-Kantian notion of Geltung when we say “the ball is round” the truth of the “is” (like all other categorial forms through which our knowledge of the world is possible) is not that of existence but that of the validity or successful relation of formal context and objective matter. (Kisiel, “Why Students of Heidegger Will Have to Read Emil Lask,” 206.) It is in this sense that we live “in” truth, in the context of validity through which objects are successfully mediated.
altogether, but by validating those very forms. If there is any immediacy, it is the validity given to all categorial attribution by the fact that I “live in” those categorial forms. In that case, however, the immediacy of our categorial intuition is simply the experience of the mediacy of life. This comes rather close to saying that facticity is medial. The question remains: what does it mean to “live in the validating element” and what is the relation of this living in to knowing of? This revolves, yet again, around the question of who experiences (and articulates) the factual. The answer, it turns out, has everything to do with the spatial metaphors through which the factual and logical are figuratively related.

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Lask described the relation between the forms we inhabit and the objects of knowledge hylomorphically. Readers of Lask are faced with a prepositional jumble when trying to capture this relation. Does one come before, is the other inside, above, peripheral? Playing upon the famous Kantian adage that concepts without intuitions are empty and intuitions without concepts blind, Lask suggests that intuitions without concepts are “naked” and lacking the usual logical shell or enclosure with which they are usually clothed. His metaphors for the form-matter relation build on this: the forms of cognition “surround,” “envelop,” “encompass,” “environ,” “en-clothe” their lived material (he

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40 Kisiel captures this Laskian thought quite clearly: “This immediate experience of living through the forms in order to medially know the cognitive object, the matter, is the moment of categorial intuition in every cognition. Thus, the nonsensory form is at first not known but only experienced or lived (erlebt).” (Kisiel, The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time, 27.)

41 Lask’s fixation on immediacy is a reminder that, for all his radicality, he was still firmly rooted in the Kantian epistemological problematic. Lask was operating in a Kantian space in which experience could only be grounded by closing the gap between the formal subject and the material world. The young Heidegger, immersed in this same impersonal language, began with the same concern with discovering the pre-theoretical that had not yet bloomed into (and been distorted by) the relationality and mediation of worldliness.

Though the Heidegger of SZ was, in many ways, freed of this quest for epistemological immediacy and generated a philosophy ostensibly built upon the navigation of distance (“Dasein”), I will argue that his own notion of mediality (threatened, as I suggested above, by lapsing into mere reflexivity) was re-condensed into the immediacy of a self-relation.
experiments with virtually every *um-* figure: *umkleidet, umlagert, umfährt, umfasst, umgibt, umgreift, umschliesst, umzieht, umhüllt* to name but a few). Only because we live in (are in an immediate relation to) this categorial frame or context, this already meaningful Um-world, can we take up a mediate relation of knowledge to any object by determining it formally. It is no coincidence, then, that *Hingabe* played a key role for Lask and that he needed such a tangle of prepositions and spatial configurations to flesh out this pretheoretical moment. Lask’s dive into facticity had the entirely unexpected effect of opening the door to a new primordial realm of experience that didn’t work through the isolation of a thing but through the immersion in relations of validity and meaning: what we might call categorial environmentality.

Lask’s deflection of the locus of experience from the reified object of knowledge to the categorial environment in which such objectification could so much as take place makes it clear that his search for the immediate was, in fact, a first step toward the mediality of the eventive voice. Mediality, the site of an event, appears here in the *um-* structure: environmentality expands the dyadic subject-object axis of Kantian logical space, opening the door to describing experience as a medium with its own spatial organization. Still, Lask’s philosophy faced a problem. Despite this immanent fullness of lived experience, it remained unclear how to talk about this unreflective, unknowing immersion in form; the sharp distinction of the *pre-*theoretical *Erlebnis* and the theoretical *Erkenntnis* may have solved an epistemological problem but reproduced a methodological one. His project of

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42 E.g. Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre*, 2, 69–76.

43 As Heidegger put it several years later in his habilitation, “It is only because I live in the validating element [im Geltenden] that I know about the existing element [um Existierende],” Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe I: Frühe Schriften (V. Klostermann, 1976), 280.
characterizing the pre-theoretical environmental moment was itself a theoretical undertaking, which revived the fear of reifying and mediating the raw immediacy of *Erlebnis* that he sought to capture.\(^44\)

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Lask’s linguistic formulations for getting at this most basic moment of contextual validity — “*es gibt*” and the common “*es gilt*” — expose the theoretical impersonality of his project. Though Lask hoped to capture the fundamental fabric of living, he was left with an emptied, impersonal, and entirely formal philosophical language. In fact, despite his relative radicality this was a problem he had set himself at the very outset and was never going to overcome: his search for immediacy and the self-validation of sheer living or blind immersion was always a fantasy of epistemological assurance projected from a philosophical position removed from that space; it was the last hope for a subject already alienated from *Erlebnis* and thus always in the strange position of craning its theoretical neck back on an imagined moment before finding itself on one side of the cognitive schism between self and world, a moment before the flow of life was irrevocably hardened into objective matter.

To put the problem somewhat differently: Lask successfully imagined a way of living in the world that seemed free of the gap between subjective form and objective matter, and yet only as a prior moment postulated by the subject of cognition. Lask may have broken the opposition between facticity and logicity, but far from folding them into one another he simply placed facticity before, or around, logicity. The rigid temporal divide between the theoretical and the pre-theoretical would always be at odds with his fluid and co-dependent spatial model of the hylomorphic environment. He transformed phenomenality by steeping it in environmental facticity, but only to have stranded logos on the far shores of theoretical, impersonal generality. Phenomenology remained out of reach for

\(^{44}\) This was Paul Natorp’s critique of Husserl’s phenomenology and remains a crippling problem so long as the descriptive vantage point of phenomenology is considered external to the flow of life.
Lask because he did not allow environmentality — life — to permeate the *logos* with which to investigate it.

In Lask’s writings, mediality makes a flashing appearance as the ur-experience we must hearken back to, but it does not step in as the methodological structure of philosophy itself. This chapter asks: how can the subject of philosophical description be understood as constitutively worldly? Lask could not answer this because his environmental figuration of life remained entirely impersonal and fully separated from the discursive space from which the theoretical “I” speaks.

What seemed like the seeds of a phenomenology growing out of the attention to factic environmentality in fact reinstated the gap between philosophy and life, between knowledge and experience, between the subject and its *Umwelt*. Does eventiveness then really characterize the highest peak of objectivity, the purest form of a thing showing itself on its own terms, undisturbed by reflection precisely because it justifies and enables such objectifying reflection? Or does it somehow open us to the surroundings in which we live “in” meaning, the medium in which the event is able to form itself? Heidegger, himself grappling with the fate of these neo-Kantian terms, put this fork in the phenomenological road quite clearly. In his 1919 “*Kriegsnotsemester*” (KNS) course in which he both experimented with and critiqued these Laskian terms, he remarked:

> Already in the opening of the question ‘Is there…?’ there is something. Our *entire* problematic has arrived at a crucial point […] We are standing at the methodological crossroad which will decide on the very life or death of philosophy. We stand at an abyss: either into nothingness, that is, absolute reification, or we somehow leap into another world, more precisely: for the first time into the world at all [überhaupt erst in die Welt].


Future citations will reference the German pagination from Klostermann’s *Gesamtausgabe*. E.g. “Heidegger, KNS, 63.”
With this portentous announcement, the choice and its stakes were clear: though in his habilitation he had comfortably traded in the Laskian impersonal “es gilt,” at this point he called upon philosophy itself to make the leap into the world, for it to embed itself methodologically into the worldliness that had hitherto only been bestowed upon the phenomena it attempted to know. If philosophy was itself to become worldly, its *logos* had to discover its own material situation, and, with it, the problem of the pre- and post-theoretical dissolved. The Laskian metaphors of environmentality had to be taken literally and the purported hylomorphism of life and knowledge allowed to develop into the worldly medium of immersed experience.

3. *Ereignis*: Heidegger’s Eventive Worldliness

At this pivotal moment in his 1919 seminar, Heidegger made what might seem a rather simple observation, but which was to save the Laskian question (“Is there…?”) from itself and steer philosophy toward solid ground. Already in posing the question, Heidegger suggested in the passage above, there is something. *We*, the ones who pose the question, are there: “If *we* were not at all first here, then there would be no such question.”⁴⁶ Lask’s pursuit of the *Etwas* entirely neglected the one engaged in that pursuit. What kind of “we” is Heidegger pointing to here? Who, as we began to ask before, poses the Laskian question? In a basic sense, it is simply “I” who poses the question: I am the one for whom this can become an issue to pursue. As Heidegger was quick to point out, however, this kind of account of the question threatened to be misunderstood as a psychologized “I” or else an emptied transcendental “I.” This is why there was no “I” in Lask’s account of the primordial realm of *Erlebnis* but, in its place, an “*Etwas*.” But, continued Heidegger, does not the very notion of *Fraglichkeit* (questionability) already carry an “I” with it? When we ask “Is there…?” isn’t that always

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *KN3*, 63–64.
“Is there … for me?”; “The question is experienced [erlebt]. I experience. I experience something.” Erlebnis, far from being the elusive object of philosophy’s questioning, would be the very form of the questioning: not die Frage des Erlebnis but das Frageerlebnis.

Here, the methodological tension in Lask between the theoretical philosopher and pretheoretical lived experience, the tension between the complete abstraction of the Etwas and its indication of pure facticity, emerged as a problem in the very nature of the question. “I ask: ‘Is there something?’ The ‘is there’ is a ‘there is’ for an ‘I’, and yet it is not I to and for whom the question has relation [auf den der Fragesinn Bezug hat].” Immersed life, however immediately absorbed in the forms of its experience, remains fully impersonal: it is not I, you, we, or anyone else whose lived experience is captured. Just as the Etwas didn’t name this or that particular thing (in this sense, it is nothing), so is the pretheoretical life to which we make appeal not our particular life. If we are to pursue philosophy along the thread of facticity, the decontextualized abstraction of Lask’s formalized question is a dead end.

It is not only the Etwas whose facticity must be uncovered: the life (the person) for whom that Etwas so much as matters must be understood medially as well. To be more precise, it is not a matter of completing or balancing the analysis, performing the operation Lask had carried out on the thing now on oneself: facticity understood medially is precisely a matter of exploring the context in which

47 Heidegger, 65.

48 Heidegger, 69.

49 As I have already shown, the fatal contradiction of the Etwas is that, by pursuing thisness to the point of formalization, one entirely empties it of any this or that. One wants to say that it is the most general, the bare minimum of what one can say about a thing, but, as Heidegger puts it, the meaning of the Etwas arises out of a “whole process of motivations” that set this generalization into motion. “This is already suggested by the fact that, in attempting to grasp the meaning of ‘something in general’ [den Sinn des Etwas überhaupt zu erfassen], we return to individual objects with particular concrete content.” (Heidegger, 68.)

Though Heidegger was acutely aware of this danger, it didn’t prevent something similar from happening to his Dasein in SZ.
these two “halves” show themselves to be originally unified in *my* experience of *the world*. Lask’s environmental metaphors, which suggested that categorial forms are a medium for the matter of knowledge, are therefore *mere* metaphors offering a mythic experiential a priori that is postulated to ground philosophical knowledge. Lask, though radical, was not yet thinking phenomenologically. And it was phenomenology, the medium in which experience and discourse, phenomenon and *logos*, are unified, that allowed Heidegger to steer philosophy toward “the world at all.”

* To provide an alternative to the strangely self-defeating Laskian *Fragelebnis*, Heidegger simply asked his audience to consider any everyday experience of theirs. Walking, for example, into the lecture hall as a student, I find “*my* usual seat.” As the lecturer, walking into the same room, I may first see the lectern from which I will speak, while the seats are simply the general place from which the audience will listen. The very same lectern that may serve as a support for my bad knee, an elevated table for my notes, or maybe the culprit of a splinter I haven’t been able to remove from my palm, may, for a student of mine, be an imposing marker of authority or the angular piece of wood on which they inadvertently zone out when I bore them. If a building inspector walks into the room, my lectern or the student’s chairs may immediately be visible as potential fire hazards or violations of other codes.

These differences are, Heidegger emphasized, not a matter of differing interpretations or perspectives, but of differing *arrangements of significance* in which the lectern appears. To illustrate this, Heidegger pointed out that I do not first intuit brown surfaces, wood, a box conjoined with another, the academic context, etc. and out of that build a lectern, as though “I attach lecternhood to the box like a label.” Instead, “I see the lectern in one fell swoop, so to speak, and not in isolation, but as adjusted a bit too high for me. I see — and immediately so — a book lying upon it as annoying to me (a book, not a collection of layered pages with black marks strewn upon them), I see the lectern in an
orientation, an illumination [Beleuchtung], a background.” All experience, including the contrived Frageerlebnis, is therefore inscribed in a particular configuration of meaning. Heidegger called such a configuration an “environment” (“Umwelt”), and the accompanying experience of it the “Umwelterlebnis”:

In the experience of seeing the lectern, something is given to me from out of an immediate environment [Umwelt]. This environmental milieu [Umweltliche] (lectern, book, blackboard, notebook, fountain pen, caretaker, student fraternity, tram, automobile, etc.) does not consist just of things, objects, which are then conceived as meaning this and this; rather the meaningful is primary and immediately [unmittelbar] given to me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension. Living in an environment, it signifies to me everywhere and always, everything has the character of world [welthaft]. It is everywhere the case that “it worlds” [“es weltet”], which is something different from “it values” [“es gilt”].

In place of Lask’s esoteric metaphorical hylomorphism of form enveloping matter, Heidegger turned to the familiar world in which we live, the meaningful surroundings out of which our experience of the world is fashioned. Phenomenality within an Umwelt is no longer the cognitively structured appearance of objects, but the worldliness of the surroundings in which I live, a world structured by relations of meaning. To say that the lectern is something I encounter in terms of its meaning is simply to say that I encounter it within a context of history, practice, investment, and everything else that has arranged things as they are for me (the lectern in all of its facticity). Phenomenality understood as an Umwelterlebnis is simply the appearance of something as belonging to a structure of meaning.

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With facticity redirected toward the world in which we each live, the mediality of phenomenality begins to take shape. The “world,” no longer referring to a universal container in which

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50 Heidegger, 71.
51 Heidegger, 72–73.
bare things appear and take on determinacy, comes into focus as the structure in which things are meaningful for me. The world of life,\textsuperscript{52} to risk sounding gnomic, is the worldliness of life. This might sound rather empty or nebulous if it were not a precise restatement of the eventive mediality of the middle voice. To say that the world is the medium of my life is precisely to say that, far from detached observation of the events happening around me, my experience is the event. For something to mean this or that is for it to enter the world of meaning through which I live, for it to be configured by my world, by me. Phenomenality is, then, the coming into meaningful relation of something and myself. Hence Heidegger’s strange locution, “es weltet”: it is the discovery of the meaningful configuration of something for me. “Only through the accord [Mitanklingen] of this particular I [jeweiligen eigenen] does it experience something environmental, does it world, and wherever and whenever it worlds for me, I am somehow completely there [dabei].”\textsuperscript{53}

Though Heidegger had not yet invoked the grammatical middle voice in this early lecture, it comes as no surprise that it is precisely at this moment that he introduced his understanding of an “event” as distinguishable from a mere process or action. The term, arguably the conceptual through-

\textsuperscript{52} Heidegger did not use the term “Lebenswelt” in this lecture series, nor was it an operative term in his writings later on (as it was to be for Husserl). Later in 1919, Heidegger held a series of lectures on “life as the originary realm of philosophy” in which he used “Lebenswelt” a number of times, but it never achieved any greater significance. Heidegger’s proximity to Dilthey and his philosophy of life despite his abrupt abandonment of the term or position of “life” in his writings in the 20s cannot be treated at greater length here. Heidegger’s overt departure from a philosophy of life didn’t prevent others from trying to show the essential linkage. Perhaps the most notable effort at the time was Georg Misch’s Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie. (Georg Misch, Lebensphilosophie Und Phänomenologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung Der Diltheyschen Richtung Mit Heidegger Und Husserl (Bonn: F. Cohen Verlag, 1930)). Though largely unacknowledged by Heidegger, the work of Georg Simmel was of enormous consequence at this juncture of method and life; for a thorough analysis of this fraught inheritance, see Michael Großheim, Von Georg Simmel zu Martin Heidegger: Philosophie zwischen Leben und Existenz (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1991). I will implicitly be excavating the reasons why Heidegger became averse to the term and all of its baggage when returning to embodiment towards the end of this chapter, but for a more direct and lengthy treatment of this, see Scott M. Campbell, The Early Heidegger’s Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being, and Language (Fordham University Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{53} Heidegger, KN3, 73, translation amended for accuracy.
line of his entire philosophical career, is “Ereignis.” Though notoriously difficult to translate, it is nothing other than a name for a phenomenon understood medially. A phenomenon, in other words, in its worldly lived experience (Umwelterlebnis). Heidegger continues:

In seeing the lectern I am fully present in my I; it resonates with the experience, as we said. It is an experience proper to me and so do I see it. However, it is not a process but rather an event [Ereignis] […] Lived experience does not pass in front of me like a thing, but I appropriate [er-eignen] it to myself, and it appropriates [er-eignet] itself according to its essence [Wesen]. If I understand it in this way, then I understand it not as process, as thing, as object, but as something quite new, an event [Ereignis].

A (medial) event is the experiential process of incorporating something into my life, which also means incorporating myself into my world. The novelty (facticity) of the event is not a mark of its standing outside of some pre-given structure, resisting the determination with which it could have been constructed a priori. Quite the contrary, the event is novel because it is the emergence of something meaningful from the structure of my life, a moment in which my worldliness becomes apparent in the mine-ness of my world. This is what it means for Erlebnis to take the form of Ereignis. By closing any possibility of circumscribing the “I” and its “object” in distinct domains, Heidegger’s eventive characterization of facticity anticipates a term that, I argue below, is the key figure of SZ: “ekstasis.” As Heidegger notes already in this early lecture, “Event [Ereignis] is also not to be taken as if I appropriate [an-eignen] the lived experience [Erlebnis] to myself from outside or from anywhere else; ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ have as little meaning here as ‘physical’ and ‘psychological.’ The experiences

54 In everyday German, the term is no different than the English “event”: an incident, something which occurs or takes place. But, as with so many of Heidegger’s key terms, one must remain attentive to the fact that it is a composite noun, literally meaning “to make one’s own,” sharing the all-important “eigen” stem with terms like “Eigenlichkeit” and, somewhat obliquely, “Jemeinigkeit.” While some stick with “event,” others have tried neologisms as ugly and/or unhelpful as “enowning,” “properizing event,” “appropriating event”, or “e-vent.” There is no easy way around the translation other than explicating what an event in this sense must be.

55 Heidegger, KNS, 75, translation amended for accuracy.

56 Quite literally, as I argue below, this is a matter of the material embodiment through which the coherence and self and world both emerge as figures of one another.
are events in so far as they live out of one’s own-ness, and live only in this way [Erlebnisse sind Ereignisse insofern sie aus dem Eigenen leben und Leben nur so lebt].”57 This radical reinterpretation of phenomenology’s facticity as Ereignis turns lived experience into the medium of meaning in which I, and the things in my world, do not stand in a relation of here to there, inside to outside, or primary to secondary.

With this, the Umwelterlebnis undoes the “Um-” with which it began. To speak of the world in terms of surroundings or en-virons preserves the spatiality of inside and outside, center and periphery, obfuscating the spatial reciprocity of myself and phenomenon, Erlebnis and Ereignis, I and world.

With this successful first “leap into the world,” Heidegger had more or less set out the structure of “being-in-the-World” (“in-der-Welt-sein”) that would underpin the first Division of SZ. There is, however, one final stop to make in the early Heidegger’s lecture courses to prepare the radicality as well as the points of failure in the “ecstatic” relation between self and world in SZ. This lecture course, given just a few months after the initial development of Welt and Ereignis in the Kriegsnotsemester’s treatment of neo-Kantianism, was Heidegger’s most direct confrontation with the methodological place of the notion of “life” in phenomenology.

Just as the closure and self-sufficiency of the immediacy of Erlebnis posed a methodological problem of discursive access for Lask, so, too, did Heidegger’s phenomenology run the risk of shutting itself out if the world and self were too perfectly melded together. If phenomenality is understood in terms of Ereignis, what does phenomenology look like? Does Ereignis contain its own logic? If so, who is it who speaks through Ereignis? Though eventive Erlebnis involves making the world my own, Heidegger’s formulation remained strangely impersonal and nebulous at its core: “es weltet.” This “es” attests to Heidegger’s inability to answer the very question he critiqued Lask for de-

57 Heidegger, KN§, 75.
contextualizing. For Heidegger, the question was: *who speaks in the middle voice (of/ in/ through Ereignis)?*\(^{58}\)

In the winter lectures of 1919-20 we find clues, not only to what a phenomenology of life could have looked like for the young Heidegger, but to addressing this methodological problem of phenomenology through the first-personality of life. This introduces the problematic balance between everyday immersion in the world, on the one hand, (in which the “I” and the “Ereignis” are co-dependent (the basis for “everyday inauthenticity” in *SZ*) and, on the other, the (philosophical) possibility of life grounding itself (authenticity).

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If, as Heidegger announced in the opening words of his 1919-20 winter semester lecture course (*WS*), *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,\(^{59}\) phenomenology is the science of “the absolute origin” of “life in and for itself,”\(^{60}\) two questions demand immediate attention. First, the question which lurked in the background of both Lask and Heidegger in his *KNS* lectures: *What is life in itself?* And second, the methodological question now quite familiar to us: *How can we access this original realm?* These questions turn out to be bound together.

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\(^{58}\) Recall the language of facilitation from the reflexive interpretation of mediality, echoed here in the notion that *Ereignis* is not only the process in which “I appropriate it to myself” but also (and perhaps according to) the way, “it appropriates itself according to its essence.” (*KNS* 75 my emphasis)

This anticipates the key problem with *SZ*’s spatiality. That the logic of *Ereignis* is somehow split between myself and the “es” (and that in this experience I am merely (passively!) allowing the essence of the thing to come into Being) foreshadows Heidegger’s later notion that the phenomena of the world do not contain a coherent logic of their own and therefore cannot furnish the unity of life that authenticity (and therefore fundamental ontology) requires. The inadequacy of everyday experience thus already emerged here in the assimilation of myself to the *es*.

\(^{59}\) I will be citing from the only published translation of this course: Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology: Winter Semester 1919/1920*, trans. Scott M. Campbell (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Though a helpful beginning, it has some strange syntax and some errors, which I will emend. Pagination refers to that of Klostermann’s *Gesamtausgabe* volume 58: Martin Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (1919/20)* (V. Klostermann, 1993).

\(^{60}\) Heidegger, *WS*, 1.
Heidegger began with the first. In words highly anticipatory of the way he characterizes Dasein in the opening of _SZ_ — and echoing the “immediacy” of the “Umwelt” in the passages from the _KNS_ — he suggested that, to begin with, one can say that “Life—my life, your life, their life, our life” designate “something that lies so near to us that we mostly do not even expressly concern [kümmern] ourselves with it; something from which we have no distance to see it in its ‘at all’; and the distance to it is lacking, because we are it itself and we only see ourselves from out of life itself.” We are not only close to life, or even caught up in life, we are life. Lask erected the living self in opposition to the cognitive self and upon the formalized _Erlebnis_ of the categories; his notion of life was, as I suggested above, entirely impersonal. The phenomenological “Ursprungsgebiet” (the original region) of life, on the other hand, is simply what we, each (“_je_”), are.

Furthermore, when we say that we live, “we always live in a direction” which “engrosses us, addresses us.” I look forward to breakfast; today I’m very low energy; being around some friends opens me to reminiscing while with others I feel mildly competitive and on edge; lying in bed I’m sometimes taken over by exhaustion but other times the lull in activity sets off a flurry of ideas, plans, worries, or memories. These eventive formulations remind us that every moment of life moves in a certain direction: it “tends” (“tendiert”) towards this or that, “motivated” (“motiviert”) by certain goals or projects. What had been isolated and intense moments of religious, ethical, or aesthetic devotion (_Hingabe_) for Lask, unreflective plunges into the immediate stream of absorbed life, become the matter of everyday life in all of its manifestations, no matter how mundane. Metaphorical immersion had become literal in the worldly facticity of motivated tendency (or tending motivations). Not only is the

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61 Heidegger, 30.
62 Heidegger, 29.
63 The notion that (first)-personality can be secured through the distribution of something to “each” of us should seem a tenuous one. I will return to this at length below.
64 Heidegger, _WS_, 32.
world spatially arranged in terms of meaningful involvement, but the temporal character of this “being one’s world” took form too, hinted at in the terms “tendency” and “motivation.”

The radicalization of the Umwelterlebnis into the worldliness of life, something foreshadowed in the “es weltet” of the KN§, was fully developed in these lectures. Phenomenality had, by this point, left the realm of cognition so fully that any concern leading to the impersonal formality of an “Etwas” had disappeared and the inside/outside separation of the Umwelt had evaporated as well. Heidegger had leapt back into the world by grounding phenomenology in the mediality of life. Without yet naming the grammatical form, he had taken the eventive voice to its phenomenological conclusion:

Our life is the world in which we live, into which and in each case [je] within which the tendencies of life flow. And our life is only lived as life insofar as it lives in a world.”

In language highly anticipatory of the ontological definition of “world” in SZ, Heidegger called this the “world-character of life” (“Weltcharakter des Lebens”). Already in these lectures, however, are the first signs that in leaping headlong into the world, Heidegger had gone right through it.

Heidegger’s answer to the question of what life (“in itself”) is, didn’t end here. Heidegger continued with what might seem an innocuous, perhaps even suspiciously naive and uncritical, division of this world of life into three spheres (“Umkreise”):

[our] Umwelt—landscapes, regions, cities and coasts; our Mitwelt—parents, siblings, acquaintances, superiors, teachers, students, officials, strangers, the man there with the crutch, the woman over there with the elegant hat, the little girl here with the doll; our Selbstwelt—insofar as that directly encounters me in

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65 Which are the clear precursors to the ecstatic temporal horizons of past and future: “geworfener Entwurf” (as it is generally translated, “thrown projection”) in SZ.

66 For a direct discussion of the impossibility of encountering a formal-logical “something,” see Heidegger, WS, 106–7.

67 Heidegger, 34.

68 In, for example, his assertion that the world is, ontologically, “not a determination of those beings which Dasein essentially is not, but rather a characteristic of Dasein itself.” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 64/64.)
such and such a way and directly imparts upon my life this, my personal rhythm.\textsuperscript{69}

This is a rather peculiar division. Why these three spheres? Why divide the “world-character” of life, — which, just a moment earlier, had established the total unity of my “I” and the meaningful relations I have with my world — at all? Does it not contravene the basic idea of life as the originary realm of phenomenology to divide it further? Moreover, one of these spheres is not like the others: his characterization of the Umwelt (“environing-world”) and Mitwelt (“with-world”, though I will use the German terms to avoid these unfortunate hyphenations) is, to use Heidegger’s later term, ontic, while that of the Selbstwelt (“self-world”) is decidedly ontological. The Um- and Mit-welten are described in terms of the collection of things that make them up, the objects that constitute that sphere of our world, while the Selbstwelt refers to the “way,” the “rhythm,” the form of my life.\textsuperscript{70} The Um- and Mit-welten seem like strange strawmen, objectifications of the world pitted against the clearly privileged, and originary, first-personality of my life that makes the phenomena of my world meaningful (and allows me to go on to objectify them as “landscapes,” “strangers” etc.). Had his Umwelterlebnis from the KNS not released him from this very reification of worldliness? Had he not established that all world is self-world, and that this neither refers to some delimited entity, “self,” nor excludes any other entities that are part of my life?

\textsuperscript{69} Heidegger, \textit{WS}, 33.

\textsuperscript{70} Though Heidegger was not yet in the throes of his \textit{Seinsfrage} and was therefore not yet employing the term “ontological” (nor its counterpart, “ontic”), he expressed a functionally equivalent distinction later in the lecture with the modal difference between life’s “what-content” (“Wasgehalt”) and how-content” (“Wiegehalt”). E.g.: Life shows and gives experienceable contents, which we describe as specific how-contents, because, as in intensifying-concentration [Zugespitztheid], they are not bound to a particular what-content. Rather the latter stands in the former, it gives itself in the form of the “how,” a factual mode in which experiences factically run off: a functional rhythm, which expresses factual life itself, which presses out of itself. This how-content is such that content-wise an “indicating toward” lies in it. We are talking about intensification “to” (-toward) the factual self-worlds and their factual constitution (aptitude, talent, moodiness, etc.) (Heidegger, 85.)

I will return to this distinction in greater detail below.
Later in the lecture, he sharpened this triad somewhat, backtracking from the bald objectification above. He acknowledged: “even the Mitwelt gives itself in such a way that the relevant people live together with me, insofar as they display themselves to me in individual actions.” Even stronger: the Mitwelt and the Umwelt “live in a remarkable context of permeation [merkwürdigen Durchdringungszusammenhang] with my Selbstwelt, whose circumstantiality [Zuständlichkeit] in this context almost opens up as a living and flowing context, so that one has even thought that the Mitwelt and society in general are nothing real, but rather exist only in the sum and composition of the individual.”

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And so, it was precisely the worldliness of life that also first opened the (re)polarization of the structure of my life and the material of my world, providing the resistance against which the ontological privilege of the Selbstwelt could break through. Although Heidegger was clearly dismissive of collapsing the Mitwelt into the Selbstwelt entirely, he went on to state as self-evident that the very same “changeable circumstantiality [labile Zuständlichkeit]” of life “explicitly and emphatically shifts the focus [Schwerpunkt] onto the self,” and that “factual life can be lived, experienced, and, correspondingly, even historically understood in a peculiar intensifying-concentration [Zugespitztheit] on the Selbstwelt.”

Indeed, this “Zugespitztheit” on the Selbstwelt is not only a possibility, a priority given over in a particular sphere of life or in a particular mode (autobiography, for example) but “is always there in factual life.” Moreover, in an observation that will be very familiar to readers of SZ, he suggests that “this accentuation [Betontheit] of the Selbstwelt, the indexing of tendencies and world-characters from out of it, does not need to be made prominent. Rather, it is, and even for the most part is, vitally improminent,

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71 Heidegger, 45.
72 Heidegger, 56.
73 Heidegger, 57, 59.
so much so that life can give itself as if all Selbstwelt were determined and directed by the Umwelt.”
This priority, in other words, of the Selbstwelt in the overall organization of the tendencies and motivations of our lives is so pervasive that it generally goes entirely forgotten. The Selbstwelt is, as Heidegger says of our understanding of Being in SZ, ontically nearest and ontologically furthest.

So why this division of our world and the division of our life into its “what” and “how”? The answer comes with the lectures’ second question: how can we access life in itself? Now that it has leapt into the world, phenomenology cannot be the Laskian theorization of pre-theoretical factical life, so it must “not reflect on the beginning, but rather factically begin! But how?” If Heidegger is to conduct a phenomenology of life, life must itself begin to provide the clue to this question. However, if phenomenology is to be a science, it cannot simply be descriptive or imitative of factical life. What, after all, would be the point? Heidegger thus needs to find the point at which the phenomena of life themselves spill into the logos of their organization and understanding.

In any given description of going to the store, reading a novel, throwing a dinner party, etc., we may well move within the factical stream of life, but we have not come to see life “in itself.” Why not? Because if phenomenology uses these narrative or descriptive experiences as leads towards an understanding of life more generally, whether as paradigmatic experiences to be inductively extrapolated or as scraps to be additively stitched together into a whole, it will either have gained nothing philosophical at all and will just be left with a series of banal anecdotes, or will rely on a pre-given (biological, psychological, anthropological, religious, or other) notion of “life” into which those experiences are inserted. In the former case, phenomenology is stuck in the realm of banality, in the latter, it lapses into dogmatism. As he noted, “Experience [Erfahrung] has a peculiar character of patchwork, of variety, of being spotty [des Gemischten, des Vielerei, des Gesprenkelten], yet not under the

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74 Heidegger, 60.
75 Heidegger, 4.
emergence of a pattern that is more or less clear”; experiences are woven together in “The Carpet [Teppich] of Life.” And yet, in order to get to the

ground of experience [Erfahrungs boden] [...] in its naked homogeneity [Gleichartigkeit],
the carpet must be pulled away, so to speak— to stick with the image — i.e. a
context [Zusammenhang] must be prepared [muss sich bereiten], which defines itself
out of a contentful belonging together of what has been experienced as such,
so that from out of this ground of experience a unified character-of-subject-
matter [einheitlicher Sachcharakter] can be lifted out, through which a subject-area
[Sachgebiet] for a science allows itself to be determined.76

The problem with our experiences, as Heidegger saw it, is that they don’t wear the logic of their
coherence on their sleeve.77 The fullness of their meaning — their interwoven relationality as tending
motivation — is not, Heidegger suggests, to be confused with their immanent figuration of the
grounding context — the unity — of life.

For the science of life in itself, phenomenology, to get off the ground, a context of coherence
must offer itself in which the “unity” of our experiences comes to show itself through itself
(immanently). Heidegger is thus turning to “life” not to pick up the baton from the Lebensphilosophen
or to come into dialogue with his contemporary philosophical anthropologists but is simply using it
as the name for the unified ground of all experience: “life” names the fact that any given experience
occurs within a context of unity; life indicates that within the patchwork of everyday experience there
is a pattern, a “rhythm” of unity that can be read off of it and which can ground itself. This, Heidegger
claimed, was life’s “self-sufficiency [Selbstgenügsamkeit]”:

Self-sufficient – the form of fulfillment – its intentional structure a basic
directedness in each case and always into a world (also the Selbstwelt) [...] This
‘form’ is the mode of life’s own direction, which it even takes right there where
it wants to fulfill and satisfy itself. Structurally, it does not need to come out

76 Heidegger, 69, translation altered for accuracy.

77 This both recalls the isolation of Ereignis (it follows its own logic, that of the “es”) (and therefore the lack of
unity of a world of Ereignisse (note that “Ereignis” is rarely used in the plural) and anticipates the philosophical
inadequacy of the everyday. The notion that the heterogeneity of everyday experience does not contain its own
potential unity is absolutely fatal to the harmony of Gemeinigkeit and Weltlichkeit in SZ. This seemingly innocuous
metaphor of the heterogeneous carpet and homogenous ground, I will argue, is highly consequential.
of itself (it does not untwist itself out of itself), in order to bring its genuine tendencies to fulfillment. [Life] itself always addresses itself only in its own “language.” It itself poses tasks and demands to itself that always remain solely in its own sphere, so that it seeks to overcome its limitations, its imperfections, to fill out the perspectives arising within it, again and again and only “in” the basic character that is prefigured by its ownmost self-sufficiency and its forms and the means derived from them [...]. Self-sufficiency is a characterized motivational direction of life in itself, indeed, that [direction] of life which has its motivation from its own factual flow [Ablauf].

Here, the two main questions of the lecture come together. Life understood “in itself” is the key to the methodological problem of what kind of access phenomenology as a science could possibly have to the flow of experience. The logos of life is contained within itself: its “direction,” “flow,” “form,” “tending motivation”—its internal unity, in short—is contained within itself. The Selbstwelt provides just this factual point of phenomenological entry by characterizing the constitutive (though often hidden) arrangement of the “multiplicity of the tendencies of life” around one thing: itself. The project of phenomenology thus raises itself out of the banality of merely describing or relaying snippets of experience and is kept from being raised out of the stream of life toward a position of reflective distance. Instead, phenomenology finds within the stream of life the threads of experience through which it can be philosophically figured as unified. Bringing the logic (the arrangement, the figure) of the unifying “tending motivation” (thrown projection) into view is, then, the science of phenomenology.

With this, the entire methodological framework of SZ had been established. Though over the seven years leading up to it, Heidegger transposed most of the terms used in these lectures into another idiom (under the command of the question of Being), the Dasein problematic, though by no means

78 Heidegger, WS, 31, translation altered for accuracy.

79 The most obvious transpositions being: Life in itself → Dasein*; what-content/how-content → Ontic/Ontological; Selbstwelt → Gemeinigkeit (though this transposition is slippery and will need some more attention); tending motivation → thrown projection; unified context → wholeness; relief-characteristics → existentials.
solved, was fully set up in this early phenomenology of life: *how are we to make sense of Weltlichkeit in terms of Gemeinigkeit?* This “making sense,” is, as these lectures make abundantly clear, a matter of making **unified**, rearranging, reconfiguring, and regrounding the seemingly disparate and chaotic facticity of life’s eventful fullness around the singular coherence of the first-personality of life (its potentiality to be a *Selbstwelt*).

With the further development of this phenomenological framework and its existential explication, however, some decisions of Heidegger’s became calcified and made to seem inevitable. While in *WS*, the turn away from medial entwinement (the “carpet of life”) toward the distinction of the modalities of self and world (the homogenous unifying ground) seemed to contain an alternative route inscribed into it (a prospect to which I will return), I will argue that the factical worldliness of *Dasein* in *SZ* was fated, from the start, to be peeled away from the formal ground of *Dasein’s* immanent logic.

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* Though the first uses of *Dasein* to refer to the existential structure of “my life” surface in this lecture already: Heidegger, 59, 66.
III. Heidegger’s Disfiguration of the World

1. *Teppich* and *Boden*

We have followed Heidegger in his attempt to recuperate a world from the (neo-)Kantian void of abstract cognition, picking up Lask’s turn toward factual life and developing an eventive structure of phenomenology to better describe the worldliness of everyday experience. And yet, he has left us with a rather peculiar term, one which seems to mark his radical departure from the Kantian project and his slide back toward the worldless subject threatened by reactionary existentialism: the *Selbstwelt.*

On the face of it, this compound noun would seem to encapsulate the essential union of self and world into a single entity or structure (and, so, isn’t really a compound noun at all), the arena for a phenomenology which has indeed succeeded in leaping into the world as such. And in a certain sense, this is right. As I demonstrated above, the very notion of “Selbst” that here modifies “Welt” is derived from everyday *Erlebnis* understood medially as *Ereignis.* Whatever this hybrid term is, it cannot be an amalgam of heterogeneous halves (“self” and “world”) but a term that allows for the mine-ness of world and the worldliness of myself to become visible in the first place. And as Heidegger’s early lectures made abundantly clear, the *Selbstwelt*, understood as the “self-sufficiency” of life, was meant to address the methodological problem of philosophical access to phenomena understood eventively (in their fullness of meaning). With *Selbstwelt*, phenomenology moves from “es weltet” to *ich* welte; the *who* of phenomenology gives itself from within the phenomenon itself. This is precisely, it would seem, the elusive self-organization of facticity that Heidegger was after: life arranges itself nicely for us as my

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80 Here, too, competing forefathers of his philosophical approach pull him in different directions. “Life,” as mentioned above, had been given affective and material fullness by the likes of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but had been evacuated of any determinacy in the work of Kierkegaard (and Lask). Though Heidegger claimed to be starting anew, these competing methods, interests, and factual contingencies of philosophy’s relation to life throughout the nineteenth century left his phenomenology with a series of fateful ambiguities.
life, uncovering the immanent logic of its own experiences, the “rhythm” out of which things take on meaning for me.

On the one hand, then, my life is made up of the myriad experiential events in which meaning is constituted for me (our everyday “Being-in-the-world” as Heidegger calls it in SZ), and, on the other hand, my life gives itself its own direction, unity, and form. Does Selbstwelt describe the unity of these two aspects of life? Or the transition from the first to the second? Our worldliness is constituted by the things and people around us, and by ourselves. The content of my life can be understood in terms of what it is and in terms of how it is. A lot rides on this “and”: are these two modes competing possibilities or mutually dependent actualities? Are they ways of living life or theorizing it? Are they distinctions germane to Erlebnis or only to its study as phenomenology? At stake here is the relation between life’s dispersion in the world and its immanent unity around the “self.” The relation, as it will be called in SZ, between mine-ness and worldliness. Selbstwelt is an early harbinger of this ambiguous relation.

From the (ontic) point of view of what I experience in my life, I am entirely constituted by the events of my world: in the language of the WS lectures, my Selbstwelt is made up of my Um- and Mit-welten. From the (ontological) vantage point of how we experience those very same things, all the events that form the structure we called “world” are rearranged around the logic internal to my life: my Um- and Mit-welten are “indexed” by the rhythm of my Selbstwelt. Taken together, these two vantage points seem to suggest a kind of reciprocal co-dependence, or even an identity of sorts; one is entirely unintelligible without the other and both, after all, describe one thing (my experience of life). But do they really refer to the very same experiential world? Do they focalize, arrange, figure, the very same material? The image Heidegger used to characterize them certainly does not suggest as much.

Recall his invocation of the “carpet of life.” Our worldly experience (the “what”) “has a peculiar character of patchwork, of variety, of being spotty” and so must be woven together into the
carpet of lived experience. Heidegger insisted, however, that from these patches, the tangled and motley threads of experience, “a pattern that is more or less clear” does not emerge on its own. The carpet does not weave itself and thus cannot be the originary “ground of experience [Erfahrungsboden]” phenomenology needs. Because of this lack of internal logic in the carpet of life, something else must support it, and the self-sufficiency of life must, in fact, be sought elsewhere. “The carpet must be pulled away” in order to get to a layer of experience that can be called the “ground” because, contrary to the patchwork of the carpet, it exhibits a “naked homogeneity” that “defines itself out of a contentful belonging together [Zusammengehörigkeit] of what has been experienced as such [des Erfahrenen als solchen].” While the experiences of the everyday carpet merely “hang together” (they have a Zusammenhang), the experiences of the ground (which, it must be noted, are not the same experiences but those experiences as such) “belong together” (they form a Zusammengehörigkeit). Far from an infelicitous image for this ground of experience, Heidegger made it abundantly clear that it is the homogeneity of this ground that allows the science of phenomenology to lift out a “unified character-of-subject-matter [einheitlicher Sachcharakter]”; any such homogeneity is, of course, directly at odds with the medial facticity of experience. The notion that there could be something beneath or prior to the carpet, and that this primordial ground could be accessed simply by pulling up the carpet and getting past the

81 Heidegger, W.S., 69.

82 In fact, the image of the carpet is not poor at all. There is, in fact, another way to take it. One could imagine that the unity inherent to life emerges precisely out of the fact that the plurality of our experiences is a carpet and not just a pile of scraps or threads. That our experiences are woven together at all would seem a much stronger discovery of the unity of meaning in our lives than a hidden homogenous ground. In this case the weaver of the carpet — or simply its wovenness — would attest to the fact that all everyday involvement in the world is possible within the context of a certain kind of meaningful organization, and that the motley scraps themselves contain a logic for their being pieced together. This latter point would prevent the ontic schism between world and self and would truly allow phenomenology to glean the logos of phenomena from the immanent structure of the phenomena themselves.

The carpet (my life) would be the medium in which the plurality of relations of meaning to my world could form themselves, arrange themselves, take on different kinds of meaning depending on their proximity to and compatibility with other experiential patches, and so on. We will call the carpet taken in this sense our “ecstatic body.”
confusing tapestry of everyday worldly experience, seems to undermine the entire phenomenological project of finding the *logos* of experience *within* the phenomena that constitute it. It undermines facticity’s promise to meld the form and matter of life in the *medium* of experience.

Indeed, the leap into the world seems to have fallen right through it into a formal plane entirely distinct from our everyday navigation of the world. Far from mere aspect-views of the same experiences of life, the “what” and the “how” of life refer to entirely different layers of experience that not only do not permeate one another but don’t stand in a relation any more complex than the former lying on top of the latter. The two may be co-extensive, but they are made of entirely different materials; it isn’t clear in what way the homogeneous ground is furnished out of the heterogeneous carpet other than as its formal “as such.” To say that everyday experience *leads* us in some way to its ground is true only in the shallow and negative sense that coming to see the lack of coherence of our experiential carpet allows us to see it as such and pull it up, uncovering the previously hidden ground. For the “what” and “how” to offer merely aspectual differences in relation to the very same world would require that their difference be purely ontological. What the image of the carpet exposes is the inadvertent importation of a strong *ontic* divide between the *Umwelt* and *Mit-welt* and the *Selbstwelt*, a divide that threatens to impose itself between “Selbst” and “Welt.”

This leaves us with the rather simple question: in what sense is the Selbstwelt worldly? *How is the unity of my life constituted by the particularities of my world?* The answer, it would seem, is *in no way*. Whatever world the *Zugespitzheit* of the Selbstwelt might contain is simply the nondescript unifying “ground” that organizes experiences in their most general form (which is not a world in Heidegger’s sense at all). Though he entered this line of thought through the total facticity of the *Umwelterlebnis* in all of its fullness of structured meaning, the phenomenological science of this life seems to eradicate

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83 Which, of course, the terms *Umwelt*, *Mitwelt*, and *Selbstwelt* are supposed to bring out: whether they are circles, slices, aspects or whatever else, they are all of the very same *world* my world.
any trace of such facticity. That this is not an unintended consequence but the explicit aim of his phenomenology is clear later in the lecture: “can the Selbstwelt be apprehended scientifically and, indeed not as this one or that one, but rather in regard to its universal determinations, in regard to the lawfulness [Gesetzlichkeiten] of the Selbstwelt? The idea is of such an absolute science of life, not of this or that factual, individual life.”84 The irony is that the selfhood of the Selbstwelt actually takes phenomenology further afield from any kind of factic first-personal world (which is always the patchy and contingent carpet) than the original characterization of everyday life, reducing phenomenology to an abstraction of life “in itself,” of experience “as such.”

This irony reappears in full force in SZ with its protagonist, Dasein, the definitionally first-personal being-in-the-world, which we “in each case are,” and yet which is entirely abstracted, generalized, sterilized of any ontic determinacy.85 Dasein, who is constitutively in-the-world, and yet cannot be said to have any worldly determinacy. Dasein, though in each instance (je) first-personal, historical, gendered, worldly in this way or that — embodied —, is, qua Dasein, none of those things. We return to our original observation and the problems that emerge from this attempt to philosophize facticity: in the name of methodological necessity, Heidegger jumped right through the fabric of the world that he had so doggedly pursued.

84 Heidegger, W3, 86–87.

85 Indeed, Heidegger is already toeing a fine line by asserting that Dasein is not a genus which could have instantiations in me, or in you (SZ 42) while also asserting first-personality (Jemeinigkeit) as a structure with no factical determinacy (Heidegger, Being and Time, 42/42-43.). That is, from an ontological (and not psychological) point of view, I am me in the same way you are you: first-personality, while not an attribute of objects, is a formal structure of meaning we share with others. (Hence Heidegger’s slide into something very close to the alter ego model of sociality with his “Mit-dasein”). In any case, for Heidegger to strike this balance, he must lean very heavily on this distributive “je,” which is meant to imbue the ontological structure with the full facticity of my life. But because Dasein, like the Selbstwelt before it, is a structure defined by being factical and thus worldly, it is not defined through any particular facticity or situatedness. Hence the peculiar abstract facticity, impersonal first-personality, disembodied Being-in-the-world, etc. which marks the Dasein analysis.
2. *Dasein*: Ontology’s Distributive First-person

With this, we return to the idea that phenomenology speaks in the middle voice: the methodological introduction to *SZ*. Behind the explication of phenomenology at this later point stands the analogous methodological problem of the immediacy of meaningful experience and the mediation of the philosophical discourse in which these phenomena take shape as phenomena. Heidegger’s attempt to unify *phainesthai* and *logos* in the practice of phenomenology, in other words, recapitulates his earlier attempt to read the logic of the *Selbstwelt* off of the factual material of the *Um- and Mit-welten*. If anything, his major terminological shifts over the 1920s attest to the calcification of his perceived tension between the phenomena of experience and their immanent figuration of the world as a whole. Most markedly, Heidegger had abandoned “life” (even taken “in itself”) as the basic realm of phenomenological analysis in favor of the existentially charged and formalized “Dasein.” This new phenomenological subject no longer hid its instrumental role in posing phenomenology’s new foundational question; *Dasein* poses the *Seinsfrage*: *what does it mean to be*?

While the split between selfhood and worldhood in the *WS* lectures had not been inscribed into its very starting point (though I suggested above that *Erlebnis* understood as a formalized *Ereignis* is doomed to collapse into the *Selbstwelt*), *SZ* is not shy about the instrumental relation between *Sein* and *Dasein*. Whatever analysis of factual everyday experience emerges is, from the start, clearly motivated by a tactical approach to the theoretical question of Being.\(^{86}\)

\(^{86}\) Of course, one can say with confidence that Heidegger was, at root, still in search of an understanding of everyday experience that contained the figure of its own unity, and that the ontological scaffolding of his project simply offered the philosophical inroad to this territory with the least ontic baggage. This seems undeniable, and it is no coincidence that *SZ* breaks off where it does. The strange fact that Heidegger has said all he needed to (and could say) in the propaedeutic to his planned second part is, in fact, not strange at all: ontology is only interesting or relevant to phenomenology and human thought more generally, insofar as it manifests itself in *our* Being, *Dasein*.

The fact still stands, however, that his analysis of our Being as a worldly one is shot through with this architectonic in which phenomenology serves ontology, and not the other way around. My task in what follows
Dasein in its everyday worldly life is the loose thread upon which phenomenology tugs to expose the primordial logic of unity that undergirds this world. A logic that is, from the start, defined as ontological. So, under the dictates of the Seinsfrage, Heidegger launches an analysis of everydayness that is designed to move past or beneath this structure and to expose a different kind of meaningful structure that, in fact, is not factically embedded. The ontological road thus begins in total facticity, but only in order to move beyond it. Far from an imposed and unnecessary architectonic, however, the factual analysis of “Being-in-the-world” Heidegger develops in the first division of the text is itself already clearly permeated by its preparation of the existential sublimation (better yet, “Zugespitztheit”) of the second division. 87 Though the two divisions of the text are clearly meant to move through, respectively, inauthentic and authentic interpretations of our worldly Being, the axis between these modal poles appears as a possibility already within the fragility of the first division’s analysis of Dasein as worldly.

Indeed, Heidegger’s grip on facticity was already slipping in his initial gloss of the middle voice as reflexive. With phenomenality animated by the self-containment and self-sufficiency of reflexivity (how it shows itself from itself, as opposed to from anything else), phenomenology becomes a project of discovering that particular mode of autonomous self-showing and sharply distinguishing it from the myriad other ways a phenomenon might appear. Every phenomenon contains its own logic,

will, in part, be to identify the reasons for Heidegger’s fixation on ontology as the way to approach the logic of life.

87 This is contrary to the large (primarily Anglophone) reception of SZ, which largely ignores the second division and the ontological pressure behind the analysis of everydayness (most famously in Hubert L. Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I (MIT Press, 1991)). Though this may seem like an act of salvaging a robust analysis of world from the ontological existentialism of the project as whole, it generally results in a radical misunderstanding of Dasein and its worldliness, missing the fact that Heidegger is at least attempting a first-person phenomenology. It comes as no surprise that these are generally the readers who try to position Heidegger within discourses of the philosophy of mind and “analytic” concerns about the possibility of agency. I hope to show here that if one does wish to rescue worldliness from SZ, one must do so through a direct engagement with the purported mine-ness of authenticity brought by the second division.
however coded or hidden, which phenomenology seeks to tap into and explicate. Heidegger’s name for this logic is, of course, Being. Phenomenology is, therefore, the descriptive project of explicating the Being of phenomena. Because Being is not a matter of essence or any kind of lapse back into the noumenal and non-relational, it is a matter of the meaning of something for the one who is so much as able to take up phenomenology to begin with: me.

The reflexive formulation of phenomenality thus produces a strange ontological circle: I try to allow something to show itself in itself; this internal logic is its Being; and its Being is its meaningful relation to me, who is the one setting off on the explication to begin with. But far from getting lost in a circular definition of phenomenon and self, each moving through Being to define the other, our pre-ontological relation to phenomenality comes to the rescue, pulling the circle into a spiral towards the foundational. This pre-ontological immersion in phenomena does not operate with an explicit understanding of Being and so does not face this problem at all: Heidegger calls this our “average understanding of Being [durchschnittlichen Seinsverständnis],” which, though still a meaningful relation to phenomena and therefore built upon a logic of their Being, is not conceptualized or explicitly articulated. Because of the multiplicity of “average” logics under which something can show itself to us — and this is crucial —, we generally do not relate to a phenomenon according to its inherent mode or logic. Phenomenology’s task is, therefore, to extricate from this average pre-ontological relation to things the ontologically explicit Being upon which that relation can be formed. By discovering the single ground of all everyday patchworks, ontology articulates the single authentic logos from the plurality of logics of average everydayness. With this, phenomenology as ontology is pitted, from the start, against our average, everyday relation to phenomena:

What is it that phenomenology is to “let be seen”? What is it that is to be called “phenomenon” in a distinctive sense? What is it that by its very essence becomes the necessary theme when we indicate something explicitly? Manifestly it is something that does not show itself initially and for the most part, something that is concealed [verborgen] in contrast to what initially and for the
most part shows itself, indeed in such a way that it constitutes its meaning and ground.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 33/35.}

Heidegger has returned to the figurative differentiation between the carpet of everyday experience and its hidden ground. In fact, the relation runs deeper than a recycled image: as I will argue, the concealed ground here is meant to furnish exactly the same kind of immanent logical foundation as that of “life in itself” in the \textit{WS}: a self-sufficient phenomenon that figures its own worldly unity. Though the argument is substantially more developed and nuanced in \textit{SZ}, the phenomenological structure is the same.

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In \textit{SZ}, the phenomenological relation to the way something shows itself to me is, just as in \textit{WS}, as much a matter of my Being as that of the phenomenon in question. More precisely, Being simply names the manner in which something shows itself in relation to me; the phenomenon is inseparable from me from the start (which is why the question of Being is always the question of \textit{some being}'s Being, of the meaning of the being’s Being, the meaning of the being’s Being for me). We generally remain content with simply encountering phenomena as we do in everyday experience, Heidegger claims, not worrying about the structure within which they are organized and manifest. But, for the phenomenologist who wishes to make the conditions of the relation with a phenomenon explicit, the question put to any particular phenomenon is always: why does it show itself to me in this way and not that? What is the logic governing my phenomenal world? How, in other words, does this particular moment of my experience figure itself as a coherently inscribed within the entirety of my experience (i.e. the world)\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 33/35.}?
Heidegger answers this precisely the same way in \textit{SZ} as he had almost a decade earlier in \textit{WS}: the only absolute, unconditioned, self-forming locus of meaning is \textit{Dasein taken as a whole}.\footnote{This becomes explicit in the opening of the second division with the need pass over the analysis of the first division again, but this time more “primordially [ursprünglich]”:}

Phenomenology is possible only because of the possibility of this wholeness (that life \textit{can} be condensed upon the self-forming “rhythm” of life), which is nothing other than the possibility of authenticity:

If the interpretation of the \textit{Being of Dasein} is to become primordial as a foundation for the development of the fundamental question of ontology, it will have to bring the \textit{Being of Dasein} in its possible \textit{authenticity} [\textit{Eigentlichkeit}] and \textit{wholeness} [\textit{Ganzheit}] existentially to light beforehand.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 223/233.}

Though the term “\textit{Ereignis}” is conspicuously absent from \textit{SZ},\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 223/233.} the “making one’s own” of the \textit{Selbstwelt} lives on in the modality of \textit{Eigentlichkeit}, the mode of experience in which I do not take the way things appear to me as self-evident, but I challenge the phenomenal world to show itself to me as an elaborate web of meaningful relations that are anchored in the simple ground of \textit{my life}. While the relation between the condensation of the \textit{Selbstwelt} and everyday experience remained murky in \textit{WS},\footnote{Heidegger seems to have a vague sense already at this point that the concentration of life onto the \textit{Selbstwelt} is both “always there in factual life” (Heidegger, \textit{WS}, 60) and still to be understood as a possible \textit{way} in which life \textit{can} be “lived, experienced, and, correspondingly, even historically understood” (Heidegger, 59 emphasis}
the power of \(SZ\) is precisely its laser focus on the point in everyday experience out of which we are able to refocus our phenomenological sights on our Being (lives) as a whole, the shift from everyday inauthenticity to phenomenological authenticity.

This all-important experiential focal point, the loose thread of our daily life, is \textit{death}. Or rather, the fact that we \textit{will} die, that death looms as a permanent \textit{possibility}. The possibility of death shows itself to be the singular experience of worldly life which inherently tends towards being understood first-personally (towards being \textit{ereignet} and the unfolding of an \textit{eigentliche} understanding of one’s life), and which acts as a kind of anchoring portal through which the plurality of everyday experiences in the patchwork of life can be stripped down to the bare ground of one’s mortality. The methodological necessity of a self-forming point of access to life (or to Being) identified already in \textit{WS} is now given a further existential overlay; the philosophical practice of phenomenology shows itself to be more than the curious probing of the world: it is, rather, the pursuit of the most basic tendency of our existence. Phenomenology figures, through a self-justifying unity, the multitude of things we do, decisions we make, relations we maintain, as unified. Heidegger’s simple explanation for the claim that death is the methodological/existential focal point of life (“existence” in \(SZ\)) is that death is the only possibility in our lives that refuses to be fully made sense of by our particular socio-historical context.\(^{93}\) No matter removed.). It is the ontic fact that we live life always as our own and the ontological rarity of making that explicit. But in this earlier lecture there is no real development of the way this possibility, which permeates all experience, can be made manifest (or why it is generally clouded over). Instead, he offers observations like:

At first this life is especially intensive, impulsive, in the various directions and spheres of activity, or in all of them. One gets wrapped up in something, is caught up \([\text{gefangen}]\) in something (or en-snared \([\text{be-fangen}]\)). Then, once again, everything simply passes by; one is thus not actually involved. Or once again: one is happy about life, lives with great hopes, gives oneself over to others. Life is a pleasure to live. Then once again its agony. \([\ldots]\) \textit{And in all of this living, one is, from time to time, there for oneself.} (Heidegger, 32–33 translation altered for accuracy.)

\(^{93}\) More deserves to be said here as the finitude of \textit{Dasein} is one of the main existential columns upon which his entire project rests, one which has been misconstrued by most commentators. For our purposes, however, what remains undeniable about death, regardless of how exactly it is understood, is that it is meant to mark the “horizon” against which our lives come into focus as \textit{our own}, as singularly ours to live, to own up to, to bring into sync with the rhythm of our life (all of this contained within the dense notion of \textit{Eigentlichkeit}). Heidegger explicates this through five primary characteristics of the possibility of death, which really all express aspects of this \textit{Zugspitze} on myself: 1) “death is the ownmost [eigenste] possibility of Dasein”, which simply restates the
how full and internally coherent my worldly relations of meaning are, that web will always remain unmoored if I do not position it against the horizon of my life as a unified whole — as finite.

The homogeneity of the ground invoked in *W*S comes to make more sense now that all experiences are inscribed into a *singular* possibility: at every point at which the carpet is fastened to this ground it is through the same relation of a phenomenon to my finitude. The specificity and variability (facticity) of experiences (their worldliness) comes to be supported by an entirely a-factual and unchanging undercurrent that figures the “rhythm,” the underlying logic of life, through which any given experience achieves meaning. For all the ontic variation between my life, Vladimir Putin’s, and that of a medieval peasant, the ontological ground upon which those differences are structured remains the same: we are all finite beings who care what course our lives will take (we are “Dasein”) and thus share the phenomenal logic within which our worldliness is able to be inscribed. In the language of the *W*S, life understood “in itself” is not conditioned by anything other than itself, it does not rely on any logic to give form to its contents other than that which it contains within itself. Mortality, Heidegger insists, is the sole figure of our worldliness.

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At this point, an absolutely decisive inversion has taken place. While the characterization of “life” in the *W*S was methodologically crucial as a *pre*-given unity, the wholeness of authenticity is quite clearly only a *possibility* to be pursued but never taken for granted, perhaps never achieved. The pressure of our finitude reminds us that the *potential* unity of life is something we must strive for, maintain, and seek to construe for ourselves. The difference shows itself in a change to Heidegger’s

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* matter; 2) it is “nonrelational [unbezüglich],” severing one’s life explicitly from its usual socially adopted mode (more on this later); 3) it is “insuperable,” which reminds us that, as the ground of our Being, death lurks within every possibility of life — it is the absolute horizon and contour of life; and the twin attributes which express what it means for death to be this absolute horizon: 4) it is “certain” and thus there at all times behind everything we do, and 5) it is “indefinite” as to its when or where, which means that we can never bring death closer, never come to tame it or contain it within another practice (e.g. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252-54/263-66).
use of “self,” a term which remained rather un-critical in W&S, there simply invoking the intuitive first-personality of life of which Heidegger is here so explicitly critical.\footnote{For example: “The ontic obviousness of the statement that it is I who is in each case \textit{Dasein} must not mislead us into supposing that the way for an ontological interpretation of what is thus “given” has been unmistakably prescribed. It is even questionable whether the ontic content of the above statement reaches the phenomenal content of everyday \textit{Dasein}. It could be the case that the who of everyday \textit{Dasein} is precisely \textit{not} I myself [\textit{je ich selbst}].” (Heidegger, 112/115.)}

What is at stake in authenticity, in other words, is a matter all too familiar by now: the “who” of \textit{Dasein}. This “who” is not to be assumed from the start but excavated by phenomenological analysis; mine-ness is not the guarantee of ownership over life with which we each enter the world, but the \textit{task} of “finding” our I, our self, in our worldliness.\footnote{“What if the fact that \textit{Dasein} is so constituted that it is in each case mine were the reason for the fact that \textit{Dasein} is, initially and for the most part, \textit{not} itself [...] The ‘I’ must be understood only in the sense of a noncommittal formal indication of something which perhaps reveals itself in the actual phenomenal context of Being as that being’s opposite. Then ‘not I’ by no means signifies something like a being which is essentially lacking ‘I-hood,’ but means a definite mode of Being of the ‘I’ itself; for example, having lost itself.” (Heidegger, 113/115-16.)} To say that selfhood is something to be worked toward, to be pursued, is to suggest that though its possibility \textit{grounds} the plurality of experiences of our everyday lives, working to establish such a ground is still a project \textit{within} life. Does this imply that the homogenous ground of our Being is to be constructed out of the heterogeneity of the carpet of life itself? Where does one go looking for this hidden ground we are calling “self”? We know that it is hidden \textit{by} the carpet, by the web of factical relations. These relations pretend to be self-sufficient — to be taken on by me (\textit{angeeignet}) — but are in fact constructions of what Heidegger calls the “\textit{Man-selbst},” the self defined by the norms and comfortable cohesion of everyday life (more on this below). But in what is it hidden? In what experiential content does the possibility of death and the move from the “\textit{Man-selbst}” to the “\textit{ich-selbst}” show itself as a possible mode of Being? The answer to this reveals the moment at which the project of selfhood clearly separates itself from the content of factical everyday life. It is worth quoting at length:

\begin{quote}
For example: “The ontic obviousness of the statement that it is I who is in each case \textit{Dasein} must not mislead us into supposing that the way for an ontological interpretation of what is thus “given” has been unmistakably prescribed. It is even questionable whether the ontic content of the above statement reaches the phenomenal content of everyday \textit{Dasein}. It could be the case that the who of everyday \textit{Dasein} is precisely \textit{not} I myself [\textit{je ich selbst}].” (Heidegger, 112/115.)
\end{quote}
The attestation [Bekundung] [of an authentic potentiality-of-Being [Seinkönnen] of Dasein] is to give us to understand an authentic potentiality-of-Being-one’s-self [Selbstseinkönnen]. With the expression “self,” we answered the question of the who of Dasein. The selfhood of Dasein was defined formally as a way of existing, that is, not as an objectively present being. I myself [Ich selbst] am not for the most part the who of Dasein, rather the they-self [Man-selbst] is. […]

With the lostness in the they [das Man], the nearest, factual potentiality-of-Being of Dasein — tasks, rules, standards, the urgency and scope of Being-in-the-world as concerned and taking care [besorgend-fürsorgend] — has already been decided upon. The they has always already kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities-of-Being. The they even conceals the way it has silently disburdened Dasein of the explicit choice [Wahl] of these possibilities. It remains indefinite who is “really” [“eigentlich”] choosing. So Dasein is taken along by the no one [Niemand], without choice, and thus gets caught up in inauthenticity. This process can be reversed only in such a way that Dasein explicitly brings itself back to itself from its lostness in the they. But this bringing-back must have that kind of Being by the neglect of which Dasein has lost itself in inauthenticity. When Dasein thus brings itself back from the they, the they-self is modified in an existentiell manner so that it becomes authentic Being-one’s-self [Selbstsein]. This must be accomplished by making up for not choosing. But making up for not choosing signifies choosing to make this choice — deciding for a potentiality-of-Being, and making this decision from one’s own self. In choosing to make this choice, Dasein makes possible, for the first time, its authentic potentiality-of-Being.

But because Dasein is lost in the “they,” it must first find itself. In order to find itself at all, it must be “shown” to itself in its possible authenticity.96

And, finally, how is it shown to itself?

This potentiality is attested by that which, in the everyday self-interpretation of Dasein, is familiar to us as the “voice of conscience.”97

In these decisive passages, Heidegger shifts our capacity to achieve an internal coherence of meaning into the existential register of choice. “Owning” one’s experiences of the world — something Heidegger claims is only possible against the ultimate horizon of death — is now clarified as a matter of electing the “tasks, rules, standards, the urgency and scope” (in essence, the norms through which we collectively figure our lives as ordered and coherent) of everyday experience for oneself. But the

96 Heidegger, 257-58/267-68.
97 Heidegger, 258/268.
power of everyday figuration lies not only in its making these choices for me, but in doing so such that I cannot choose them for myself. Thus, to so much as open the possibility of authenticity, the choice to choose the norms that govern everyday experience must be made. This first choice is, moreover, itself not possible until the possibility of “myself” is shown to me in my contented life as the they-self.

Because Heidegger has defined the figurative order of everyday life in terms of the anonymity of the absence of choice (and so in opposition to self-elected orders of my own), this rupture of complacency is impossible from within the fabric of everyday life, and must be grounded in something else. To put it another way, “their” self (Man-selbst) is really the negation of selfhood in that its choices are made by no one in particular: what “one” does doesn’t grow out of the choice of any self, whether mine or someone else’s, but is a kind of floating, appropriable norm that absolves one of the need to consider selfhood at all. So where does the possibility of selfhood so much as emerge? Enter “conscience” and its piercing wake-up call. The pivot from inauthentic everydayness to authentic elected self-figuration begins with the “voice of conscience,” the magical disruptor of everyday normativity and the first awakening to the possibility of an alternative, a self grounded in the choices I make, the rhythm I avow and see as meaningful to my life: my self.

We might reformulate the question posed above — In what is the ich-selbst hidden? — into the more direct question: Whose voice points us to the possibility of the ich-selbst? Were conscience to name the frailty of our everyday figures of meaningful coherence, then the ich-selbst would simply be a way (a “mode”) of organizing the rules and structures of the Man-selbst against the unifying pressure of finitude. But were conscience the irrepressible last vestige of the ich-selbst calling out through the anonymity of everyday experience, the possibility of my self would stand in opposition to that of “the they.” The passage above shows Heidegger unequivocally committed to the latter, cementing the oppositional polarity of my self’s “homogenous” Jemeinigkeit and “their” “motley” Weltlichkeit. Indeed,
as Heidegger goes on to describe this fortuitous conscience, it becomes clearer that, while everyday experience (inauthenticity) covers up the possibility of authenticity, it plays no substantive role in discovering its possibility, jeopardizing the purported constitutive worldliness of Dasein, regardless of its inauthenticity or authenticity:

To what is Dasein summoned [by the call of conscience]? To one’s own self [das eigene Selbst]. Not to what Dasein is, can do, and takes care of in public Being-with-one-another [öffentlichen Miteinander], not even to what has moved it, what it has pledged itself to, what it has let itself be involved with. Dasein that is understood in a worldly way for others and for itself is passed over in this call. The call to the self does not take the slightest notice of all this. Because only the self of the they-self is summoned and made to hear, the they collapses.98

Heidegger tries to assure us that this collapse does not constitute a retreat into interiority or “inner life” cut off from the outside world, and that conscience calls solely upon “the self which is in no other way than Being-in-the-world.”99 But it isn’t clear what it means for Dasein to be defined by its Being-in-the-world when none of its everyday tendencies and motivations have any bearing on its ability to be a self. What seemed a merely formal ontological question of the figurative structure (or medium — a term we are slowly coming back to) within which everyday meaning could be inscribed, takes on a further ontic determination here. Heidegger defines the “how” of life, namely what kind of “self” one strives to be (i.e. whether ones strives to be a self at all), in terms of the “what” of life, namely the factical structures of worldliness that constitute the everyday experience of our lives, even if only negatively.100

98 Heidegger, 262-63/273, translation amended.
99 Heidegger, 263/273.
100 Recall the idea in "W'S that life speaks in its own language and that motivations and tendencies do not come from the particular religious or historical forms which give meaning its form, but from life itself, from the “self” we might say in this context. The possibility of being a “self” takes up this same notion of the language life speaks to itself, or by itself:

The motivation of tendencies and of new tendencies always comes out of lived life itself and the tendencies fulfill themselves again within life in and through its typical forms of progression. Not which particular religiosity and form of religion, not which particular worldview, not which particular artistic experience, in precisely this or that (accidental) historically motivated form, gives fulfillment to just this historically,
Couldn’t Heidegger simply respond that the “they” of everyday life in all of its tendencies (“what has moved it”) and motivations (“what it has pledged itself to”) is simply an ontological mode of Being-in-the-world? That passing over our mode of everydayness in favor of that of avowed selfhood in no way empties life of its contents or refills it with commitments that align with this new self-understanding? That this mode simply comes to “own” (in this sense “choose”) the contents that already made up our lives and takes up a new relation to them through the fragility and inherent unity of our lives? That is, couldn’t the “Man-selbst” itself simply be an ontological “how” of life, not referring to anything factical in particular? Inauthenticity is, after all, like its counterpart, just a Seinsmodus, and so should only have a bearing on the way in which my worldliness is understood to be rooted and justified, not what my worldliness is made up of.

Not only does Heidegger himself undercut such a response by undermining the clean separation of the ontic and the ontological that supports it, but the very notion that ontological modality could be separated from its ontic specificity should be suspect given that the ontological being in question (Dasein) is defined by its factical worldliness. Avoiding such a separation is, after all, what Heidegger himself took to be the difference between his phenomenology and the solipsism of more avowed existentialists who followed him: the deep worldliness of Heideggerian Dasein is supposed to prevent authenticity from being psychologized as some kind of resolve (or choice) I make morphologically motivated meaning, but rather that the fulfillment generally is of such a kind that it generally is something that actualized itself from out of its own forms, that life always addresses itself and answers itself in its own language, that structurally life does not need to untwist itself out of itself in order to maintain itself in its own meaning, that its structure suffices for itself. (Heidegger, WS, 42.)

The self-formation of life is marked by the fact that it has its own rhythm, its own language, its own form out of which all motivations and tendencies of life are spun. Life understood as a “self” has no need to go searching outside of itself for the kind of unity and wholeness that phenomenology aims to bring out.

101 Simply recall how he characterizes everydayness in the passage above: “what Dasein is, can do, and takes care of in everyday Being-with-one-another [öffentlichlen Miteinander]” and even “what has moved it, what it has pledged itself to, what it has let itself be involved with.”
in a moment in which I stand entirely detached from my day-to-day involvement in the world, a privileged momentary stance from which the whole expanse of my actions come into focus as meaningful only if elected by me. This kind of psychologized authenticity — typified by the Kierkegaardian “Knight of Faith” whose distinction is entirely interior and thus cannot be differentiated from your average Joe by anything ontic — is marked by a sharp distinction between how one is understood by the public and how one understands oneself. In this case, the boundaries of in/authenticity are drawn from within the interiority of self-understanding to postulate the imagined bounds of the private inner from the public outer. Although Heidegger emphatically steers clear of such a psychological narrative of authenticity from the very outset, the axis of authenticity as it comes to concretion in the passages above (as a continuation of the method of W3) exposes the tendency of his ontology to endanger his phenomenology of the everyday in a different kind of manner: through impersonal formalization.

Whose voice, then, calls upon us in this moment of awakening? The most honest answer is not that it is my voice, but simply the voice of “conscience.” There is nothing of “me” in this call other than the possibility of my individuation being announced. The great irony that confronted Lask returns: with the most rigorous attention to the particularity of life’s worldliness comes the tendency toward the formalization of that facticity and, with it, the sterilization of the object of analysis.

In the name of understanding the carpet of my life, we have pulled it away and exposed the ground of life “in itself.” In fact, the very same nefarious impersonal particle, “es,” comes back to answer the question of who calls us to authenticity:

When Dasein is summoned, is it not “there” in another way from that in which it does the calling? Is it perhaps the ownmost potentiality-of-Being that functions as the caller?

The call is precisely something that we ourselves have neither planned, nor prepared for, nor willfully brought about. “It” calls [“Es” ruft], against our expectations and even against our will. On the other hand, the call without
doubt does not come from someone else who is with me in the world. The call comes from me, and yet over me.

The fact that the call is not explicitly brought about by me, but rather, “it” calls, does not justify looking for the caller in a being unlike Dasein. Dasein, after all, always exists factically [Dasein existiert doch je immer faktisch].

Fair enough: it would indeed contravene everything Heidegger has said about the individualizing force of authenticity to locate its original irritant in someone else, let alone in no one and only in the nebulous “it.” But against the diffuse impersonal conscience of the “it,” Heidegger has only the crude ontological weapon of his “je,” the little distributive upon which the first-personality of the entire project rests.

This “je” is under enormous pressure to do the careful work of invoking the particularity of Dasein’s entirely formal structure. In fact, Dasein is defined by it. The distributive actually already pops up with the first characterizations of an understanding of Being before Dasein is even introduced. Its recurrence throughout the text in the famous Heideggerian hallmark of facticity, “always already [je schon],” would be more accurately phrased “in each case already,” for the “je” is a way of bringing out both the generality (in every case) and the specificity (in each case) of existence. But how are we to understand this distribution? Heidegger insists that because “the Being which this being [Dasein] is concerned about in its Being is always my own [je meines],” “Dasein is never to be understood ontologically as a case and instance of a genus of beings objectively present. [...] In accordance with the character of always-Being-my-own-being [Jemeinigkeit], when we speak of Dasein, we must always use the personal...

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102 Heidegger, Being and Time, 265/275, 265/276, emphasis added. Stambaugh has simply left the “je” out of the translation of this sentence entirely, rendering “je immer” simply as “always.” It is easy to miss the little “je,” and although it is meant to be the small yet mighty reminder that Dasein is, for all its seemingly formal generality, only possible as something first-personal, it is not clear that first-personality can simply be distributed so easily.

103 The mantra is: “This being, which we ourselves in each case [je] are […] we formulate terminologically as Dasein.” (Heidegger, 7/7.)

104 Though Heidegger himself sometimes forgets the “je” and simply writes “schon immer” where one might expect “je schon.” (E.g. Heidegger, 67/67, 236/245, 311/325.)
pronoun along with whatever we say: “I am,” “you are.” Once its distribution becomes a personal one (“je meines”), the innocuous “je” comes to form the factical backbone of ontology’s — and therefore Dasein’s — first-personality (as solidified in the term Je-meinigkeit). But within the “je” a tension is already pent up between particularity and generality that is not so easily dispensed with. Simply invoking a pronoun to accompany the “je” does not make it any clearer how particularity can be rooted in facticity if that particularity is distributed across all “cases” — “Daseins,” or however one tries to put it — in the same way. Without the notion of particularizing, or “individualizing,” as the iterating instantiation of some structure (as the genetic model would have it), it isn’t clear what sense of distribution is left at all. If mine-ness is a quality of my life that is meant to manifest itself in the factical particularities of my experience, in-each-case-mine-ness (Je-mein-igkeit) takes us away from this: it generalizes, equalizes, and perhaps most perniciously, suggests a vantage point from which “I am” and “you are” come to be seen as equivalent manifestations of a generic structure of meaning called Dasein.

* Heidegger did not seem to take this as much of a threat to his project. The universality of Being “‘surpasses’ [übersteigt] the universality of genus” because Being is transcendentally universal. Heidegger’s ontology describes the structure of meaning that makes it possible for us to have the relation to the world that we do (namely the one which explicitly questions that meaning). This transcendental universality, just like that of the Kantian categories, must be unthinkable outside of experience and yet unconditioned by it. But Heideggerian selfhood is meant as the antidote to the a priori Kantian transcendental subject, to offer a path for a phenomenology of facticity that allows us to save philosophy by “leaping into the world at all.” The problem with transcendental universality is

105 Heidegger, 42/42.
106 Heidegger, 2/3.
precisely that its distributive individuation does not allow for first-personality in any factically rooted sense. To put the matter somewhat bluntly: the “je” that individualizes me and you and every other person (for this is how personhood would be defined) is not conditioned by socio-historical specificities but simply names the fact that there is such specificity. Each of us are, in each case, specific factical beings, but this is because we each live through the same ontological structure (Dasein) which, qua formal structure, is not factical. Just as in the WŚ, Heidegger forces himself to distinguish between life in its multiplicity and life “in itself,” the internal unity (homogeneity, no less!) of the latter grounding the specificity of the former. Selfhood again functions as a principle of unity against the horizon of which the plurality of worldly particularities can be figured as meaningful, coherent, unified. Though the “I” is not pre-given as in Kant but is a projected futural possibility, the possibility itself is pre-given, re-opening the same schism between selfhood and worldhood against which Heidegger positioned his entire philosophical method. We are approaching the crux of the matter.

If the who of conscience is the bare possibility of my selfhood — the “I” that lurks latently in everyday experience as an “unfamiliar voice [fremde Stimme]” emergent from the “naked ‘that’ in the nothingness of the world”¹⁰⁷ — then this first-personality is nothing more than the possibility of selfhood which we in each case are. The contradiction of transcendental facticity leaves first-personality entirely hollowed out: what makes me me is precisely what makes you you because the possibility of both is pre-given by the ontological structure of Dasein.

The “Zugespitzheit” of Being-in-the-world on the possibility of selfhood against the horizon of death as it emerges in the call of (my) conscience raises the irrefutable difficulty facing Heidegger’s phenomenology: it is subservient to ontology. Already within the extant third of the project, the specter of fundamental ontology pushes the facticity of Dasein to its barest possible a priori

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger, 266/277, translation altered.
formalization, placing phenomenology squarely within the aims of ontology. The very thing that facticity sought to reintroduce to philosophy — the fullness and novelty of historical specificity — is ejected yet again. The only figure tethering *Dasein* to its facticity, ontology to phenomenology, is the pervasive “je” that distributes Being to our Being. It seeks to lead the ontological project into its phenomenological concretion in *me*. But this concretion is not an end but the means *through* which fundamental ontology can be accessed. While the fruitful and common way to read *SZ* is as an ontological approach to phenomenology, the methodological reality is that it implements phenomenology for the purposes of fundamental ontology.\(^{108}\)

It may seem as though I am simply trying to poke holes in Heidegger’s project wherever possible, scouring his text for moments of weakness and exposing the final faltering he himself seems to have been plenty aware of. That, in itself, would certainly be neither productive nor interesting (nor all that difficult). But instead of torpedoing his project, we have come to the precipice in his thinking that he himself identified as the ultimate matter of philosophy. We have the right to ask whether he in fact succeeds in leaping into the world, or whether he stumbles over his own eagerness. And if he does fall, as I argue he does, our task is to identify where and why, and whether we can make the leap he so meticulously prepared.

Heidegger has, in some sense, successfully leapt into the world. By carefully resisting the reification of subjectivity at every turn, he manages to redirect phenomenality from a matter of knowledge to a matter of worldly life, bringing out a complex and powerful analysis of the way in

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\(^{108}\) E.g.: “Phenomenology is the way of access to, and the demonstrative manner of determination of, that which is to become the theme of ontology. *Ontology is possible only as phenomenology.*” (Heidegger, 33/35.) Or, “Ontology and phenomenology are not two different disciplines which among others belong to philosophy. Both terms characterize philosophy itself, its object and procedure. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology.” (Heidegger, 56/38.)

Note that he does not say that “phenomenology is possible only as ontology” or that philosophy is “ontological phenomenology.” It is rather clear which serves the other.
which everything we experience and do is organized by its meaning (what he calls “care”), freeing philosophy from a multiplicity of false problems. To put it another way, Heidegger opens the way to thinking about phenomenality as *medial*, as a web of relations that can only be made sense of in terms of their coherent constitution of an entire world. And yet, the possibility of authenticity, which lurks in the backdrop throughout, casts a shadow over the analysis that threatens to collapse the factual multiplicity of everyday worldliness of the text’s first division into the unified homogeneity of the possibility of selfhood that becomes explicit in the second division.

The moment in which the split of selfhood and worldhood is prefigured, however, comes not in the second division’s explication of authenticity, but at the moment when Heidegger *could* have developed his thinking in a direction that would have made such a diremption entirely unnecessary, indeed unthinkable. This moment is the brief chapter in which Heidegger ostensibly treats, but really precludes, *sociality*. Though it will require some further attention, there is an intuitive sense in which we can already say that sociality is that worldly fabric which, far from obscuring the possibility of selfhood, makes the plurality of first-personal relations to the world possible and sets the context within which the notion of taking responsibility for one’s life (“owning” it as the language of authenticity has it) first emerges as a possibility. We can figure particularities as coherently collected in a unified world, we might say, only because we collectively figure them. The very mediation of phenomenal specificity as worldliness is a social matter.

Of course, Heidegger was not deaf to this; in a very limited sense, this is exactly the way in which his notion of sociality (“*Mitsein*”) works in *SZ*, though as a foil, not as a figure. Heidegger’s *Mitsein* describes our self-obscuring tendency towards anonymizing collectivity and shirking responsibility: thinking about how we live in a world inhabited and conditioned by others is, as I showed above, the pivotal point at which our Being-in-the-world announces itself, in “conscience,” as ungrounded.
A hypothesis to guide the final section of this chapter: the point at which the axis of in/authenticity becomes an irrevocable schism between Jemeinigkeit and Weltlichkeit is the point at which social collectivity is itself split into these two possibilities. By claiming that these are possibilities of selfhood (Man-selbst and ich-selbst), Heidegger tips the axis vertically and grounds the logic of worldliness in the possibility of first-personal focalization. To put a slightly finer point on this hypothesis: the point at which Heidegger trips on the radicality of his own project is with the (entirely unnecessary and unmotivated) assumption that everyday “public” being is alienated and anonymous, antagonistic to selfhood. Once that is assumed, phenomenology’s methodological necessity of grounding everyday experience is forced to turn to the projected possibility of private individuation, a ground whose possibility can only be found in itself (this self-sufficiency is precisely what is invoked with the notion of “privacy”).

To resist existentially atomized selfhood requires that we develop a different notion of the self-organization of the social fabric of life, and that my Being-in-the-world is understood as essentially historical, social, factical: embodied. If factical experience is no longer simply the what of our self’s how, but is the medium whose particularities give form to the logic and rhythm of life itself, then we are on a path to conceiving of Dasein not as a transcendental structure of meaning which we “je” are, but as a description of what it means to be worldly, to appropriate, modify, and share the thick carpet of tending motivations through which I experience the world as I do. Personhood (the social ecstatic basis of first-personality, contra to “selfhood” which has been commandeered by atomizing individualism) is no less a project, a possibility, and a demand that I must navigate in the multiplicity of phenomena that make up my world. But this project is not a matter of resolve, retreat, self-sufficiency, getting back to the work of my (domestic) life — of privacy in any sense — but of the difficult and unending work of owning and managing my participation in the fabric of my public and
social world. The temporal horizon of death unfolds into the spatio-temporal horizon of collective embodied experience, in which authenticity is a public and historically specific matter of shaping and shifting the contours of my world. What was a unity of selfhood made visible by ecstatic temporality will come to be the unity of my social world through the ecstatic spatio-temporality of my factical mediality — my embodiment. But enough hypothetical prophecy: let us take the final steps and turn to this pivotal point in grounding philosophy in the everyday material of life.
IV. Embodied Re-figuration of the World

1. Anonymous Collectivity

My claim is that Heidegger's chance to avoid the opposition of mine-ness and worldliness, of authenticity and facticity, comes at the moment he turns to the fact that Dasein's world is not simply structured by tools and objects but by other people. Being collective, whatever this ends up meaning, is the mode of understanding personhood that can either irrevocably sever it from its ecstatic facticity or open up its inherent embeddedness in and dependence on the lives of those “other people.” Indeed, how Heidegger understands the plurality manifest in these “others” shows itself to be not just the litmus test, but the reason, for the success or failure of his leap into the world.

Heidegger begins promisingly enough, careful, of course, not to objectify these “others” for the same reason the “I” is not to refer to a pre-given subject, avoiding all the pitfalls of an aggregated, inducted, pointillistic sociality (which marks the “intersubjectivity” of so many egological philosophies). These others, far from foreign entities I come to recognize as of my kind through something shared, are, instead, an existential characterization of my own Being (the kind of self I am):

“Others” does not mean everybody else but me — those from whom the I distinguishes itself. Others are, rather, those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one also is. This Being-there-too with them does not have the ontological character of being objectively present “with” them within a world. The “with” is of the character of Dasein, the “also” means the sameness of Being as circumspect, heedful [umsichtig-besorgendes] Being-in-the-world.109

Far from referring to entities “out there” in contrast to my self “over here,” these others with whom I live in the world show themselves to me in a different fashion. “The structure of the worldliness of the world is such that others are not initially present [vorhanden] as free-floating subjects along with

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109 Heidegger, Being and Time, 115/118.
other things, but show themselves in the world in their particular environmental Being \([\text{umweltichen besonderen Sein}]\) in terms of the things at hand \([\text{Zuhandenen}]\) in that world.\(^{110}\) The phenomenality of “others” is, then, not distinct from that of any other worldly phenomenon, but embedded within it. Being-with \((\text{Mitsein})\), the existential condition that permeates every feature of my life, no matter how alone or independent I claim to be, presses itself upon me within everything I do. Worldliness is always structured by those with whom I am in the world: “the world of Dasein is a \(\text{with-world} [\text{Mitwelt}]\).”\(^{111}\)

This certainly sounds like a characterization of sociality as fundamental to our worldly existence. Might the structures within which phenomena are shaped by others provide a factical fabric of a shared world that is neither an unmoored contingent multitude of phenomena nor an abstracted and emptied pure self-relation? Might, in other words, the tight weave of collectivity provide the supportive discursive structure within which our ecstatic dispersal in the world is grounding; does the collectivity of our \(\text{logos}\) ground its own worldliness? This, it would seem, is the potential promise of grounding our orientation in the world (the meaning of every patchwork in the carpet of our lives) in our participation in a world inhabited by others. If phenomena are ordered by their location in geographic and historical (social) space, then factical specificity and ecstatic unity figure as the possibility of the other. If, in other words, the space within which the project of selfhood is possible is always a shared one, it is only possible as a worldly project. The path seems cleared to phenomenology’s successful figuration of a unified world out of factical particularity, yet this is not the way of fundamental ontology.

The first sign that Heidegger had something else in mind is the superficiality of the inseparability of others from the phenomena of my world. The “others” are not just a structural determination of things in my world \((\text{Mitsein})\) but are themselves — though not objects \((\text{Vorhandene})\)

\(^{110}\) Heidegger, 120/124.

\(^{111}\) Heidegger, 116/118.
or things of use (Zubehör) — also encounterable in my world (as Mitdasein). Others are not like a pen, a car, or an elevator, because they have a different ontological relation to me: they are themselves Dasein. While Heidegger called our immersion in inner-worldly things of use of the surrounding world (Umwelt) “taking care of” or “dealing with” (besorgen), our relation to other people of the with-world (Mitwelt) is “concern” (Fürsorge). While this terminology needn’t worry us here in any detail, the resurgence of the odd trio from the WS lecture should be clear enough. We deal with (besorgen) the things of our Umwelt and are concerned with (fürsorgen) the other people of our Mitwelt. Prefix-less, pure “Sorge” names our relation to the missing third: the Selbstwelt. Though this latter term is not used in Sz, and Heidegger does his best to claim that Sorge does not stand in opposition to but is the encompassing ground of the other two, we have already encountered this constellation and the priority it places (Zugespitzheit) on the world understood in terms of oneself. That care is meant to both ground and remain fully independent of our facticity becomes rather explicit in his characterization of the possibility of death:

What is characteristic about authentic, existentially projected Being-toward-death can thus be summarized as follows: anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself, primarily unsupported by concern that takes care [besorgende

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112 Defined by the various modes in which we relate to useful things: “to have to do with something, to produce, order and take care of something, to use something, to give something up and let it get lost, to undertake, to accomplish, to find out, to ask about, to observe, to speak about, to determine...” (Heidegger, 57/56-57.)

113 For example: “Since the Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-together-with things at hand could be taken in our previous analyses as taking care [Besorgen] of them, while being with the Dasein-with [Mitdasein] of others encountered within the world could be taken as concern [Fürsorge]. [...] Care not only characterizes existentiality, abstracted from facticity and falling prey, but encompasses the unity of these determinations of Being. Nor does care mean primarily and exclusively an isolated attitude of the ego toward itself. The expression “care for oneself,” following the analogy of taking care and concern, would be a tautology. Care cannot mean a special attitude toward the self, because the self is already characterized ontologically as Being-ahead-of-itself; but in this determination the other two structural moments of care, already-being-in... and being-together-with, are co-posted.” (Heidegger, 186/193.) In this passage, Heidegger does his utmost to hold together two incommensurable claims: that all care is essentially unified in care for oneself, and that care for things or others (care in its facticity) leads to self-misunderstanding and must be entirely abstracted from in care as such. Care “encompasses the unity” of that from which it is abstracted. By now it should be clear that this is an unproductive tension.
Fürsorge], but to be itself in passionate, anxious freedom toward death, which is free of the illusions of the they, factical, and certain of itself.¹¹⁴ Whatever facticity Heidegger is referring to, it is fully condensed upon the point of Dasein’s self-relation, “freed” of its dispersal (i.e. rootedness) in the particularities of its world, facing itself as itself. A memory, at best, of facticity. The careful delimitation of the Mitwelt from Umwelt therefore foreshadows its eventual separability from the (Selbst-)Welt.

Instead of establishing phenomenology’s sociality and securing the methodological fragility of philosophy’s logicity in collective discursive figuration of experience as a whole (language, to put it simply),¹¹⁵ our co-inhabitation of the world is reduced to a phenomenology of society, flattening the rich logos of collectivity to disordered anonymity.

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The Mitwelt, far from supplying the discursive carpet in which my relation to my world is secured, far from establishing a structure within which my ability to make my world my own first emerges, is quickly cast into the heap of facticity that distracts us from the possibility of relating to our lives as our own. Heidegger’s Mitwelt simply intensifies the polarization of Weltlichkeit away from Jemeinigkeit. From the outset, after all, Heidegger positions Mitsein and Mitdasein as the ground for our everyday selfhood, useful for distinguishing that everyday self from my self: “in being absorbed [Aufgeben]

¹¹⁴ Heidegger, 255/266, bold emphasis altered.

¹¹⁵ This unpursued placement of phenomenology within the discursive situation of collectivity is, more or less, the path followed by Emmanuel Levinas in his inheritance of Heidegger’s failure to account for the sociality of phenomenology. Though there is a resonance between Levinas’ revival of the medium of language and my attempt here to rescue the internal order (universality) of collective facticity, Levinas’ project (like many of the French inheritors of Heidegger) was decidedly interested in a dyadic encounter with the Other. Thus, Levinas sought to ground the practice of philosophy in the ethical encounter of posing the Seinsfrage (or any other question) to another person, not in the figurative process of political and poetic representation. See: Levinas, Totality and Infinity.
in the world of taking care of things, that is, at the same time in Being-with toward others, Dasein is not itself.116

As of this point, therefore, Heidegger’s insights about the forms of sociality within which we live are damned to propping up his fear of alienation. The irony is that this actually frees Heidegger to make a rather pointed critique of the reification of collective figuration without realizing that he himself is defining it as such, leaving himself no option other than existential abstraction by pushing everything through the small Gemeinheit-funnel of anxiety in the face of mortality, erecting the false notion that there is a form of Mitsein that is not figured in terms of everydayness, one that is elective and freed of its facticity. This is, of course, the fantasy of a sociality freed of politics, a mode of association with others with no strings attached. The further irony is that his non-objective notion of Mitsein can be pushed in precisely the opposite direction to undermine his own fantasy of the possibility of being “unsupported by besorgende Fürsorge.” The question that Heidegger fails to pose critically at this moment is the very same one that guided his methodology throughout: who are “the others” through whom the phenomena of the world appear to me as motivated and tendentious?

Because these “others” who constitute Dasein’s Being-with are, at root, a rhetorical externalization of oneself, a way to “cover over one’s own essential belonging to them,” these others don’t actually refer to anyone in particular, but to the “neuter,” nebulous “they” in whose pre-trodden tracks we walk. They “prescribe” our Being, asserting their “true dictatorship.”117 “We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way one enjoys oneself. We read, see and judge literature and art the way one sees and judges. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way one withdraws, we find “shocking” what

116 Heidegger, Being and Time, 122/126.

117 “Das Man” is simply the nominalization of the singular third-person impersonal: “man.” Though its direct translation is “one” (as in, “one doesn’t do that”), it carries none of the stilted formality that it does in English (hence, its frequent translation to “they”). “They” also carries the conspiratorial anonymity of das Man’s indeterminate personhood, pulling the strings of our lives behind the curtain and wielding a well disguised tyrannical force that we have to resist (as in, “‘they’ are out to get me’”).
one finds shocking.” In short, the “choice” (and therefore the “choice to choose”) to which we are called in authenticity is made for us by this anonymous subject, the subject of tradition, habit, normalized and calcified behavior. To quash the pressing question Why? I simply tell myself, Well, that is simply what one does. By externalizing and reifying this “one” into an imagined agent responsible for this decision, we successfully disburden ourselves, or at least we feel disburdened, of the weight of choice. We are able to keep the anxiety and pressure of being responsible for our lives at bay by absolving ourselves of that responsibility and assuring ourselves that we have no real say in that matter:

The they is everywhere, but in such a way that it has always already stolen away when Dasein presses for a decision. However, because the they presents every judgment and decision as its own, it takes the responsibility of Dasein away from it. The they can, as it were, manage to have “them” constantly invoking it. It can most easily be responsible for everything because no one has to vouch for anything. The they always “did it,” and yet it can be said that “no one” did it. In the everydayness of Dasein, most things happen in such a way that we must say “no one did it.”

When pressed, we have no real answer to the “who” of this powerful they, or we hypostatize a person or people remote enough that the decision to do this and not that comes to us as though already made and is thus not really a decision at all. We make our own lives anonymous.

Heidegger is diagnosing what is clearly a common, perhaps even essential, tendency of ours to shirk responsibility by erecting these pre-packaged modes of understanding our world, externalizing the burden of life by denying agency and yielding to the powers that be (even if those powers are of our own making). Instead of wondering how or why it is that our world is arranged the way that it is, understanding our own role or participation in continuously producing and reproducing the world, we treat it as something unified in advance, rigid, and therefore beyond our scope. The facticity of phenomena is simply the imprint of a pattern whose contingency has been obscured, no longer the

118 Heidegger, Being and Time, 123/126-27, here using “one” for “Man” instead of “they” to translate the idiom.

119 Heidegger, 124/127.
rich possibility of its own self-transformation. If we are to try to establish a sense of personhood with any agency or responsibility — with any freedom — it would certainly seem crucial to dismantle these reified forms of anonymous collectivity.

But by hollowing out Being-with and separating its content from the project of grounding and justifying the particularities of life, Heidegger cannot himself distinguish hardened from plastic forms of collectivity, shared practice from anonymous custom, democracy from dictatorship. He defines “publicness” as this tendency towards reification, forcing himself to imagine Fürsorge for others as a preoccupation with how we differ from them. When sociality has been reduced to this kind of self-differentiation (or its anonymizing failure), there is nothing left but antagonism and alienation when we give ourselves over to others.

In a moment that might at first seem unusual for Heidegger (though the systematic reasons for this “oversight” are now clear), this ontic/psychological diagnosis does not uncover a neutral, structural ontological fact of our existence: instead of exploring the social fabric that allows for its own reification (and which is therefore not essentially so), Heidegger seems content to go along with the psychologized language of existentialism in which the “individual” subject either chooses or is chosen for, thereby essentializing what is a mere ontic instantiation of something much more fundamental. To return to my hypothesis above that the unifying fabric of sociality is rent the moment “public” life is condemned to alienation and anonymity, we now see that by conflating collective figuration of the world with its reification in anonymity, by conflating collective freedom with its alienation, Heidegger pits voluntarism (the ich-selbst) against dictatorship (the Man-selbst), leaving no space for the messy fact that the project of personhood is a matter of continuously participating in shaping a collective world, that social agency is the ongoing struggle to establish a world of meaning.

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120 Whether, for example, “this difference is to be equalized, whether one’s own Dasein has lagged behind others and wants to catch up in relation to them.” (Heidegger, 122/126.)
through the phenomena that I figure with others. These imagined poles of selfhood are, therefore, twin fictions that grow out of an interpretation of worldliness that has forgotten that the logicity of life is nothing other than the socio-historical space I arrange with others. That is why facticity is not the illogical remainder of discursive order but the already-structured material through which the world appears as a world.

We have, finally, arrived at the point at which Dasein’s ontological abstraction dissolves the social fabric through which it is woven into the world, forcing phenomenology to leap not into, but right through the world. Heidegger’s medial phenomenology was meant to do away with the reification borne of a philosophical subject that splits inner and outer, here and there, I and not-I. And yet, the ontological rift between the privacy of Dasein’s choosing to be a self for itself and the publicness in which this choice is dispersed and dissolved recreates precisely this separation, now under the modalities of inauthenticity and authenticity, Gemeinigkeit and Weltlichkeit. To return to the image of the carpet: our tendency to try to step outside of the fabric of life and achieve a position of self-sovereign externality (a “ground,” for example) is a protective reaction to the challenge of making meaning out of the particularities of the carpet with everyone else with whom we are bound by it. That slow and sometimes unpredictable project of (re)arranging the phenomena into new forms of coherence, new worldly unities through which the phenomena themselves appear transformed, is the project of personhood in a shared world. To condemn this embeddedness in the carpet of life as an anonymous disavowal of our agency is to invert our freedom for collective self-determination into a reactionary freedom from the determinations of others.

Heidegger was right to align the possibility of freedom with the unification of the particulars of our lives into a single whole; but this wholeness, if it is to appear in its plasticity and potential to be transformed, can’t simply be the unity of phenomena (the world) focalized (zugespitzt) on the isolated first-person, but must the unity of that very personhood: its place in a social collective. Thus, the
potential for self and world to achieve unity through their own universalization is one and the same process of coming to recognize our lives as participating in the (re)production (the re-figuration, as I have been calling it) of our social world. For phenomenology to truly speak in the middle voice, then, is for it to articulate this reciprocal constitution of the factical particular and the ordered whole. Only by identifying the mechanisms of this dialectical formation can philosophy play a role in understanding and actualizing our participatory freedom.

2. Ecstatic Embodiment: The Project of Collective Dasein

We needn’t look far, then, for the clue to forging another path back to the world as such: it lies within Heidegger’s own analysis. Mediality, no longer threatening alienating dispersal but promising our capacity to construe the world as a whole, gains its final concretion in the undercurrent of his analysis of Being-with. While the middle voice began as the call to see the eventiveness (Ereignis) underlying all cognitive phenomenality (Erkenntnis), we now see that the mediality of phenomenology is much more fundamental and radical: I am the medium (the structuring material) whose particularities allow the world to take this form and not that, through whom relationships, buildings, habits, and every other infrastructural pattern of our social world is maintained, changed, preserved, and destroyed. A medium is not an empty form to be filled in by the material that courses through; nor am I a naked logic, rhythm, or principle through which phenomena resonate as unified. The structuring tendencies of my life are the material out of which my world is constituted, they are the rhythm of everything I do, build, avoid, and find myself involved in; I am my world in all of its particularities.121 To locate my “I” in the factical configuration of the relationships, projects, limitations, prejudices, promises, and expectations that makes up my life takes the burden off of the

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121 Not simply, as Heidegger suggests, my worldliness. (Heidegger, 65/65.)
overworked “je” and allows us to see our first-personality congeal in its specificity instead of instantiating itself in distributive formality. The possibility of my “I” both focalizes the plurality of the world in its potential unity (as my world) and generalizes my experience as participatory in a shared totality (as my world). The first step back toward the world comes with the shift from formalized selfhood to collective personhood; our mediality allows phenomenology to wrest the facticity of personal pronouns back for Dasein.

If phenomenology no longer serves to differentiate selfhood from worldhood, but to loosen the reification of the world by making “bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility,” Heidegger offers, again against the grain of his own project, a powerful figure to describe and analyze this reciprocal transformation of the particular and the collective. This figure is “ecstasy.”

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As it appears in SZ, “ekstasis” is a term of the second division, emergent from discussions of authenticity and the possibility of the wholeness and unity of the self. Specifically, Heidegger introduces it to modify temporality. In SZ, therefore, the term does not simply mean being “outside oneself” as the mystical origins of the term might suggest, but the specifically temporal unity of past, future and present in their relation to my life. Ecstasy names the essentially non-objective nature of Dasein by insisting that it is not to be understood in terms of presence, but in terms of the horizons of past and future that coalesce in any engagement in the present. Far from a point on a timeline

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122 To anticipate poet Ben Lerner’s formulation of the problem as one of poetic representation. Chapter 3 will take this up in great detail.

123 “Temporality is the primordial ‘outside of itself’ [‘Außer-sich’ in and for itself.” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 314/329.)

Note that, unlike its mystical usage as a notion of self-dissolution in which experience stands outside of time (not unlike the Laskan immediacy of Hingabe), Heidegger turns to the term as fundamentally temporal, recognizing that our ecstatic immersion in the world creates non-identity, the injection of there into here, and therefore the possibility of unifying otherwise disparate elements around personhood. For a thorough discussion of the roots of Heidegger’s use of “ecstasy” (which he traces to Aristotle’s Physics), see David Farrell Krell, Ecstasy, Catastrophe: Heidegger from Being and Time to the Black Notebooks (SUNY Press, 2015), especially 11-36.
moving away from past and toward future points, ecstatic temporality brings out the co-constitution of past, future, and present in our existence. I live with past and future “horizons” against which and towards which I live. Tendency and motivation, the temporal indications of meaning that gave coherence to life in WS, emerge again here as “Geworfenheit” and “Entwurf,” or, more commonly, as the unified “geworfener Entwurf” (“thrown projection”). To say that temporality is not an objective index of change but is the structure through which my investment in the world is given its terms of possibility (the parameters and the goals, we might say) is to say that (ecstatic) temporality simply describes the way in which all worldliness is unified around the project of selfhood. Temporality is essentially a structure of Jemeinigkeit, a logic of the world that condenses along the axis of unified selfhood and orders the nebulous plurality of worldhood.\(^{124}\) Despite all that Heidegger does to distance himself from the Kantian premise that time is the form of inner intuition and space that of outer, the kernel of this division remains: ecstatic temporality is the structure that illuminates the unity of my private selfhood against the disunity and dispersion of the public world.

It is no surprise, therefore, that when Heidegger returns to the question of Dasein’s existential spatiality towards the end of SZ, he simply infers from the logic of authenticity that “the specific spatiality of Dasein must be grounded in temporality.”\(^ {125}\) If “space” is serve a phenomenological role, it certainly cannot refer to the Kantian form of outer intuition, a neutral container that provides absolute coordinates for positioning bodies within it. Space must refer to the structure by which phenomena are worldly. It, too, is a structure of Dasein. But where ecstatic temporality discloses the essential unity

\(^{124}\) Of course, Heidegger insists on the “equiprimordiality” of past, future and present horizons of our ecstasy, but the fact that the future is given “priority in the ecstatic unity of primordial and authentic temporality” (Heidegger, Being and Time, 314/329.) attests to the fact that it is the Zugeinspiegelung of life on the self in the possibility of death (the paradigmatic futural horizon) that truly gives unity to the ecstatic horizons. Temporality in SZ is, no matter how much one tries to qualify and hedge the matter, a possibility grounded in the priority of Jemeinigkeit over Weltlichkeit.

\(^ {125}\) Heidegger, 349/367.
of our lives by focalizing our worldly entanglement on the possibility of a private selfhood laid bare by our mortality, Heidegger’s spatiality (in-Sein) is never anything more than our dispersal and distraction (Zerstreuheit) in the world; far from offering new forms of unity, it is destined to entrench our inauthentic alienation. It is telling that Heidegger dismisses the spatial metaphors of ecstasy (“horizon,” being “out of oneself”) as our tendency to mistake our world for our worldliness, the ontic for the ontological. In other words, Heidegger grounds spatiality in temporality for precisely the same reason that he grounds worldhood in selfhood.

However, by offering an interpretation of worldliness (Being-in) as sociality (Being-with) — by revealing that the structural relation of things of use is in fact in structure of collective negotiation — Heidegger leaves the phenomenological door open to the figure of ecstasy as neither exclusively spatial nor temporal but the basic “outside oneself” within which spatio-temporal coherence is possible. Indeed, the modes of differentiating and unifying the phenomena of the world according to their place within my life needn’t be split into “spatial” and “temporal” axes that are needlessly made orthogonal. Ecstasy is not, then, a philosophical figure of individuation but exactly the opposite: it reveals the fact that I am not to be found here, nearest to myself, shielded from the public space of external determination and influence, but that I am always there, caught up in this task, dealing with that issue, negotiating various expectations and possibilities. I am the being within whom proximity and distance, familiarity and foreignness, relevance and irrelevance can be so much as configured.126 Again, because we are the medium of phenomenality, we are the structure (the “site”) through which

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126 Heidegger says as much when he characterizes Dasein as “Ent-fernung,” the distance (and therefore the bridging, navigating, and undoing of this distance) that emerges from our relation to phenomena. And yet, Heidegger sees in this formal structure of ours a tendency towards inauthenticity since we have “an essential tendency toward nearness” (Heidegger, 103/105). Of course, I hope to have shown that the real response to this tendency toward calcification and familiarity is not a retreat into the private (for what could be nearer!) but an embrace of the relations of distance themselves.
relations and coherence across space and time are articulated; being outside oneself is the most basic way of expressing our mediality.

The temporal privilege of ecstasy in *SZ* brings together several strands of our analysis. When Heidegger says that the caller and the called of the voice of conscience are both *Dasein* and yet are sharply distinguished, the “they” and the “self” of the everyday “they-self” are severed from one another by the caller. Entangled (*verfallenes*) worldly *Dasein* is called upon by its own “potentiality-of-Being [*Seinkönnen*].” *Dasein* in its factual immersion is parsed from *Dasein* in its sheer possibility. What it is from what it could become. This is nothing more than a restatement of *Dasein*’s ecstatic character: *Dasein* is defined by what it is not (yet), by those relations of meaning whose past and future horizons give our lives momentum at every moment, possibility imbuing every actuality. But because Heidegger limits this modal difference between actuality and possibility to temporal difference, to the horizon of what is not yet against the present of what has already congealed into concretion (hence the ontological priority of the future), his language of potentiality places the freedom of fluidity against the alienation of concretion. If *Dasein* is what it is not yet, any particular configuration of the world poses a threat of reifying and fixing *Dasein*. As I argued above, assuming that all material arrangements of the present world pose an anti-temporal trap of “Verfallenheit” (entanglement, fallenness) that obscures the possibility of the “future” has consequences for any robust notion of sociality: the ecstatic structure of internal difference collapses on itself and, instead, encourages a retreat into the privacy of unhampered volition and away from the morass of public entanglement.

Interestingly, this constitutive temporal difference that produces the dissonance of conscience also leads Heidegger into his only real discussion of (the possibility) of responsibility and the conditions of figuring individuality in terms of collectivity: ontological “*Schuld*” (guilt). Heidegger, in a now-familiar gesture, attempts to separate what he takes to be the vulgar, everyday notion of *Schuld* — having debts (*Schulden*) to another person and other forms of “making oneself responsible [*schuldig*]”
by living under certain laws, obligations, and forms of exchange — from our ontological Schuldigsein.\textsuperscript{127} This ontological guilt is nothing other than the fact of this modal gap between what we are and what we can become. Dasein’s possibilities are always laden with the “burden” of thrownness, limited and dragged down by their factual particularity, and so “Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities” and “never [gains] power over [its] ownmost Being from the ground up.”\textsuperscript{128} This ontological guilt of always being indebted to and entangled in the affairs of others allows us to “make ourselves responsible” for this or that: Dasein’s ecstatic non-identity creates the ontological foundation for the many forms in which my own project of selfhood emerges from my facticity.\textsuperscript{129}

Despite this insight, Heidegger places this gap between possibility and actuality between what is expected of me by the fixed impositions of the “Man-selbst” and the projected possibilities of the “ich-selbst.”\textsuperscript{130} We are left with the age-old fiction that our freedom and responsibility arise out of our negotiation of limitation and volition, the demands of the masses and the whims of the self (even if Heidegger internalizes this ontologically into the theater of subjectivity). The “others” and the

\textsuperscript{127} Heidegger, 269-71/280-82.

\textsuperscript{128} Heidegger, 273/285.

\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, these passages are the fodder for Iain Macdonald’s insistence that Adorno unfairly dismissed Heidegger as unable to conceive of non-identity within identity, and his claim that a nascent ethics can be found in this constitutive alterity of Dasein. Macdonald sees in these passages an undeveloped theory of the conditions for normativity: the essential modal gap in Dasein is not simply between what I am and what I can be, but between what “is and what ought to be.” And so, “without such a bifurcation or split, norm-based action would be impossible; again, it is only such a self-relation that can explain the difference between moral action (involving responsibility and guilt) and animal behavior.” (Iain Macdonald, “Ethics and Authenticity: Conscience and Non-Identity in Heidegger and Adorno, with a Glance at Hegel,” in Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions (Stanford University Press, 2008), 14, 18.)

In a basic sense, this is irrefutable: normativity is not thinkable without the possibility of difference. Our capacity to carry responsibility (i.e. have legible agency) would seem to rest on this latent non-identity. But Macdonald assumes, following Heidegger, that this modal gap should be understood as a temporal gap, as a tension within Dasein that arises from its struggle to pursue its own future possibilities through the messy bog of “their” present constraints.

\textsuperscript{130} Macdonald repeats this assumption: “The Self of Dasein is not a pure, point-like, self-identical Self; it is rather a self divided, pitted against itself (its they-self) as it sorts through its existentiell possibilities.” (Macdonald, 15.)
particular arrangement of the present world appear as obstacles to, facilitators of, and characters within this project of mine. To the degree that facticity is baked into my possibilities and my responsibility to myself is tethered to my responsibility to others, the relation is fundamentally antagonistic. Though my ontological Schuld is also manifest in terms of some particular social entanglement, it is clear that this is rooted in the more primordial self-responsibility of non-identity, which is explicitly not ecstatic in a social sense.

The narrowness of this ontological Schuld leads to equally thin “vulgar” manifestations. While we might be able to wrest a strange kind of ethics out of this notion of being indebted to others, it is not clear that any kind of politics is possible on this basis.131 This is, of course, another manifestation of the weakness of Heidegger’s Mitsein: he simply cannot imagine that the differential tension of our existence might itself be a function of our sociality, that our ecstasy emerges from the generative friction of collectivity. Instead, his wilted Mitsein is reduced to the besorgende Fürsorge of thrown actuality that conditions the urges toward the not yet of the self, one pole of an internalized tension, not the material of the tension itself. If the glimmer of new forms of unity (the possibility of making a different world to come) emerges out of a difference between actuality and possibility, Heidegger’s sociality

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131 As Hannah Arendt trenchantly remarked of the destructive individuation of existential guilt:

If since Kant the essence of man consisted in every single human being representing all of humanity and if since the French Revolution and the declaration of the rights of man it became integral to the concept of man that all of humanity could be debased or exalted in every individual, then the concept of Self is a concept of man that leaves the individual existing independent of humanity and representative of no one but himself — of nothing but his own nothingness. If Kant’s categorical imperative insisted that every human act had to bear responsibility for all of humanity, then the experience of guilty nothingness insists on precisely the opposite: the destruction in every individual of the presence of all humanity. The Self in the form of conscience has taken the place of humanity, and being-a-Self has taken the place of being human. (Hannah Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy,” in Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism, ed. Jerome Kohn, trans. Rita Kimber and Robert Kimber (1948; repr., New York: Schocken, 1994), 181.)

For a detailed discussion of the problematic (even totalitarian) tendencies of placing individual guilt above collective responsibility, see chapter 2, in which I follow Hannah Arendt’s inversion of Heidegger’s analysis, saving the Heideggerian world from itself by ensuring its cogency as a public world.
seems to offer only the conservative inertia of the former and never the transformative momentum of the latter.

If ecstasy is not, however, understood merely temporally, a different kind of existential gap emerges out of which an experiential unity, emergent from within the “actualities” of our social fabric, can grow.

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What would it mean for the existential gap (between Being and Becoming, actuality and possibility) to itself be a function of social facticity, for the difference constitutive of our unity to be a description of sociality and not of our antagonism to it? Sociality would not be condemned to the mere negotiation of the tension between what I am and what I could become, and would itself be the web of “thrown projections” (factual possibilities) that I am becoming. What would it mean to say that I am not only collectively conditioned but that I am collective, that this is not an attribute, a product, a constraint of my Being but is simply the structure of entanglement (“Verfallenheit” now identical to, not merely an aspect of, “Sorge”) that constitutes the project of personhood? The “they-self” (not reified into anonymous autocracy but simply the forces of entanglement that make up my thrownness) needn’t be feared as the enemy of ecstasy, the conflation of possibility and actuality, but names the geographic and historical structure of worldly signification whose specificity always carries within it the possibility of being otherwise, even the tendency towards alteration, transformation, and reevaluation. Reproducing the world in a particular configuration does not necessarily obstruct its potential to change; it is, rather, the condition for the coherence of a unified world at all. Maintaining our social world is always already a way of transforming it.

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132 Or, in Macdonald’s Hegelian formulation: the “non-identity within identity.”
Mediality, collectively, sociality, ecstasy: are these all synonymous? For which material fact do they all serve as figures? What kind of social “medium” structures differences? Are we talking about language? Infrastructure? Practical identities? While those media of sociality are certainly woven into this medium, we are aiming to describe the coherent worldliness of first-personal facticity, the most basic way in which the fact of my own person is made visible in the project of life. Our first-personal worldliness is, at risk of speaking tautologically, our embodiment.

If embodiment is, at root, the materiality of our Being-in, then any phenomenology grounded in selfhood must localize our existence in a particular, delimited object. Whether the brain, our flesh, our sensorium, or our home, these are all ways locate and delimit the “I” in space. Of course, these circumscribed subjectivities do not contain any existential gap within their own materiality since the subject is whole and pre-given in its where and what. Because of this, the problem looms that this Being-in isn’t yet in, so we concretize, make manifest, embody our “I” to address this. Our bodies become the intermediary through which our interior Being comes into contact with the public world, the convenient hybrid object that is both “I” and world (and yet not fully either). This body is a dual-aspect entity, thinkable as subjective and objective, as mine and foreign, the domain of my sovereignty and rights but also my vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the socio-historical world I am “in.” As Heidegger went to great lengths to show, this kind of embodiment of interior subjectivity is a non-starter for understanding oneself as existentially “in” the world; a physical within mixed with a psychological without does not constitute much of a step beyond the fissure between the material and ideal. Yet, as I have argued, Heidegger’s only strategy for avoiding this reification and interiorization of subjectivity was positing a formal difference of temporal ecstasy within the unity of the self, a

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133 Though in very different ways, both Schopenhauer and Husserl turned to the body to serve this kind of dual purpose; Schopenhauer connected the worlds of “will” and “representation” through our body’s aspectual access to both worlds while Husserl sought to establish an immersed subjectivity related but not reducible to its empirical existence by cleaving the body in its physicality (Körper) and its lived intentionality (Leib).
structure whose specific Being-in is constantly strained and is always trying to avoid understanding itself in terms of that entangled Being-in. In short, as I observed at the outset, there is simply no room in Heidegger’s phenomenology for Dasein to leap back into the world in its full factical particularity: it cannot be embodied.

If we do not begin, however, with the notion that the potential unity (and therefore meaning) of our lives is a private matter, but is something constituted in the specifics of my public life — if we consider our embodiment ecstatically — these obstacles dissipate. The materiality of our body is no longer limited to a bounded physical entity with which I identify myself, nor is it a porous or hazily bounded object, or even the body that is that boundary between inside and out. To say that my embodiment is ecstatic means that the worldly material out of which I forge a sense of personhood is there, not here, it is public, contested, shared, and forever changing. It is, in other words, a body formed and re-formed collectively. If we are to call this a social body, it is far from the liberal agglomeration of a collective Leviathan; the “I” is not dissolved into a “we” through association, conjoinment, or yielding itself up to some higher order. My first-personality is already a social matter, already associative, reactive, committed, repulsed, impassioned by the relations I inhabit, that constitute me, and which I, in turn, (or rather, at the very same time) constitute.

To insist on the inherent sociality of embodied experience is also to save Heidegger’s phenomenological method from its own undoing. Dasein — which Heidegger meticulously designed to pick out the way in which our first-personal particularity is “je schon immer” ordered, but which lapsed into a purely formal structure that distributively particularizes itself — finally appears as a mode of factical particularity that tends towards its own universalization as a collective structure shared with others. Dasein is, therefore, not a pre-given form to which we asymptotically strive but a historically

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134 As Helmuth Plessner’s “eccentric positionality” would have it.
and geographically situated collective project in which I realize my unifying and meaningful freedom by participating. Dasein is the philosophical name for our peculiar capacity to figure the tiniest thread of everyday banality in terms of the totality of the world. We aren’t passive observers of “it worlding,” but are the medium (the structured bodies of difference) through which we “world” ourselves.\textsuperscript{135}

* *

Freed from our fear of the dictatorship of the public as an essentially diffuse worldly medium within which we lose ourselves to the whims of others and confuse actuality for potentiality, phenomenology has no need to resist our worldly ecstasy with a “temporal” one, there is no urgency to gather ourselves up and shed the roots of our worldly entanglement in the carpet of life.

Affirming embodied particularity, the rejection of which had fueled the anxiety underlying authenticity, does not, however, undermine Heidegger’s project of freeing ourselves from a naturalized and fixed self-understanding. Quite to the contrary, only by understanding our tendency to organize the specificity of our experience universally are we able to make sense of (and counteract) the problematic and alienating forms of our collectivity. Heidegger was very right to warn us of the danger of mistaking the actual for the possible, unity for absolute totality. Indeed, to say that we are medial beings for whom the structured fabric of life is constitutive intensifies the difficulty we face in finding our agency, our responsibility, our ownership of our world within the tangle of life. Far messier than achieving mineness by kicking away the crutches of worldliness, developing a sense of universal collectivity out of the inseparability of mineness and worldliness of ecstatic embodiment is a difficult, frustrating, and ongoing task, one which exceeds the horizons of my birth and my death. Far more

\textsuperscript{135} In a rather circuitous way, I am reading Heidegger’s notion of Dasein as a first-personal description of Marx’s slippery idea of our “species-being.” Note that at the heart of Marx’s theory that humans define themselves in their “universalization” in every particular instance, is Marx’s insistence that the whole of the world functions as the “inorganic body” over which we labor and through which we transform ourselves (our organic bodies). See the introduction and chapter 3 for further discussion of this deep similitude.
challenging than retreating from alienating collectivity into the ease of individuality is to see in the disfigured world the trace of its possible transformation: for our experience of collectivity, however contorted and calcified, to always contain the seeds of a different world to come. Though all experience figures itself as worldly, phenomenology offers a mode of description and understanding through which that figuration comes into view as historical, changeable, and my own. By following the transformative potentiality of our ecstatic embodiment, phenomenology brings everyday experience back to life and frees the poetic mechanisms by which we rearrange the world; it does not simply “leap into the world at all” but allows us to leap, together, into a world to come.
CHAPTER TWO

Fabrication:

Weaving Narrative Webs of Collective Responsibility between Hans Fallada and Hannah Arendt

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I. Introduction: Fractured Politics

This chapter asks what forms, if any, poetic representation can take when the usual avenues of political representation have been all but snuffed out. It asks, in other words, how we might imagine and configure alternative arrangements of collective life when the dominant social totality maintains its hegemony precisely by obscuring the mechanisms by which it reproduces itself and through which alternatives could be created. Can poetic rearrangement begin to loosen the authoritarian grip of certain deformations of collectivity? Though the contemporary instantiation of this problem is the global alienation manifest in our hapless and profoundly unequal response to our climate crisis,¹ this chapter turns, not to our rising seas, but to a — I hope to show — structurally analogous form of political alienation, one which has the benefit of being one of the most thoroughly digested and theorized moments of human existence: National Socialism. More specifically, I turn to the everyday reproduction of Nazism in the life of the ordinary “little man” in the moment and place of its greatest consolidation, early 1940s Berlin, to ask whether even the most disfigured forms of collectivity might contain the clues to their own reconfiguration.

What do we gain if we think of Nazism not as a discrete political party, a fixed group of people, or a set of convictions, but of a particular configuration of collectivity, a condition under which action is particularly difficult, responsibility shrouded in the binary of guilt and innocence, and power hidden in the fable of sovereignty and resistance? For one, its self-exacerbating alienation, which obscures the mechanisms of its own undoing, emerges for the first time. How do we regain a sense of action and potency under these conditions? How do we regain a sense of political collectivity in which each individual is a potentially transformative participant? Though the tendency to tell the

¹ See chapter 3 and the introduction for more direct discussions of this problem as it appears in our poetics and politics today.
story of Nazism in terms of the authoritarian subjugation of a people under the yolk of evil is strong, it does little to explain its rise and popularity, its ostensible defeat, or its political afterlife in terms other than moral failure, international war, and psychological evil: in short, it leaves no space to understand Nazism as a fundamentally political configuration and corruption of collective life. Insisting, instead, that Nazism was made possible by — and in turn compounded by — a particular deformation of political mechanisms for representing the social world as a whole, opens the path to an internal understanding of it as a form of extreme alienation, what I will call the "domestication" of politics.²

* If the previous chapter sought a philosophical vocabulary to articulate the inherent worldliness of even the smallest scrap of everyday life, to describe the reciprocal constitution of social collectivity and individual personhood, this chapter tests that phenomenology by turning to collectivity at its most disfigured, totalizing, and seemingly irredeemable. It asks whether there are, in fact, circumstances in which the iron grip of “das Man” is so unresponsive and unrepresentative of the lives of those it is meant to encapsulate that the only path toward freedom (in other words, the only form of meaningful coherence) is isolated individuation. There is a certain irony to this gesture: while the previous chapter challenged Heidegger’s assumption that everyday social infrastructure couldn’t offer a logic of coherence adequate to the first-personality of lived experience — that specific political forms could

2 As I will argue below, it is imperative to distinguish the domestic as a familial space within a polity and the domestic as a paradigm for the political itself. Indeed, only when the polity as a whole is organized as though it were a colossal household (when it is domesticated) does “the domestic” appear in competition with and opposed to the political. (It is, in this sense, structurally analogous to the differentiation of the realms of natural necessity and human freedom. Only when we understand our shelter, our food, and our reproduction as inscribed within the universal processes of communal infrastructure, social metabolism, and the continuous production of a world, does the “natural” no longer stand in opposition to the “human,” but in a fruitful relation of a dialectic oriented toward sustainable freedom. See the introduction and chapter 3 for further discussion of the universalization of our material production of ourselves through the world.)
ever adequately figure the unity of existence —, I propose to explore this in its limit case by turning to the very polity, the Third Reich, to which Heidegger pledged allegiance.

Hannah Arendt, the theorist who serves as the guide to this chapter, is, therefore, relevant here for several coinciding reasons. Her reflections are not only indicative of a certain kind of inheritance of the specter of Nazism, but, more importantly for the purposes of this inquiry, they work to carefully pry apart the registers of political alienation and moral evil. Her inversion of Heidegger is, then, indispensable to parsing the political register from its domestic obfuscation. Two adjacent distinctions of hers, between the domestic (oikos) and the political (polis) on the one hand, and guilt (moral agency) and responsibility (political agency) on the other, clear the path for Nazism to so much as appear as a problem of collective alienation as opposed to sheer force, subjugation, and violence. Though the two distinctions are intimately related, it is in the latter that her inheritance, and critique, of Heidegger is most apparent. By grounding freedom in the continuous negotiation of political difference through collective responsibility, she exposes the interiority of Heidegger’s existential guilt as a thin derivative of its socio-historical ground.

Though her diagnosis makes room for an understanding of action in the Third Reich that is neither dissolved in a historical-social functionalism nor overemphasized through a psychologized and atomized intentionalism, her own writing does not probe the shape of this action in its particularity, nor does it illuminate the political space within which such a notion of action might be possible. Because she separates the material and immaterial production of collective life, her theoretical approach doesn’t wrestle with the poetic challenge of fabricating the “web of stories” that she so carefully articulates analytically.

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To truly bring Nazism into view as a political disfigurement reproduced in everyday practice, I turn to a more overly poetic attempt to capture the strained collectivity in its manifestation in the
banalities of ordinary Germans. It is, therefore, in the coherence and form of a novel written just after the end of the war that I hope to bring out one man’s attempt to make life in Nazi Germany legible as coherently political. The novel is Hans Fallada’s 1947 *Jeder stirbt für sich allein* (*Every Man Dies Alone*), a narrative, I hope to show, that is animated and structured by the oscillation between moral and political registers of agency: now distinguishing, then collapsing the domestic and the political spheres, swinging from guilt, conscience, and the pursuit of moral “decency” to responsibility, complicity, and the navigation of political entanglement. It not only depicts but itself performs the challenges of figuring a discernible collective out of the small moments of everyday life forced into the margins by a totalizing logic of tribalistic partisanship.

The novel came into existence after Hans Fallada (Rudolph Ditzen’s lifelong pseudonym) was asked, shortly after the war, to write a novel based on extensive documents collected by the Gestapo on the attempted subversion of the Nazi regime by a working-class couple (Otto and Elise Hampel). The request came from his new but intimate friend, Johannes Becher, who, at that time (late 1945), led the newly formed *Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands*, an association of artists and intellectuals backed by the Soviet military. The *Kulturbund* was dedicated to the postwar anti-fascist national rebirth of Germany and would go on to become an intellectual pillar of socialist cultural self-understanding in the GDR. Fallada, apparently uncomfortable with his own lack of clear opposition to the Nazi regime and fearing that writing a novel of this kind would appear as dishonest self-preservation while he wrote other, clearly subversive, texts, his novel *Der Eiserne Gustav* (published 1938) bears the blemish of having been commissioned as the basis for a Nazi propaganda film and. His breakout 1931 novel, *Bauern, Bonzen, and Bomben*, was hailed by the right and left alike, proving early on that his deceptively unmediated realism was open to highly divergent political readings. Fallada undoubtedly saw his own entanglement in Nazi Germany in an ambiguous light and was not eager to falsely smooth it out. See Peter Walther, *Hans Fallada: Die Biographie*

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4 Fallada was, on the one hand, censored, imprisoned, and declared an anti-Nazi conspirator, and, on the other, was contracted to write Nazi propaganda and agreed to write a novel under plans laid out by Goebbels. Though this novel was never written and may very well simply have been a tactic for self-preservation while he wrote other, clearly subversive, texts, his novel *Der Eiserne Gustav* (published 1938) bears the blemish of having been commissioned as the basis for a Nazi propaganda film and. His breakout 1931 novel, *Bauern, Bonzen, and Bomben*, was hailed by the right and left alike, proving early on that his deceptively unmediated realism was open to highly divergent political readings. Fallada undoubtedly saw his own entanglement in Nazi Germany in an ambiguous light and was not eager to falsely smooth it out. See Peter Walther, *Hans Fallada: Die Biographie*
exculpation, declined.\(^5\) Only when it was made clear that the files told the story not of a “purposeful communist resistant group”\(^6\) but of the isolated attempt by a working-class couple to live under the harsh conditions of Nazi Germany did Fallada agree to take it on. Thus, from the beginning, there was a certain tension between Fallada’s insistence on telling the murky and morally ambiguous stories of Germany’s *Kleinbürger* and Becher’s clear-cut nation-building project that needed stories not of the *Mitläufer*\(^7\) who were implicated in the widely declared collective guilt but of those who had remained untarnished by twelve years of fascism and on whose clear consciences a new Germany could grow.\(^8\)

The novel thus illuminates the messy and often terrifying political fabric constituted by relations of responsibility, complicity, and differential empowerment that underlies isolated moments of acute moral quandary and reflection. While Fallada’s narrative is, therefore, symptomatic of the success with which Nazism buried and disrupted this fabric, it keeps one eye trained on the forms of

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\(^5\) Heinz Willmann, another co-founder of the *Kulturbrand* and close associate of Becher’s who was sent by Becher to convince Fallada to take on the project, gives a detailed account of this exchange in his memoir: Heinz Willmann, *Steine klopft man mit dem Kopf: Lebenserinnerungen* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1977), 302–5.

\(^6\) Willmann, 303, my translation.

\(^7\) *Mitläufer*, meaning “follower,” was cemented into common parlance by the Allied denazification proceedings in which it was the lowest of four categories of complicity in Nazi crimes into which Germans were sorted. See Allied Control Council, “Directive No. 38: The Arrest and Punishment of War Criminals, Nazis, and Militarists and the Internment, Control, and Surveillance of Potentially Dangerous Germans.,” October 12, 1946, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=2307. I discuss the various notions of complicity used to make sense of Nazi hegemony and how they were shaped by denazification narratives below.

\(^8\) This was particularly evident in the changes made to the manuscript by an editor, Paul Wiegler, after Fallada’s death, which smoothed over the political complexities of many of the characters that the publisher, Aufbau, hoped would be straightforward bastions of pure resistance. Only in 2011 did Aufbau publish a new edition of the novel that restored the full version originally submitted by Fallada in 1946.

action that remained avowedly political in their internal dissidence and their modest effectivity, avoiding the post-war struggle between accusations of collective guilt and counter-narratives of impotence and moral constancy.

This oscillation between the moral and the political is, I argue, most apparent in the novel's ambivalence toward the idea of resistance. Resistance would, on the one hand, seem to be the very epitome of effective dissidence and therefore of political action under repressive regimes, reclaiming power by carving out a space from which to create countercurrents. But, in doing so, it in fact consolidates the very alienation it seeks to unseat: in resisting, individuals take a stand against (as the German Widerstand makes literal enough) the person, norm, institution, state, or whatever configuration of the political fabric, without drawing on any power inherited from it, and thus tries to remain totally un-implicated and un-entangled in, for example, the nefarious machinations of Nazi Germany (as Becher and the Kulturbund presumably imagined the Hampels’ case). If resistance is internal, it is only tenuously or superficially so; to take a stand against someone or something is necessarily to try to separate and distance oneself from it. For this very reason, the debates over the historiographical use of the term and its various ideological underpinnings have been far-reaching and go to the very core of interpretations of Nazism (and the political) as such.9

Jeder stirbt für sich allein is certainly a testament to the pressures of post-war German rebuilding (both liberal and socialist) to tell a clean and forward-looking story of the noble but powerless resisters to Nazism patiently awaiting a post-fascist Germany in which to flourish (the Kulturbund’s newly founded publishing house, Aufbau, certainly hadn’t chosen its name at random). But beneath these

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9 As historian Peter Hoffmann put it in his work on the most high-profile moments of resistance during the Third Reich, “the relation between National Socialism and the Resistance is a key to comprehending the Nazi system.” (Peter Hoffmann, German resistance to Hitler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3; originally published as Peter Hoffman, Widerstand, Staatsstreich, Attentat: Der Kampf Der Opposition Gegen Hitler (Munich: Piper, 1985).)
moments lies a much messier tale of the enormous obstacles to daily life set, not by the colonizing force of the Nazi Party, its leaders, or Hitler himself, but by the relations of fear, distrust, and retreat in which all Germans found themselves caught. Fallada’s novel thus not only depicts, but is structured by the fabric of relations in which life had no choice but to find its way and its meaning. It is this structure that separates it most essentially from the Gestapo files on which the plot is based — which separates its poetic force from criminological accounting.  

The novel’s form, I suggest, allows for a completely different notion of action that follows, not from the actualization of an interior capacity (something like “agency” in the traditionally intentionalist, moral sense), but drawn from one's participation in the (re)arrangement of collectivity, a highly unevenly distributed capacity despite its universality. Action becomes the navigation of an already existent medium of others' actions, and is thus fundamentally collective: action is always a form of reaction, a way of participating in the grand project of casting our mundane lives as creative of the world as such. It is because our lives are mediated by such a political fabric that it can be alienated, the mechanisms of this figuration monopolized and obscured; but it is also by virtue of this mediating fabric that its malleability can never be fully snuffed out. Even in the most totalizing forms of collectivity, Fallada’s narrative insists, there lie the small traces of a different world to come. This chapter, then, seeks to uncover this faith — present even (or perhaps especially) in the ruins of Germany in 1946 — in the possibility of poetic representation of the world as a dynamic whole.

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10 There is some irony in the fact that the pointillistic entries in the Gestapo files may have served Becher and his nationalist needs better than the messier and ambivalent fabric-structure of the novel.
II.  

Widerstand: Moral or Political Dissidence?

1. Domesticity Disrupted

At that moment she grasped that this very first sentence was Otto’s absolute and irrevocable declaration of war [...] war between, on the one side, the two of them, poor, small, insignificant workers who could be extinguished for just a word or two, and on the other, the Führer, the Party, the whole apparatus in all its power and glory, with three-fourths or even four-fifths of the German people behind it. And the two of them in this little room in Jablonski Strasse! [...] 

On the outside, nothing has changed. All is quiet around the Quangels. But inside, everything is different, they are at war…[11]

Otto and Anna Quangel are, as always, sitting at home alone in near silence. The Second World War is raging at full pitch to the east and the west; lives are being taken every day in the military conflict where the old divisions of nationality determine who one has to fear and under what banner one will find one’s untimely death. But this is not the war that has been kindled in the small German home of the Quangels. Theirs, we are told, cannot be detected on the “outside”: far from joining the fray — on either side — they have changed internally, becoming all the more isolated, all the more alone. If this scene, at the end of the first section of Fallada’s Jeder stirbt für sich allein, is a pivotal moment at which its protagonists, the Quangels, claim a thread of agency in the increasingly self-destructive political fabric of Nazi Germany, we must ask what kind of agency this couple can be said to have.


All quotations are based on Michael Hofmann’s 2009 translation, which is the only English translation. Because of the stilted style of this translation and, more importantly, because it is based on an older edition of the German text (see footnote above), there are a number of omissions and misleading word choices that I will amend in the quotations and, for reasons of fluidity and practicality, will not explicitly mark unless they have particular significance. All errors are, thus, my own.
The Quangels might seem (and certainly took themselves to be) too powerless, too small, too atomistic to be a force adequate to the behemoth of Nazism: can one even speak of political action at the level of the individual, let alone under the hegemony of totalitarianism? More specifically, what kind of action (and adversary) does an “interior war” entail? What are the consequences of a domestic conflict of this kind?

Whatever interiority marks this new unrest of theirs is not simply psychological but already, in its first glimmer, avowedly political: their war is against their own leader, against the ruling party of their state, against “three-fourths, even four-fifths of the German people.” Indeed, the power and terror of fascism is such that their war against the “Führer” cannot be contained to any fraction of the population but is necessarily a war against every German, regardless of social standing or party affiliation. In this sense, however, they are themselves among those against whom they must fight: their war is not directed against a clearly defined external entity, but against their own implication in “the whole apparatus in all its power and glory.” It is a war sparked by their own self-reckoning, recognizing their participation in a “whole” whose face they no longer recognize.

But is this really a “war”? If war is a relation between two entities at their most acutely differentiated, a battle of colliding factions meeting at their boundaries, of purported good and evil,

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12 It is imperative not to conflate — as totalizing regimes always work to — partisanship and political entanglement as such. The delimitation of parties within the political sphere attempts to organize and institutionalize this pervasive entanglement by ideological likeness. Of course, once one party is able to edge out all the others, it would seem that there is, de facto, no space in which political action could form itself aside from within that particular partisan institution. As this novel suggests in painful detail, much of the power of the Nazi party came with the successful closure of a gap between party and political life as such. The true damage of this, however, is not the hegemony of a single party, but the marginalization of politics as such, carried out by the artificial homogeneity and unity of the party. One party rule is but a symptom of the deeper notion that the Nazi party was not only coextensive with German political life, but that the party was not actually to be understood politically at all, but nationally, ethnically, and charismatically. Nazism loomed as a form of political organization predicated on invented identity (with Hitler, first and foremost, and with other Nazis by way of one’s shared Führer) and not on the negotiation of difference, difficulty, and collective self-determination. It was a form of politics that sought to suppress its rocky and heterogeneous political reality under the stable and homogenous veil of a partisan fiction. If Fallada’s novel is to be political at all, it must, I will argue, figure the relations of everyday life as constitutive of a collective founded on difference, not identity.
then the Quangels are encountering something much messier, much more personal, and, by the same token, entirely political. To put it another way, war is definitionally not political; it is the relation between entities at their barest self-identity, coming into conflict without any medium through which to negotiate and recognize their co-existence. War is, to put it simply, the rejection of human universality, putting tribalistic identity over the collectivity of humanity; it is the kind of relation that remains when we try to circumvent our inescapable political relations because they are inconvenient, difficult, or condemning — more on this below.¹³ One indication that the Quangels’ struggle is not straightforwardly bellicose, or even clearly oppositional, is that they are not, demographically speaking, obvious victims of Nazi ideology, nor members of an organized insurgency: they are “ordinary” working class Germans who voted for Hitler in 1933 and who are coming to recognize the gruesome apparatus in which they are complicit participants. For them to call this recognition “war” is, then, already a retreat from their own place within Nazism, an attempt to preserve their own purity; it is a self-protective simplification and reification of themselves and their Führer into the collision of self-contained and fully distinct entities.¹⁴

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This becomes all the clearer if we take a step back to ask how two “poor, small, insignificant” workers who voted for the NSDAP in 1933 find themselves declaring war with Hitler, with his party, with the Germans, and with, in some sense, themselves. How do the Quangels, who “kept to

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¹³ Needless to say, this notion of politics has little to do with the liberal notion of the mechanisms of contractual representation characteristic of the modern state. “Politics” as I use it here and throughout this chapter refers simply to the navigation and negotiation of plurality within the medium of an already extent unified collective. I will work out exactly what this entails and is differentiated from in greater detail below in discussing Hannah Arendt, to whom this approach is largely indebted.

¹⁴ To be clear, that they voted for Hitler and are not demographically explicitly “outside” of Nazism makes the matter (both for them and for us as readers) much starker, but it will remain an open question to what degree anyone can, in a deep sense, said to have been totally disentangled from the political fabric of Nazi Germany without robbing them of their political agency as such. See the discussion below on Hannah Arendt and the conditions (and costs) of standing outside of a polity.
themselves” and only left the privacy of their home for work and other purposeful business, find themselves caught up in a political conflict that injects tension into their relation with everyone around them (indeed, as I will suggest, their relation to their city as a whole)?

It begins, as does the novel itself, one week earlier with a letter they receive from the military informing them of their son’s death on the western front. This routine administrative announcement is presumably expected to be unproblematically assimilated into the narrative of sacrifice that the devotion of a family to the Fatherland requires, solidifying, if anything, a family’s sense of allegiance to their nation. The honor of dying for one’s nation, pro patria mori, is predicated on the identification of nation and family, as the patria of the fatherland makes clear enough: the honor hinges on one’s tribal identification with one’s nation via sacrifice. Instead, the letter the Quangels receive undermines the neat barrier they had tried to erect between the cultivated calm of their home and the turbulence of the world outside, forcing them to reckon with their complicity in their son’s death and the world as a whole. This escalates rather quickly: moments after Anna has read the letter with the news, Otto reaches to see the letter for himself, setting off a moment of confrontation perhaps neither had expected. Anna grabs the letter from him and furiously she rips the letter into scraps and shreds and fragments and she shouts into his face: “What do you even want to read that filth for, those common lies they always write? That he died a hero’s death for Führer and Fatherland? That he was an exemplary soldier and comrade? Do you want to hear that from them, when you know yourself that Ottochen liked nothing better than fiddling about with his radio kits, and that he cried when he was called away to be a soldier? How often he used to say to me when he was recruited that he would give his right hand to be able to get away from them? And now he’s supposed to be an exemplary soldier, and died a hero’s death?

15 This goes both ways: some fathers in the novel begin to relate to their children as dispensable bodies to be fed, put to work, and sacrificed if need be. Soon after receiving the news of their son’s death, Otto bumps into a neighbor of his, Emil Barkhausen, who has already heard about his son. Barkhausen congratulates him on his loss: “As a father, you should be proud of such a sacrifice! [...] If [my kids] all died at once in a bomb blast or something, I’d be proud of them.” (Fallada, Every Man Dies Alone, 21-22/25.) Clearly, Barkhausen is as little concerned about his kids as are the army generals.
Lies, all a pack of lies! But that’s what you get from your wretched war, you and your Führer!“\(^\text{16}\)

It is this “du und dein Führer” that initially puts Otto on the defensive, but soon dissolves the rigidity of the domestic wall he had erected between himself and Nazism, forcing him to somehow prove Anna’s identification wrong. His anger towards Anna reflects his own dawning recognition, not only that despite his silence and seclusion he had always been a political actor, but, even more disturbingly, that that agency was messy and made it difficult to separate himself from “his Führer” and his war. This charge, as much as his son’s death, haunts Otto for the week that he and his wife spend in almost complete silence and internal tumult, facing its partial truth over and over before resolving to respond to his own (problematic) agency by taking (corrective) action. It is during this week that the grief of losing his son, refracted through Anna’s comment,\(^\text{17}\) transforms itself into a political reckoning with his own entangled complicity. Not only do Otto and Anna refuse to see in the loss of their son a heroic moment in which their pride in, and allegiance to, their “Fatherland” is manifest, they are also unable to receive his murder as would pure victims who stand outside the perpetrating apparatus. It is their war, their Führer, their murder.

\(^{16}\) Fallada, 12-13/14-15.

\(^{17}\) His loss and his reckoning are not really separable:

He was preoccupied by two thoughts, each in turn shoving the other aside: that he no longer had a son, and that Anna had said ‘You and your Führer.’ Quangel admitted to himself that he never loved the boy the way a father is supposed to love his son. From the time Ottochen was born, he had never seen anything in him but a nuisance and a distraction in his relationship with Anna. If he felt grief now, it was because he was thinking worriedly about Anna, how she would take the loss, what would now change between them. Anna had already said it: ‘You and your Führer!’

It wasn’t true. Hitler was not his Führer, or no more his Führer than Anna’s. (Fallada, 20/22.)
2. The Quangels Act

But is their situation really so fraught; are their actions so hard to understand? The Quangels, at least, seem to understand and justify their own plans rather quickly. Anna, upon hearing Otto’s plans to write dissident postcards and secretly distribute them across the city, is at first disappointed by his proposal to wage a “dangerless war from the dark.” But Otto assures her that no matter how trivial their actions, “if they get wind of it, it’ll cost us our lives.” She imagines them, caught, at the guillotine, but the danger does not deter her. Instead, the great peril of their small actions convinces her that Otto's plan may have some sense after all: “Otto might be right: whether their act was big or small, no one could risk more than their life. Each according to their strength and abilities, but the main thing was, one resisted.”\(^\text{18}\) As they imagine their dissidence, they grow increasingly excited by their newfound power, imagining the flood of postcards with which they and their followers would inundate Berlin: “we will slow the machines, we will depose the Führer, end the war…” Intoxicated by this fantasy, they are even proud: “What were they just now? Unknown entities; they had swarmed along with the big, dark swarm. And now they are totally alone, separate, elevated above the others, not to be mistaken for anyone else. They are so alone that it is ice cold around them.”\(^\text{19}\) Standing up and against the crowd, they are alone but empowered, powered not by their complicity, their place or role in Nazi Berlin, or by anything particular to them, but by the power everyone is born with and has equally: the power to sacrifice themselves. They are special only in their choice to wield this power, marked by their courage. They have gathered themselves behind the moral image of resistance.

This is not just a flutter of fantasy on the part of the Quangels. As the back cover of the Aufbau edition announces, *Jeder stirbt für sich allein* is the story of the “resistance of the little people [Widerstand der kleinen Leute].” The English edition is proudly endorsed by Primo Levi with the words:

\(^\text{18}\) Fallada, 132/182.  
\(^\text{19}\) Fallada, 135/188.
“The greatest book ever written about German resistance to the Nazis.” Fallada is himself rather direct about this when, in a brief foreward, he explains the prevalence of death and suffering in the novel by pointing out that it deals almost exclusively with people who “fought against the Hitler-regime,” while he could just as well have explained the unfortunate endings met by the novel’s protagonists by noting their proximity to institutions and members of the Nazi party.

Nor can this simply be chalked up to the editorial influence of Becher and the Kulturbund: already in an essay Fallada wrote in the months before writing the novel (which he did in a frenzied four weeks), he expresses the same excitement over the courageous resistance of the little Quangels against the impossibly imposing machinery of the state:

This couple Quangel, two meaningless individuals [Einselwesen] in north Berlin, almost poor, without help, without any particular abilities, without attachments, take up the fight one day in 1940 against the tremendous [umgebeure] machinery of the Nazi state, and the grotesque occurs: the elephant is threatened by the mouse! […]

Against this man in the dark, the entire tremendous apparatus of the Hitlerish state machinery was powerless.

In a rather programmatic ending to this essay, Fallada declares: “Their protest echoed unheard, they sacrificed their lives, seemingly for nothing, to a hopeless fight. But perhaps not entirely hopeless? Perhaps not entirely for nothing after all? […] I, the author of a yet to be written novel, hope that their fight, their suffering, their death was not entirely for nothing.” If the task of the novel is indeed to vindicate the lives of the Quangels, to show that their fight was not entirely meaningless, how would the idea of resistance furnish an answer?

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20 Fallada, my translation*/5.

*Fallada’s opening note is not included in Hofmann’s translation.


22 Fallada, 218.
In a reading of the novel that takes up precisely this question, Berndt Springer suggests that, at its core, the novel investigates the “meaning of morally right yet futile acts.”  It is, therefore, in response to this quandary that Springer sees the novel’s particular “literary truth” above and beyond the historical content of the Gestapo files on the Hampels: it establishes, he suggests, a portrait of the full breadth of the population of Berlin who were not necessarily involved in the arrest of the couple, but whose “denunciations and fear assured that their attempt to resist [Widerstandsversuch] ended completely unsuccessfully. […] To tell this story comes as an answer to the question of why this attempt to resist not only failed, but had to fail.” The novel’s literary truth lies, in Springer’s reading, less in the specifics of the Quangels’ story than in the broad social portrait of the political landscape crippled by fear and mistrust and which was structurally inhospitable to dissent.

And yet, in addition to this “Milieustudie” that takes the novel’s characters in their collectivity (“Gesamtheit”), Springer insists that the novel also offers a truth in which the figures are considered in their “singularity.” Not only does it offer both, but it stages the “dialectic of rulers and ruled” by specifying and humanizing the types of actors ("Menschentypen") that are generally stereotypically flat and anonymous in their full “freedom to choose.” Set against the political milieu of fear, Springer sees the characters posing a particularly admirable psychological determination to act: “those who want to resist must overcome their fear. Moral conduct thereby becomes a question of courage.” In setting these two modes of agency against one another — the mass of people who collectively constitute a political whole that suffocates individual action, and the individuated characters who are


24 Springer, 89.

25 Springer, 89.

26 Springer, 94.
able to wrest agency for themselves despite this — Springer reduces the novel’s truth of collectively constituted structural disempowerment (a quintessentially political problem) into a morality tale in which certain characters somehow free themselves from this milieu and courageously will themselves into the right, however ineffectively. Springer is left to conclude that the Quangels’ actions are meaningful simply in their exemplarity (“Vorbildfunktion”): “that there is something in a person that cannot be broken or corrupted, an unshakable good seed that withstands all seduction and intimidation, threat and violence. Which can withstand. At least in some few people who bear the cross in the name of all others.” The hopelessness of transforming their situation, in other words, underscores their courage, and their moral courage marks their total detachment from the collective reproduction of political life in Nazi Berlin.

By celebrating the moralistic hope planted in the “good seed,” Springer not only reads the novel more or less exactly as Becher had planned, but psychologizes the very political milieu he had gestured toward, undermining any dialectic between the weak and the powerful outside the theater of retrospective judgement. Detached courage does nothing to better understand the rise, appeal, maintenance, complexity, and, most importantly, the internal heterogeneity of the political fabric of National Socialism. The material reproduction of Nazism isn’t a simple story of the domination of rulers over the ruled (categories that do nothing to explain their own creation), but of the dialectic between the collective milieu and each character in their singularity. If the novel fixes these aspects of individuality and collectivity into demographic labels, the milieu must remain the static backdrop,


28 Springer even suggests that Becher intentionally withheld the last Gestapo file (in which the Hampels are documented to have informed on one another in an attempt to save themselves) in order to allow Fallada to write a novel in which the Quangels remain morally upright and cogent. He goes so far as to say that the novel would have been unthinkable without its morally hopefully ending, one which Fallada must have preserved, even if knowingly against the historical facts, out of a “commitment to popular education” [“volkspädagogisches Engagement”]. (Springer, 101.)
separated from any particular character and destined to remain fixed until the end of the story. It is no surprise, then, that Springer assumes that the Quangels’ acts are doomed to be “unsuccessful” from the outset, precisely the assumption that Fallada postulated his novel would put into question.

3. *Alltagsgeschichte* and *Resistenz*

If their struggle is not a war, if their resistance is to go deeper than moral objection to Hitler and the other “rulers,” how are we to speak of the Quangels’ new commitment to dissident action? As Springer’s analysis makes abundantly clear, and as Fallada himself seemed to at least partially recognize, psychologizing their potency would both blunt any effectivity their struggle may have had and preclude their reckoning with their own complicity. If the novel painted the political landscape of Nazi Germany in the black and white binaries supporter/resistor, Nazi/anti-Nazi, fearful/courageous, ruler/ruled, replicating the neat opposition of warring states domestically, there would simply be no room for anyone like the Quangels to play a political role. They would be relegated to impotent, even if courageous, specks pulled along by the anonymous political current, domestic creatures with no public footprint, characters whose only choices lie in their private moral salvation or condemnation. Without any dialectical reciprocity between the political collectivity and its specific characters, the novel would be condemned to promote a propagandistic story of passive characters living out their lives against a backdrop of unchangeable totality. It would, in other words, carry over the alienation of political representation under Nazism into an inability to poetically represent the reproduction of Nazism in the everyday life of ordinary people (I will return to this below). At the heart of this predicament, then, is how the novel narratively re-constitutes a political milieu so thoroughly obscured by its own form; how can the novel revive the continued representational dialectic between the “little man” of everyday life and the iron grip of Nazi social order when the possibility of the latter is predicated on obfuscating its constitution by the former?
Drawing Nazism back into the poetic web of narratability is inseparable from the matter of folding Nazism back into the fabric of history. If the Quangels are reduced to merely symbolic figures of moral character, so, too, is Nazism explained away as an aberration of evil unconnected to the forms of collectivity before, around, and after (not to mention within) it. After the war, the question of how to represent National Socialism posed a real problem for historians, politicians, and virtually every German. This problem was, from the start, split by Germany’s own division into the liberal West and socialist East. While East German historians sought to develop a structural understanding of Nazism as an outgrowth of corporate interests, those in the West were much more likely to personify the regime in its most visible leaders. The former dismissed the totalitarian hierarchy of the regime as the marionette of capitalist forces, obscuring the mechanisms by which Nazi leadership did, in fact, attain an astonishing monopoly on power through the cultivation charismatic rule. This strictly structuralist approach, in other words, hid the means by which these ordinary men cultivated their own autocratic status and gained widespread popularity and support, leaving the very totalization of the Third Reich as a political entity of representation (however alienated) largely unexplored. The latter, on the other hand, tended to make sense of Nazism metonymically, mapping the burden of understanding an entire logic of collectivity onto a few individuals. In this approach, however, these “figures” tended to obscure their own figuration; Nazism was reduced and contained to the deranged psyches of certain party leaders (or some fervent base), replacing a complex historical and political phenomenon with a neat psychological one. By assuming the very personification of politics in the actions of a select few, this mode of representation simply reinforced the legitimacy of their charisma.

29 This is, of course, a great simplification. Though this was largely true in the years immediately after the war, the historiography became much more nuanced as it grew more distanced and the immediate need to explain it away faded. For an excellent overview of these debates over the personification of Nazism, particularly in Hitler himself, see Gerhard Schreiber, *Hitler Interpretationen: 1923-1983* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984); as well as Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), particularly the introduction.
instead of explaining its careful political construction. Neither approach, we might say, was able to tell
the *story* of Nazism within the greater geography and history of human life.

This chapter seeks to bring these strategies of figuration back into view and ask whether there
are representational figures that maintain a dynamic view of the dialectical relation between individual
and collective, the “little man” and the Führer, neither questioning their political monopolization nor
naturalizing it. In such a representational mode, Nazism begins to seem a much more slippery, diffuse,
and, most alarmingly, ordinary phenomenon, with deep, wide, and often hidden roots across the globe
and continuing in new guises to the present moment. Though it is surely more troublesome and
laborious, this gesture of placing Nazism back into the fabric of history also enables us to actually
understand it for the first time (and to think strategically about how to work against such political
*Gesamtheit* in the future).

It took some thirty years after the war had ended for historians of the Third Reich to begin to
seriously discuss the “historicization” of Nazism and its reintegration into the plane of "ordinary"
history. Brought into the academic mainstream by an essay by historian Martin Broszat,30 this turn
toward the methodological “normalization” of National Socialism followed a more general trend in
German historiography toward what was termed *Alltagsgeschichte*, an approach to historical phenomena
that insisted on a bottom-up attention to the institutions and material conditions of the commoner in
his or her everyday life, an assertion of the “interdependence of society and politics.”31 Broszat
explained the virtue of *Alltagsgeschichte* for an understanding of Nazism as follows:

[*Alltagsgeschichte*] may also help to pave the way to a historiography of this era,
which uses the national-socialistic subjects of these events not only as


monstrous figures and caricatures, but as understandable people. Without such premises, which have nothing to do with apology, it will be hardly possible to overcome the problematic “islandization” [“Verinselung”] of the Nazi era in our historical consciousness and to transform the increasingly unconvincing judgement of this past on solely moral grounds into historical hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{32}

Broszat’s assessment reads like an ecologist’s plea to understand organisms in terms of the material conditions and transformations of their habitats. The way we tell the story of figures both powerful and weak must remain animated by how we construe the collectivity within which their actions unfolded. Broszat was suggesting something as obvious as it was radical: one could configure Nazism with the same tools and materials as any other moment in history.

This project of “overcoming” the moralized evaluation of the past through a careful and slow approach to the texture of everyday life is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Broszat’s monumental six-volume work, \textit{Bayern in der NS-Zeit},\textsuperscript{33} whose subtitle, \textit{Herrschaft und Gesellschaft im Konflikt} (roughly, \textit{Domination and Society in Conflict}) already points to this shift in focus from the homogenous forces of the “monstrous” high-level sovereigns to the more heterogenous and ambiguous activity of “society.” In this sense, the work may sound like a study of various forms of resistance meant to show that Nazism never had the full grip on those people that the Nazis’ own claim of \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} claimed it did. The eponymous “conflict,” however, is not simply between one group, the “\textit{Herrschaft},” and another, “\textit{Gesellschaft}” (ruler and ruled, as Springer suggested), since the very idea of the latter already subsumes the former and begins to undermine its monolithic hegemony. Instead, the material conflict between the multitude of historical actors reappears as a conflict between different notions of collectivity: totalitarian dominion and pluralistic sociality. As Broszat explained:

\begin{quote}
Of additional concern was that the tendency to identify resistance [\textit{Widerstand}] with martyrdom often corresponded to a false image of the Third Reich as a monolithic system of total power and domination, the image of totalitarianism,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} Broszat, “\textit{Alltagsgeschichte der NS-Zeit},” 139.

against which opposition was only possible by sacrificing and risking everything. Totalitarianism and martyrdom, in opposition [Widerstand] to each other, often represent the two main pillars of a historical image of this time that has hardly any basis in the experience [Erlebniswelt] of the younger generation anymore. Instead of facilitating a comprehensible, thoughtful acquisition of knowledge through history, this image instead promotes the naive strictness of a moralizing view of history and possibly, also, its uncritical projection onto the present.34

Heroizing resistance by celebrating martyrdom and consolidating domination through its totalization function as two sides of the same moralizing coin that necessarily caricatures both, placing them beyond understanding and ensuring that their conflict doesn’t risk any cross-contamination: they stand against one another in opposition (im Widerstand).

Attending to the fabric of everyday relations, on the other hand, undermines these dual myths of hegemonic totalitarianism and morally pure resistance, replacing them with “zones of conflict” (which Broszat loosely collects together as “society,” and which I am (anticipating the Arendtian analysis of political alienation that I explore below) describing as the heterogeneous fabric of political relationality).

To signal this shift, Broszat recommended replacing the term Widerstand with Resistenz, the immunological and electromagnetic resonances of which invoke the slow diminishment or amplification of forces through the accumulation and coordination of small buffers, clogs, and reactions against the prevailing forces and tendencies within that system. While Widerstand is individual, isolatable, external, and morally grounded, Resistenz names collective, entangled, internal, and political acts. David stands against Goliath; members of a political community square off through the competing tendencies of collective reproduction in which they participate. Resistenz traces the power and the mutual reinforcement of acts of non-conformity as the paradigm for effective dissidence,

focusing on the power to preserve potent plurality and the health of the relations that function between those heterogenous actors who refuse to be silenced.35

This demythologization of both the Nazi state and its resistance was, naturally, received by many historians of the time as a dangerous step in the direction of explaining away the horrors of the Nazi era and a symptom of a collective forgetting and banalization of the regime and its crimes, particularly its genocidal dimension.36 Of particular concern was the way that Broszat’s plea for historicization was coopted and used as cover by the right-wing historians Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber in the infamous Historikerstreit a few years later for precisely the kind of apology and exculpation Broszat had explicitly warned against in the passage above.37 Far from leading to normalization or exculpation, a historical understanding of Nazism as a social structure reproduced and consolidated (and therefore also challenged) by figures from every corner of the Gesellschaft allowed Nazism to be condemned as more than the mere expression of an inherent ideological evil; it was, therefore, not something to be forgotten in the dustbin of history (which was, largely, the position of the right-wing apologists, who thought it high time that the German people leave behind their guilt and move on).

35 Broszat, Fröhlich, and Grossmann, 697–98.


Also helpful here are the discussions from a symposium in 1983 held on the topic and published as Martin Broszat, Alltagsgeschichte Der NS-Zeit: Neue Perspektive Oder Trivialisierung, Kolloquien Des Instituts Für Zeitgeschichte. (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1984).

37 The central texts of this debate are collected in Rudolf Augstein, Historikerstreit: die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung (München: R. Piper, 1989).

For an excellent overview of the debate over Alltagsgeschichte in this context, see Ian Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation. (Bloomsbury, 2015), especially 253-62.
In a flare-up of this controversy in the 1990s, as research on the Nazi period began to consolidate itself around the Holocaust and the regime as a place of widespread crime, the same fear of normalizing Nazi violence as a step toward apology was amplified and set against the concern — by then a mainstream position promoted by the likes of Hans Mommsen, Jürgen Habermas, Richard J. Evans, and Ian Kershaw — of mythologizing the historical actors as a step toward simplification and an abandonment of true understanding. Christopher Browning, in his own bottom-up account of the “ordinary men” from one particular battalion who killed huge numbers of Jews in Poland, was well aware that whenever a history of everyday life “has been applied to the era of the Third Reich,” it has been taken as “an evasion – a way to shift attention from the unparalleled horrors of the Nazi regime’s genocidal policies to those mundane aspects of life that continued relatively undisturbed.” But, echoing the principle of Broszat’s work, he insisted that “it becomes an evasion, an attempt to ‘normalize’ the Third Reich, only if it fails to confront the degree to which the criminal policies of the regime inescapably permeated everyday existence under the Nazis.”

Browning’s attempt to make sense of the forces of history through the complex implications of the millions of “ordinary” and heterogenous Germans allows for the emergence of the unwieldy but essential question of the relation between the handful of infamous officials with whom Nazism is so often identified and the 70-odd million other Germans beside, despite, through, and because of whom, Nazism took the course that it did.

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38 Two texts came to represent this clash. Christopher Browning’s Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland, and the highly publicized response from Daniel Goldhagen in his Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust. Browning’s plea to understand the worst crimes of the war as committed by “ordinary men” in a particularly deranged bureaucratic and political context was met with Goldhagen’s attempt to paint the eruption of violence as the inevitable result of a long history of German anti-Semitism and an evil unique to that history. Christopher R. Browning, Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (1992; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2017); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

39 Browning, Ordinary Men, xvii.
This was precisely Broszat’s question: how to illuminate the zones of conflict within society that reflected the dissonance between the notions of *Herrschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and that formed the grotesque totality that was Nazism. But as the Holocaust became the focus of Nazi scholarship and storytelling (Browning himself speaking in the juridical language of “criminality,” built upon the individuation of action as opposed to its political entanglement), the pressure to acknowledge the singularity and the evil of those years was heightened, and any attempt to understand or explain smelled of apology.

There is an impasse here that cannot be resolved by digging deeper in the archives, but which emerges from two fundamentally divergent ways of talking about action: the moral register of individuality, in which criminality and its categories of innocence and guilt have the final word, and the political register of collectivity, in which everything is understood in terms of its historical and social entanglement in the relational acts of others and is rooted in shared responsibility and the unevenness of power. If one wishes, together with Broszat and Browning, to understand how Nazism was possible — and therefore also the possibility of its return or perdurance in some form — one must move beyond the narrow juridical indictment of a handful of high-level officers and turn toward its permeation of, and constitution in, everyday existence. To do so, however, is not simply to widen the scope of one’s indictment and put every German on trial. Moving beyond the fable of the elephant and mouse, and towards an account of Nazism as a configuration of everyday life, requires a concerted shift from a moral into a thoroughly political register. Only then can the stories of the “little men” come to represent — poetically as much as politically — the greater tides of *Gesellschaft*. This, I argue, is the great achievement of Fallada’s novel.
III. The Collective Fabric of Action

1. Arendt: Guilt and Responsibility

In the wake of Germany’s vast institutional undertaking of slowly purging itself of guilt by indicting those citizens in whom Nazism was most clearly and intensely condensed and following the Allies' attempts to programmatically "denazify" Germans, we have retrospectively become comfortable with the juridico-moral paradigm of guilt that comes with the familiar questions: Did you murder civilians? Did you harbor xenophobic or racist views? Were you a cooperative and high ranking member of the NSDAP? etc.\(^4^0\) This is a mode of thinking of individual implication in atomistic and moral terms, a discourse of rooting out the bad apples who had survived the war and on whose shoulders the great collective weight of genocide could be placed.\(^4^1\)

Refusing this moral language is, however, just as little a way of excusing or exculpating those who committed crimes as it is a straightforward indictment: it, instead, insists that understanding the possibility of a political apparatus in which atrocities are commonplace comes neither with the identification of evil intentions and tendencies in the individuals who most obviously represent that

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\(^{40}\) For decades, the courts served as the conveniently limited mechanism to bring those tied directly to criminal acts to justice, distancing both post-war German polities from their predecessor by implying that anyone not found guilty by the courts was innocent. The narrowness of this juridical scope has been slightly expanded since 2011, when John Demjanjuk was deported from the United States back to Germany and found guilty, at the age of 91, of being an “accessory” to the murder of nearly 28,000 Jewish people at the Sobibor concentration camp. Since then, German prosecutors have frantically been trying to hold those involved administratively or otherwise in the Nazi genocide accountable. There is a dark comedy in the deep dissatisfaction that comes with handing down decades-long prison sentences on frail old men and women, some of whom have seemed less than aware of the proceeding or even died while awaiting trial. If nothing else, it indicates the total inadequacy of isolated cases of guilt to account for crimes of collectivity; whether they were a scapegoat or a brutal SS officer, one can hardly bring justice — let alone understanding — to the murder of thousands (as many of these recent cases have done) with the imprisonment of a few individuals.

\(^{41}\) The elaborate typologies of culpability defined by the Allies are one trace of this. See, for example, the attempt to define “war criminals” and the rigid categories into which everyone had to be placeable for this to be possible: for example, Allied Control Council, “Directive No. 38: The Arrest and Punishment of War Criminals, Nazis, and Militarists and the Internment, Control, and Surveillance of Potentially Dangerous Germans.”
system, nor in the notion that anyone acting within such a system is a mere cog in a suffocating hierarchy. Evil actions are explained neither by evil actors nor by non-actors. Indeed, to speak in the moral register of “evil” (and therefore of guilt) is to give up on explanation entirely, either by psychologically rediscovering the evil in an individuated agent or by appealing to a structure in which evil is fully dissolved into faceless functioning. We either displace the enigma of an evil action onto that of an evil intention or we do away with the notion of action entirely.42 Thus, the kind of agential implication emergent from the “everyday stories” of society cannot be that of guilt (moral and individual), but must be that of responsibility (political and collective).

If the predicament of the Quangels — the quintessential “ordinary” or “little” people about whom Fallada wrote so incessantly — is to guide us toward a dialectical understanding of Nazism suspended between hegemony and social struggle, the novel’s success hinges on sharply distinguishing these two modes of conceiving of action, particularly in their dissidence. The possibility of pure resistance (Widerstand) must be representationally challenged by other forms of effective dissidence that draw upon the (uneven) distribution of responsibility and power across social life instead of fleeing to an imagined moral neutrality. Though the novel draws (and muddies) this distinction in its own way, it does not do so particularly explicitly or programmatically. To see how and why the novel

42 This was the crux of a debate in the late 1970s among historians, which foreshadowed the criticism Broszat and others faced several years later (though it was, in many ways, overcome by the latter’s synthesis of the rather dogmatic sides of this debate). The sides coalesced under the terms “functionalist” and “intentionalist,” analytic approaches to the Third Reich, which, one the one hand, took the structure of German bureaucracy to be the true locus of power and responsibility, and, on the other, pointed to the expressed intentions of Hitler and other avowed Nazis as the real actors. The debate, which came to a head at The Cumberland Lodge Conference of 1979, had historians of the left accusing those who stressed the pre-mediation and hierarchical coordination of the Holocaust — by focusing on Hitler’s early speeches and the pervasiveness of anti-Semitic and xenophobic ideology — of ignoring the institutional structures that so much as made those ideologies possible, and historians of the right accusing the structuralist analyses of normalizing or even apologizing for the Holocaust. For a clear account of this debate, see Timothy W. Mason, “Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism,” in Der Führerstaat: Mythos Und Realität, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 21–40. See also Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation.
weaves them together and splits them apart, I will first clarify a distinction that I have let circulate somewhat freely up to this point: that between the political and the moral. Differentiating between the two, I will argue, is key not simply for a more thorough and nuanced calculus of justice, but to understand how Fallada was able to narratively represent Nazism through the banalities of the “little man’s” everyday life. How, in others words, Fallada was able to make the novelistic form adequate to the seemingly incomprehensible and extraordinary. Only by insisting on the narratability of those dark times, only by recovering the representational mechanisms mediating individual life and the form of collectivity, could Fallada discover hope in the apparent failure of an insignificant couple.

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As I mentioned at the outset, I borrow this notion of “the political realm” as distinct from the morality of domestic rather directly from Hannah Arendt. Because her differentiation is primarily one between spheres of action, it is no coincidence that she must also draw a hard line between guilt and responsibility. It is to this latter distinction that I will turn first.

Though she first formulated the difference programmatically in a well-known essay from 1945, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” it is in a short piece from 1968 that she pinpoints the true kernel of the distinction. In this later essay, Arendt questions the adequacy of a phenomenon

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43 Arendt may, on the face of it, seem an odd figure to turn to here. She was, after all, the theoretical champion of the “totalitarian” interpretation of Nazism, one of the primary targets of Broszat’s critique. As I will argue, however, Arendt offers (though herself often collapses) a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, the structural “web” of collective totality and the atomistic domestic spheres of individuated tribalism, and, on the other, the historical disfiguration of collectivity into a totalizing (or totalitarian) totality and its democratic counterparts (which are, nevertheless, universal). Her diagnosis of Nazism as a totalitarian totality was precisely not to dismiss its functioning as mere “Herrschaft” but to understand it as a particular self-alienation of the fragile project of universal freedom.

Arendt, as I will show, is also a crucial philosophical figure here due to her inheritance and inversion of Heidegger’s nascent collectivity, discussed in the first chapter. More on both of these points below.


45 She presented this at a symposium of the American Philosophical Association in response to a paper by Joel Feinberg of the same title. It is available in an edited volume from about twenty years later: Hannah Arendt,
that Allied propaganda had weaseled into the public imagination and that had come to loom over Germany’s inheritance of the Third Reich: *Kollektivschuld* (collective guilt). The British and U.S. “reeducation” program to “de-nazify” Germany took many forms, making use of the newly available array of mass media to impress on as wide a portion of the population as possible two (contradictory) points: first, that they were complicit in the crimes of the regime and that they should feel guilt even for those crimes that they may not have been aware of, and second, that they should feel revulsion toward and distance themselves from the Nazi party and those very crimes and, instead, accept the Allied push toward liberalization. If the fear of apologizing for and forgetting the crimes of the Nazi period took Broszat’s approach to be a slippery slope toward collective exoneration, this declaration of collective guilt tried to have it both ways, insisting on the permeation of Nazism into the everyday lives of the entire population while remaining steadfast that Nazism, however diffuse, was unequivocally criminal and evil, an ideology that could simply be punished or purged out of existence.

At the crux of Arendt’s critique of *Kollektivschuld* is precisely her insistence that “guilt” is essentially a moral (and therefore individuated) term, whereas “responsibility” is able to capture the

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46 There is, of course, a contradiction internal to the very notion of “collective guilt,” for it universalizes an indictment that only works if it is able to distinguish the innocent from the guilty: collective guilt turned out not only to be impractical, but essentially unthinkable. (Hence the targeted trials of high-profile figures, see note above.)

47 In a careful analysis of the notion of German guilt that recognized the “flatness” of a general declaration of collective guilt, Karl Jaspers tried to differentiate various modalities or levels of guilt. He identified four different kinds of implication or complicity conflated in the single term: what he called *criminal* guilt, *political* guilt, *moral* guilt, and *metaphysical* guilt. That he felt the need to divide them up in this way and carefully explain their differentiation and inter-dependence is testament to the inadequacy and unintelligibility of universalized and flattened guilt. See Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage: ein Beitrag zur deutschen Frage* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1947), particularly 31-33 and 55-65.

Arendt, a student and close friend of Jaspers, is — though ostensibly responding to Joel Feinberg in this piece — undoubtedly writing with Jaspers’ book in mind, and with it, a rebuttal to the Heideggerian notion of existential guilt (see note below).
wide array of political entanglements that we are all implicated in but do not ourselves necessarily willfully commit:48

there is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them. But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them. This is an important point, worth making loudly and clearly at a moment when so many good white liberals confess to guilt feelings with respect to the Negro question. I don't know how many precedents there are in history for such misplaced feelings, but I do know that in post-War Germany, where similar problems arose with respect to what had been done by the Hitler regime to Jews, the cry "We are all guilty" that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is. Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal. It refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities. It is only in a metaphorical sense that we can say we feel guilty for the sins of our fathers or our people or mankind, in short, for deeds we have not done, although the course of events may well make us pay for them. And since sentiments of guilt, *mens rea* or bad conscience, the awareness of wrong doing, play such an important role in our legal and moral judgement, it may be wise to refrain from such metaphorical statements which, when taken literally, can only lead into a phony sentimentality in which all real issues are obscured.49

Guilt, in short, cannot be a collective phenomenon, something one shares, inherits, or finds oneself implicated in. If this sounds like it actually limits our understanding of a phenomenon to those who carried it out most directly, that is because the narrowed notion of guilt clears the ground for an expanded notion of responsibility. Where guilt singles out, responsibility is essentially diffuse, public, and shared. To be responsible, I must belong to a collectivity “which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve.”50 Responsibility is political and not moral, historical and not voluntaristic; my implication in

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48 Her critique emerges, in fact, from her own philosophical inheritances and conflicts: in this case, her upending of Heidegger’s phenomenology and dialogue with Jaspers. Where Heidegger tried to show that *Schuld* (guilt) was the existential condition for our being vulnerable and incomplete (of which moral/legal guilt and economic debt are derivatives), Arendt argues that *Verantwortung* (responsibility) furnishes the socio-historical ground, our collective “thrownness” if we like, in which instances of individuated guilt can then be inscribed. Heidegger’s blindness to the priority of the political over the moral, though not treated in his ontology, infects the normative dimension of his project rather drastically. See chapter 1 for an extended discussion of this.


50 Arendt, 45.
something is definitionally not due to any kind of intention on my part, but, quite the contrary, due to my being an essentially political being whose life is conditioned by the actions of those that have come before me and that occur alongside me. It is something I am thrown into and must navigate: “In this sense, we are always held responsible for the sins of our fathers as we reap the rewards of their merits; but we are of course not guilty of their misdeeds, either morally or legally, nor can we ascribe their deeds to our own merits.”

Where guilt emerges only as a consequence of something one does, responsibility is something one is saddled with from birth and that — so long as one remains caught up in the web of practices, disagreements, dependencies, promises, etc. — one cannot escape. Though, for this very reason, the language of being burdened isn’t actually appropriate, for, as Arendt points out, this responsibility is nothing other than one’s status as political and one’s capacity to change the shape of that shared world through which one always acts. Arendt insinuates, I will argue, that responsibility is not opposed to but constitutes the possibility of freedom. Consequently, the cost of standing outside of this web of responsibility is total disempowerment and, with it, the loss of political personhood. Hence the tension inherent to the notion of resistance: to be excluded from a collective in which one could have responsibility, Arendt suggests, is to be severed both from its actuality and its possibility of being transformed. Without responsibility borne of participation in a collective, one cannot act at all, whether in dissent or affirmation. Thus, responsibility is not so much a consequence of our

51 Arendt, 45.

52 I will return, below, to the problematic consequences of holding onto any notion of guilt at all, as Arendt clearly tries to here. Because she merely distinguishes the two typologically, not only allowing them to co-exist but insisting that they must refer to different kinds of action, her account actually slides back quite close to Jaspers’ guilt typology.

53 Just as freedom, as will become more explicit below, cannot be the liberal freedom from the constraints of others but the freedom to act out of those constraints to co-determine them with others. See chapters 1 and 3 for analogous arguments in other contexts of (recon)figuring collectivity.

54 The sad exceptions to which Arendt is here referring are the many stateless and fully disempowered people produced by the calamities of the twentieth century.* Far from admirable for their inviolable innocence and
intentionality, a way of carving up culpability, but is a structural fact of our being caught up in a historical and social world. And for this reason, responsibility is the condition for guilt; political relationality grounds moral individuation.

This begins to illuminate the Quangels’ predicament. Arendt’s firm distinction sets off the unsettling realization that trying to alter one’s political fabric from an apolitical position, from a moral “island,” is not only contradictory — the attempt to take a stance from nowhere — but is an evasion of responsibility: with one hand, one tries to disavow one’s place in the very political fabric that, with the other, one claims to still be able to effectively resist. A conveniently heroic and irreproachable position. When dissidence puts on the moralistic cloak of Widerstand, neatly rending the political fabric in order to declare war, it forfeits every mechanism of change that such a fabric has built into it and exacerbates the gaps or blockages in that collectivity by severing its threads entirely. Far from addressing the political alienation (the totalizing totality) that an individual or part of a community may well face, a domestic war takes that alienation for granted and tries to rebuild a new political fabric around it.

Arendt’s distinction between these modalities of action also specifies the figure that has played a central role in my reading thus far, but which I have yet to precisely define: the political “fabric.”

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lack of responsibility, they are, first and foremost, politically powerless. Just as they were robbed of a place in a political collective, they were robbed of their responsibility. As Arendt admits, for these extra-political people, only morality remains as a framework for action: “the marginal situation in which moral propositions become absolutely valid in the realm of politics is impotence. Powerlessness which always presupposes isolation is a valid excuse for doing nothing.” (Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 49.)

*Of course, that one can so much as be stateless is a function of citizenship becoming bound to the narrowness and dogmatism of the nation-state. Exclusion and impotence in this sense, are built into a notion of the polity that has become confused with and stuck in geographic and identitarian boundaries. Responsibility is (like its counterpart, freedom), at root, universal.
2. The Fabrication of Stories

Hannah Arendt’s distinction between individual guilt and collective responsibility does not simply separate different modalities of blame or different degrees of distributing complicity and power. The two imply fundamentally different notions of action, and therefore of social personhood. Because guilt singles out an actor separated from all relationality, it assumes that every act is authored by its actor in order to fully explain that act in isolation. Though this individuation is carried out in the name of personalizing action, — putting a face to it by being clear about who “did it” — guilt does not actually identify who did it, but what was done: it is the act that is isolated and identified, not the person.

This difference is neatly captured in the narrative difference between Fallada’s story of the Quangels and the Gestapo’s account of the Hampels. The Gestapo’s extensive file on the Hampels itemizes and describes their individual acts, stamping them with time and place to delimit them. The file is an excellent list of what the Hampels did, but says nothing about who they were. Fallada’s novel, on the other hand, creates a completely different kind of agential narrative, illuminating the fabric within which the Quangels’ actions are comprehensible as opposed to listing them. In doing so, Fallada skirts the question of authorship entirely and thereby opens up the dynamic narrative field between characters and the world of collectivity through which they attain personhood. As Arendt puts it in *The Human Condition*, if we are to ask who someone is, and not simply what they are, we must understand them both as the subject of certain acts and as subject to the world, as “actor and sufferer,” a delicate combination for which no list of characteristics or typological qualities could suffice. Who we are is something established only in the “flux” of our relations to others and, in that sense, only as

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55 I have not myself gained access to these files. I rely entirely on Manfred Kuhnke’s excellent forensic reconstruction of the lives of the Hampels, their distortion in the Gestapo files, and Fallada’s fictionalization of those files: Kuhnke, *dass ihr Tod nicht umsonst war!* Updated as Manfred Kuhnke, *Falladas letzter Roman: die wabre Geschichte* (Friedland, Germany: Steffen Verlag, 2011).
participants in a social totality. This is never a settled matter, both because of its temporal and its relational extension. Who we are, in short, is political.\(^\text{56}\)

This claim about political personhood is equally a claim about the structure of the polity. If considered in its \textit{wholeness}, a polity cannot be the mere aggregation of atomistic actions that happen to interpenetrate or impinge upon one another, nor a singular entity determined by a super-structural subject (whether society, the collective will, public opinion, or what Arendt simply refers to as “mankind”\(^\text{57}\)). Instead, a community is political insofar as it offers a space in which individuals can be seen, and thus can act, as differentiated persons. This collectivity (or “public realm” as she often calls it) is the space in which we appear to one another as \textit{heterogeneous} subjects who share a common world; persons don’t simply co-habitate, they co-constitute one another. To account for the structure of such a pluralistic collectivity, Arendt offers a striking image: the “web of human relationships.”\(^\text{58}\) This political web constitutes persons by configuring and holding together “life stories”:

\begin{quote}

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose […] Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. […] Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.\(^\text{59}\)
\end{quote}


\(^{57}\) Arendt, 184–85.

\(^{58}\) Arendt, 183.

\(^{59}\) Arendt, 184.
“Responsibility” names this particular social modality of agency without authority, the weight of continuously navigating one’s entanglement in this narrative web. To be political is, then, to be responsible for what one does through one’s responsibility to what one is subjected to. It is to tell any story of activity within the conditions of reactivity. In place of the authoritative individual, Arendt posits the political person. The pluralism of this public realm, therefore, is precisely not the liberal allowance of individual idiosyncrasies and preferences in a political container of sufficient size and unobtrusiveness: the “conflicting wills and intentions” of a polity are not ameliorated or tolerated, but can only so much as appear as different and coexistent within such a medium of interdependency.

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Strangely, Arendt insists on dividing the public realm into two distinct strata. The web is, she argues, on the one hand, material: it is “the human artifact” that “gathers us together” and lies between us, just “as a table is located between those who sit around it” and which, “like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”60 But this material infrastructure, which she generally just calls the “world,” is the basis for a distinct immaterial relationality, a “subjective in-between.” It is, she contends, only within this immaterial web that actions properly disclose actors (as opposed to mere “producers”). In doing so, the relational “stories” of which she speaks are reduced, at best, to mere metaphors:

it is also because of this medium [the already existing web of human relationships], in which action alone is real, that it "produces" stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. They tell us more about their subjects, the "hero" in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever

60 Arendt, 52.
tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking.\footnote{Arendt, 184.}

By prying the material and political apart, Arendt is forced to condemn the perdurance of stories in anything concrete as merely documentary “reification.”\footnote{This is the consequence of a general tendency on Arendt’s part to misread Marx and fear the conflation of work, labor, and action. This rigid typology creates the same problems for itself as does her firm separation of guilt and responsibility. I will discuss this more thoroughly below.} But how, then, are we to understand the temporal and spatial extension of action? With what is action laden if not the material instantiations carried over from previous actions into the present? And with what substance can action carry political ramifications if not those material and durable? What, in short, makes us essentially vulnerable to one another if not our negotiation of the world that we collective fabricate? And, conversely, how are we to understand the “table” of artifacts around which we gather if not as constituted and maintained by political action, created by and generative of the stories of those whose lives flowed through and shaped them? To distinguish the Arendtian possibilities of relational plurality from her separation of them into the “world” of physical infrastructure and the immaterial “web” of social infrastructure, I
will reserve the term “fabric” for a medium that does not separate these layers and whose fabrication is constitutive of its political effectivity.

Fabrication, understood as both production and action, material and social, cannot simply be the apolitical “work of homo faber” that “consists in reification.” It must, instead, be the durable yet malleable infrastructure of social relations, the collective signature of our continuous manipulation of inherited materials in order to mediate and make possible certain kinds of political life. The courthouse is not simply the material vessel for the law, but a structure, which contains and displays a particular history and projects forward a certain set of possibilities, expectations for others and ourselves, and responsibilities we must take; the electrical grid is not simply the material condition for energy consumption in urban life, but a way of distributing possibilities and problems, a built pattern with momentum and inertia, the trace and possibility of who we are and who we can be. Physical

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63 Even for Arendt’s own notion of immaterial collectivity, I would suggest that the figure of a woven fabric is better than that of a web. A web is the basic schema of all networked theories of social relations* and concomitant new materialisms that set themselves the task of bringing seemingly inert nodes of matter to life through animating relations or “assemblages.” The web becomes a way of bringing pre-given and contained units into relation and separates levels of analysis, separating the very structural and individual perspectives that it seeks to relate. A fabric contains no such clean points of intersection, but instead creates patterns out of the material of the threads themselves. This also helps to make clear why the Arendtian web cannot simply be a social layer of relationality superimposed onto the material world of relationality, but that the two must be understood as one and the same, and the web must itself be the material medium of political life.

(Of course, both metaphors suffer from the same implication of being structured by a pre-determined pattern, whether that of nature or a craftsman. It is imperative to continuously demonstrate that this fabric is not pre-patterned but is continuously woven by the many threads in their ongoing activity of (re)production.)


64 Though she herself lets the term slip at one point when describing the “‘products’ of action and speech” as constitutive of “the fabric of human relationships and affairs.” Arendt, The Human Condition, 94–95.

65 Arendt, 139.
infrastructure is social infrastructure. It creates, carries, and shapes our stories just as much as our matter.66

Far from the reification of a fleeting story, the concerted creation of stories through art(ifacts)—Fallada’s novel, in this case—is then itself an essentially political act that thematizes the challenge of being an actor and sufferer of a particular collective world (whether or not the artwork understands itself as such and works with or against this fact). Because Arendt takes this “documentation” to be essentially different in kind from the immaterial stories produced by action, she does not dwell with the difficulty of how exactly an artwork could figure (let alone reconfigure) this fabric of responsibility, how narrative might intervene in the process of creating and recreating the medium of collective life. How, for example, the rise of fascism (or our continued self-destruction in the face of ecological crisis, as I discuss in chapter 3) could be represented as the alienation of this fabric; how narrative could not only representationally document the clogs, tears, and hidden paths of a political infrastructure meant to obscure its own reproduction, but that its act of representation might even, poetically, dissidently participate in (re)figuring that collective by disclosing its contingency and fabrication, indicating its potential to be rebuilt or even fully transformed.

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It is not incidental that these studies turn to infrastructure both as structures of domination and as strategies for dissent.
Telling the story of a life and its world from the point of view of guilt and innocence is rather straightforward: actions have authors, authors are authoritative over their intentions and wills, and so all that remains is to ask or interrogate those actors, to fill in the interior life that we assume has a direct correspondence to that which they have done (however that is arbitrarily bounded). As I suggested above, the Gestapo files collected on Otto and Elise Hampel do precisely this: they document the story of the Hampels’ resistance (and therefore, in the eyes of the Gestapo, their guilt), relying on a collection of observations by investigators and interrogations of the Hampels themselves, adjudicating their guilt based on this pointillistic narrative. The files tell the factual story of what the Hampels were, based on a particular kind of view of what they did.67

To bring their responsibility into view, however, and to tell the story of who they were by illuminating the political fabric of relations in which they lived, is a very different task to which a criminal investigator and judge are not adequate. It is here that the specific power of Fallada’s narrative emerges. Where some, like Springer, have claimed that the novel paints a portrait of the “milieu” of Berlin, a static backdrop not of actions but of pre-given norms and anonymous tendencies, I will argue that it attempts to bring the Quangels’ political fabric into view by slowly weaving a multitude of threads together out of which their life story is only able to congeal retrospectively. In doing so, the novel strives (though by no means always successfully) to entirely sidestep the moral question of the Quangels’ purity as members of an innocent resistance, and instead to ask how Nazism was configured in everyday life, and how those very same actions might, in fact, have contained the hopeful traces of a very different form of collectivity.

In this sense, Fallada’s novel traces, at its best, the difficult and confusing tangle of relations that we call Nazi Germany and the attempt by one tiny knot of that fabric to take responsibility for

67 For yet another form of narration of their lives, one which exists somewhere between the investigative form of the files and the narrative fabric of Fallada’s, see Kuhnke, ... dass ihr Tod nicht umsonst war!
their implication in it. They do this by trying, however minutely, to change who they are by shifting their weight, tugging here, pushing there, adjusting and rearranging the political weave ever so slightly. In these moments, the novel charts the difficult and messy project of living from within that fabric. It suggests that, even at its most totalizing, collectivity remains a contingent and fragile configuration of individuals, forever open to being reconfigured and rebuilt, a task for poets as much as for craftsmen or politicians. At its worst, however, Fallada’s protagonists (and Fallada himself) hide from this uncomfortable view of these atrocities, obscured by its own proximity and participation. In response, they attempt to run to a moral high ground from which to clarify matters, taking an apolitical view from nowhere. The novel constantly moves between these modes of narrative, lapsing into exculpatory language when the attention to entanglement simply becomes too much to bear or too messy to represent. Any reading of the novel, then, must track these moments and ask whether behind the points of acute moralization there lies, in fact, a more ambiguous weave of stories of the incredibly difficult demands of political life in early 1940s Berlin. If there is a struggle in the novel, then, it is not so much between dictators and martyrs, but between competing figurative logics of its social coherence — a struggle between the closed totality of Herrschaft and the dynamic contestation of Gesellschaft.
IV. Islands of Impotence

1. “*Im Namen des deutschen Volkes*”

This oscillation between political and moral registers of action and the temptation of a rhetoric of resistance goes deeper than the historical context of the novel’s conception between Becher and Fallada. As I suggested above, the structure of the narrative itself exhibits a similar ambivalence, moving back and forth between the language of conscience and purity and that of action and complicity, often blurring the line between them. Several pivotal scenes in particular bring this ambivalence into view and help to make the narrative and its political stakes clearer. For this, it is worth returning to a scene from the first pages of the novel, shortly after Otto has learned of his son’s death and before he and Anna have developed their plan of action and declared war.

Otto sets out to deliver the bad news to Truden (his son’s soon to be fiancé). What begins as an excursion to deliver private news quickly transforms into something much further reaching and more precarious for them both. Having found her in a hallway of the factory at which she works, Otto, about to break the news to her, notices a placard hanging directly behind her that reads: “*In the name of the German people,*” followed by three names, “*were sentenced to death by hanging for treason.*” As Otto impulsively pulls her away, she, confused, sees the sign and lets out a sigh — a sigh of “protest” against the sign, but also of “indifference,” and turns back to their conversation. At that moment, however, Otto blurts out the news of the younger Otto’s death. As Truden turns to silently weep against the wall, she unwittingly places her head directly over the three names written on the sign. At that moment,

> a vision appears before him [Otto] of how one day a poster with his own name and Anna’s and Truden’s might be put up on the wall. He shakes his head unhappily. He’s a simple worker, he just wants peace and quiet, nothing to do.

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with politics, and Anna just attends to the household, and a lovely girl like Trudel will surely have found herself a new boyfriend before long.... But the vision won’t go away. Our names on the walls, he thinks, completely confused now. And why not? Hanging on the gallows is no worse than being ripped apart by a shell, or dying from a bullet in the guts. All that doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is this: I must find out what the deal with Hitler is [das, was Hitler ist]. First everything seemed to be so good, and now suddenly all I see is oppression and hate and suffering, so much suffering [...] If so much as one person is suffering unjustly, and I can put an end to it, and the only reason I don’t is because I’m a coward and prefer peace and quiet, then...

At this point, he doesn’t dare to think any further. He’s afraid, really afraid, of where a thought like that, taken to its conclusion, might lead. He might then have to change his whole life!69

This is the first glimmer of the domestic war he and Anna will soon declare, and it is already fraught with the contradiction of simultaneous complicity and impotence that is endemic to resistance. The vision pulls in both directions, placing Otto on both sides of the confrontation that the sign announces. He sees himself as both victim and perpetrator: impotent as a victim of the regime and complicit in belonging to “the German people” in whose name that very victimization is legitimized and carried out. But where it had seemed to Otto before that he had the option of extricating himself from the struggle between the state and its dissidents, that his “peace and quiet” would safeguard him from the vulnerability of victimhood and from becoming a perpetrator, the death of his son closes the door to this flight. Being a simple worker, a quiet and “apolitical” man who has kept to his domestic affairs, can no longer keep him from being inscribed into both sides of the “war”; this interior conflict is, after all, one which the Quangels must wage with themselves. It is now for Otto to decide: how far will he allow this vision of his own political complicity and entanglement to go before he stops himself and tries to pull himself back to his quiet and seemingly private household? The question is one for the novel as much as for Otto.

69Fallada, 31/37-38.
What seems a psychological drama within Otto is staged quite literally in the novel’s setting: the domestic interiority of Otto and Anna’s conflict with Nazism is in no way figurative but actually a matter of the house in which they live. Jablonskistraße 55, the townhouse in which they, and a number of the novel’s other protagonists, live, is the site of increasing conflict as the novel progresses. The novel transforms this ordinary domestic sphere from a space of seeming private calm — good old-fashioned a-political life at home — into the concrete infrastructure of chance encounters, refuge and murder, friendships and antagonisms. This begins on the very first page of the novel with the aforementioned letter from the front delivered to their home by the mailwoman. The quiet of their living room, penetrated by a bureaucratic letter, instantly becomes the site of their political reckoning; once Otto recognizes that the very place to which he and Anna had tried to retreat is itself inscribed into the machinations of the collective fabric from which they have shied away, there is no real position of stability to which they can retreat.

Trudel, echoing the very question that rattled Otto out of his vision, recognizes the threat of this transformation and asks whether he “can carry on living as before, now that they’ve shot your Otto?” Otto (the senior), too afraid to admit the implications of his vision to Trudel or himself, simply mutters “the French.” “‘The French!’ she shouts indignantly. ‘What sort of excuse is that? Who invaded France? Who, Father?’” The conflict that had seemed so distant, played out between foreign armies, now looms over their daily life, their relation to their neighbors, and the false quiet of their home.

But even more unsettling than the vulnerability laid bare by this placard, and which Otto presumably sensed as he tried to backpedal from his vision, is the total invisibility of any obvious course of action that would change the political fabric in which they find themselves trapped. Facing

70 See below for a further discussion of the circulation of mail as one of the primary infrastructures (material and poetic) established by the novel to figure a sense of urban coherence.
his participation in the formation of the very collectivity that led to his own son’s death, Otto squirms between impotence and resignation: “But what can we do? [...] There are so few of us, and all those millions for him, and now, after the victory against France, there will be even more. We can do nothing!”71 In a swift about-face, Otto deflects the demand to change his life by rejecting the power briefly exposed by his complicity. Using this impotence as a springboard back to moral safety, he reasserts the externality of the conflict, speaking again in terms of the radical asymmetry between “us” and “them.” But this moral language of exculpation is, of course, precisely that which removed him from the political sphere of conflict in the first place: far from following from his sense of powerlessness, it compounds it. Trudel’s reply brings out this tension between impotence and complicity even more starkly:

“We can do plenty!” she whispers. We can vandalize the machines, we can work badly, work slowly, we can tear down their posters and put up others where we tell people the truth about how they are being cheated and lied to.” She drops her voice further: “But the main thing is that we remain different from them, that we never allow ourselves to be made into them, or start thinking as they do. Even if they conquer the whole world, we must refuse to become Nazis.”

“And what will that accomplish Trudel?” asks Otto Quangel softly. “I don’t see the point.”

“Father,” she replies, “when it began I didn’t understand that either, and I’m not sure I fully understand it now. But, you know, we’ve formed a secret communist cell in the factory, very small for now, three men and me. A man came to us and tried to explain it to me. He said we are like good seeds in a field of weeds. If it wasn’t for the good seeds, the whole field would be nothing but weeds. And the good seeds can spread their influence…”72

This is, in one sense, exactly the story of Widerstand that Becher and the Kulturbund wanted to tell: there can be a new, post-fascist Germany because there were always the scattered bulwarks of communist Germans who remained untainted by Nazism and who were simply waiting for the Allies

71 Fallada, Every Man Dies Alone, 32/39.
72 Fallada, 32/39-40.
to weed out the fascists and allow communist Germany to grow in its place. To tell this story, it is actually advantageous to downplay the power that these “good seeds” had in order to emphasize their victimhood and thereby fully disentangle the good seeds from the bad. From this moralized point of view, the impotence to which the Quangels and Trudel seem condemned is actually a self-protective buffer against their domestic war, and furnishes a path toward their salvation as martyrs for the new nation; “even if they conquer the whole world, we must refuse to become Nazis.”

2. Bloody Fromm

There is, incidentally, a character who more or less embodies this full retreat from the political to the moral and whose unwavering commitment to “Justice” is certainly not without a dark irony. Living just below the Quangels, Kammergerichtsrat Fromm (literally, Judge Pious) does not welcome the politicization of his domestic life, living in utter seclusion and almost entirely nocturnally so as to avoid crossing paths with others both outside and within the house. His name already suggests that he is more of a typological caricature than an active character, something of which he seems to not only be aware but even proud. Speaking to Frau Rosenthal, a widowed Jewish woman living on the top floor of the same building (and who finds herself taking shelter in his apartment after her’s has been broken into, another saga of the politicization of the house that I won’t go into here), he boasts: “all my professional life [...] I had a mistress [Herrin] whom I had to obey: one that rules over me, you, the world, even the world outside as presently constituted, and her name is Justice. I always believed in her, I made Justice the guiding light for everything I did.”

But the sentence before this — interestingly, and unsurprisingly, removed by Paul Wiegler (and therefore left out of the English edition as well, see note above) — puts his commitment to Lady

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73 Fallada, 75/96.
Justice in an entirely different light. Frau Rosenthal, concerned that she is putting Fromm in danger by hiding in his apartment, tries to decline his help and head back up to her apartment. Fromm responds chillingly: “Concerning the danger in which you are putting me, I have been in danger my entire professional life. I have always been a judge, and in certain circles one simply called me bloody Fromm or executioner Fromm. [...] I was always a quiet and gentle person, but fate decided that during my career I would decide or confirm twenty-one death sentences.” Fromm, clearly proud instead of ashamed, seems convinced that there is a north star of Justice that cuts through all political uncertainty and opinion, a moral compass totally unperturbed by the noise of political conditions. But his own confession exposes the danger of this expedient inversion of political uncertainty and moral absoluteness: the notion that any positive law and empirical judge is simply guided by the absolute norms of Justice is the pretense of dogmatic justification, the tyrannical fantasy of revealed pure morality. Justice, as incarnate in the hands of a judge, is a procedure, a practice, a form of navigating and constituting the norms of a political sphere through the contingent and historical body of law, and therefore always vulnerable to missteps, corruptions, and injustices. It is, in Arendt’s language, as much an act inscribed in the fabric of relations as any other, and must be held accountable for that. It is a form of collective social infrastructure as prone to scrutiny and change as any other. Were judges simply the earthly executors of Justice, we would need no procedure, no amendments, checks or appeals, no political relations at all, and could live under the unquestioned and unmediated tyranny of Lady Justice and her edicts. Fromm, far from offering such false angelic promise, is a discomforting reminder of the thoroughly political nature of any system of justice, its historical contingency, its reality as the institutionalized condensation of the heterogeneities of the political fabric that need constant attention and mediation.

74 Fallada, my translation/96.
If he is a caricature of any kind, then, it is not that of a bastion of wise neutrality, a “good seed” gone dormant until the political conditions become favorable (hence the Kulturbund’s removal of Fromm’s dark backstory), but of a once-powerful functionary trying to scrub himself of the blood on his hands by an appeal to fate, Justice, and the belief that moral principles can and should override the ongoing mediation demanded by political life. Under this aspect at least, there is little to distinguish executioner Fromm from any powerful Nazi functionary, each seeing in the blood they spill and the censure they receive the unfortunate but untroubling by-products of the march toward what is Just.\(^{75}\)

3. A Failed Escape to the Countryside

Trudel, however, is more ambivalent in her language: though she seems taken by the promise of the hibernating good seeds, she recognizes, in the same breath, the many forms of active subversion that she and Otto could, and must, perform. These acts point not to their separation from the Nazis, but to the power born of their implication. If there is a notion of immunity at work here, it is not that of a moral cloak between her and the Nazi regime, but of immunizing the political fabric from forces coursing within: to protect institutions, practices, and relations from themselves. (In this sense, Trudel is appealing to the power, not of Widerstand, but of Resistenz.) That they can work badly or slowly is only possible and effective because they work in the service of the Nazi war machine to begin

\(^{75}\) Fromm is, however, not a mere caricature and is much more politically determinate than he would allow of himself. Despite dismissing the danger he is putting himself in, this and several other scenes show the lengths to which he goes to protect Frau Rosenthal from the drunk and belligerent SS teenagers living upstairs. It could be said, however, that his blind insistence on following Justice alone, the content of which remains unclear, of course, finally prevents him from really helping Rosenthal and from doing anything more than postponing her bitter end by sheltering her and trying to create an apolitical refuge from the conflict “outside.”
with.\textsuperscript{76} Their capacity for action does not follow from their distinction from the Nazis, but from the negotiation of their implication in Nazi institutions, projects, and officials.\textsuperscript{77}

In the end, Trudel’s secret communist cell succumbs to the very alienation and fear (disfiguration) on which Nazism was built. Because the cell’s efficacy was rooted in manipulating and leveraging its members’ entanglement in Nazism to disrupt the fiction of domestic homogeneity that defined Nazi ideology, the cell finally falters in the face of this project and yields whatever power it might have had by retreating into the perceived safety of isolation. In trying to distinguish themselves from the institutions, practices and neighbors they seek to change, they relegate themselves to the controlled arena of partisan opposition (\textit{Widerstand}), the register of political identity and difference so carefully managed and defined by the Nazi party. In this, they play into the Nazi’s totalization by collapsing the public realm of politics and the factional clash of distinct parties; to speak solely in terms of partisan difference allows political difference to be recast as ethnic, tribal, or even national (in this sense, moral) and, as such, intolerable. By playing political issues out in this bellicose arena of international and civil war, all opposition can be externalized, allowing Nazism to appear truly

\textsuperscript{76} See, for example, Otto’s awareness of the economic gains he has enjoyed through Hitler’s reorganization of the industrial economy: “After being out of work for four years, in 1934 Quangel had become foreman in the big furniture factory, taking home forty marks a week. They had done pretty well on that. That was a result of the Führer, who brought the economy back into motion. They [Otto and Anna] had always agreed about that.” (Fallada, \textit{Every Man Dies Alone}, 20*/22.) This economic incentive was enough to free him of political concern: “At the beginning of the war, the business was put on a war footing, and Quangel’s workshop was assigned to make large, heavy crates that it was thought were used to transport bombs. As far as Otto Quangel was concerned, he didn’t have the least interest in the destination and function of the crates; to him, this new, mindless labor was simply ridiculous. He was a craftsman.” (Fallada, 46/56-57.) Needless to say, Otto hid behind the purported neutrality of his work and actively overlooked its overt political reorientation. And so, he quietly went on building crates for Nazi bombs.

\textsuperscript{*}The English edition does not contain these last two sentences. See note above.

\textsuperscript{77} The term “Nazi” is, of course, itself an equivocation here between the moral register of “evil” individuals from whom one wants to distance oneself, and Nazism as the name for the political configuration of relations in Germany at the time in which power was, however unequally, distributed across the unhealthy and uncoordinated fabric. Trudel and Otto may well be able to distinguish themselves from the former (despite having voted for the party in 1933) but whatever power they have to act with or against the grain of this fabric is evidence of their being a part of it in the latter sense.
hegemonic and free of internal difference or strife. By naturalizing its own totality, it hides the figures by which everyday practice reproduces (and potentially dismantles) that form of collective totality. For the communist cell to accept these terms of action isolates and defangs them while contributing to the mythologization, homogenization, and validation of the Nazi party;\(^{78}\) the hermetic survival of the good seed totally obfuscates the need to cultivate the soil for it to actualize itself and propagate. The dual fears of physical harm and moral corruption force Trudel and her comrades to pull back from the world and seal themselves off in hopes that a more hospitable future will be delivered by some benevolent agent external to the Nazi totality (thankfully, it was only ever a projected totality and did not take over the entire world!). Plans of action are replaced with hopes of survival, and attempts to expand the scope of their action are aborted by the necessity of secrecy.

It is in the throes of this retreat to partisan isolation that the cell finally implodes entirely. When the others find out that Trudel has mentioned the existence of their group to Otto, they are blind to the possibility of expanding their scope with new members and leveraging more power with an established workshop leader, and instead simply see a breach in their partisan wall. In a rash escalation in the name of the cell’s self-preservation, the others decide that Trudel should either commit suicide or simply allow them to kill her. Though she runs away to the small town of Erkner with another member (Karl Hergesell, her new lover) before they can carry this out, the next time Trudel reappears in the novel she is fleeing Berlin to start a new, hopefully quieter life in the countryside where she, five months pregnant, and Karl could live “only for the happiness of their home” and where they thought they would remain out of reach of “the Party, and its demands.”\(^{79}\)

\(^{78}\) Recall Broszat’s critique of the dual mythologization of the Nazi Party and its antagonists by demonizing the former as totalitarian and heroizing the former as martyrs, homogenizing both and placing them beyond understanding. The rhetoric of partisanship participates in this externalization of the two poles and removes them from their common political context. (Broszat, Fröhlich, and Grossmann, *Herrschaft und Gesellschaft im Konflikt: Teil C*, 1981, 693.)

\(^{79}\) Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, 278*/375.
Trudel may have evaded death at the hands of her cell, but at the cost of any sense of power and responsibility, and with that, any possibility of collectivity. She has effectively (attempted) to render herself stateless. The logic of the cell has taught them, not unlike the domestication of politics practiced by the Nazi party, that, without its protection, their lives can only be inward-facing, domestically hermetic, blunted of any political openness to their world.

The tragedy of this retreat, however, is not only the impotence of those who hide behind it, but the false sense of safety on which it relies. Fallada, who himself fled to the countryside and knew the total permeation of Nazism intimately, is quick to preempt the naïveté of the Hergesells and their false identification of Nazism with its urban administrative centers. As he ominously notes: “Like many city dwellers, they had made the painful discovery that recrimination, eavesdropping, and informing were ten times worse in the small towns than in the big city.” Far from a domain of simple extra-political provincialism, Erkner is full of families who, more concerned with their own self-preservation than any kind of sense of community, are all too ready to inform on their neighbors to secure their standing in the eyes of the Gestapo, a fear which only further consolidates the power that generates this fear to begin with. There simply is no private moral island on which Trudel and Karl can hide.

* The veil of self-deception under which they have crept is abruptly lifted when Karl, running an errand back in Berlin, bumps into Grigoleit, the most dogmatic member of the communist cell, and the one who had pressed for Trudel’s self-elimination. Their encounter may be the most pointed case of this equivocation on the moral and political.

*Not included in Hofmann’s translation.

80 Fallada, 278/375.
What begins as an innocuous exchange of pleasantries quickly flares up when Grigoleit asks Karl what he “does” these days. Karl, whether intentionally deflecting or out of a newfound naiveté, tells him of his new job as an electrical engineer in a factory in Erkner. Grigoleit presses him: “No, I mean what are you really doing, Hergesell — for our future.” Karl, feeling a pang of “something like guilt” at this indictment, tries to justify his new life: “Look, Grigoleit, we’re a couple of young newlyweds and we live for ourselves. What is the world out there to do with us, them and their shitty war? We’re happy we’re having a child. You see, that’s something too, isn’t it, Grigoleit? If we try to remain decent [anständig], and try to make a decent human being out of our kid…” Grigoleit, unmoved, brags of his continued activities with the cell and its new members, to which Karl responds with the predictable skepticism of the fearful: “And you really think it’ll bring results? Your little bunch and this great machine [Ihr paar Männekens und diese Riesenmaschine]?…” Karl, focused on decency (Anständigkeit) and self-preservation, seems to be recycling the very same principle of the dormant seed that he presumably learned from the cell to now justify his inward turn toward maintaining the purity of his new family: his “future” lies is preserving himself through his child. Consequently, he must see Nazism as externalized, objectified, and enlarged, an unstoppable “Riesenmaschine.” By contrast, Grigoleit remains committed to a markedly different relation to the future, and therefore to the German people:

“First of all, we’re not a little bunch, as you put it. Every decent [anständige] German, and there are still two or three million of them, will make common cause with us. They just need to overcome their fear. At the moment, their fear of the future the Nazis are creating is still less than their fear of the present.”

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81 Fallada, 284/383. Note the echo of Fallada’s insistence, cited above, in his preparatory essay that “Against this man in the dark, the entire tremendous apparatus of the Hitlerish state machinery was powerless.”

82 Fallada, 284/383-84.
While Karl’s fear of his present circumstances entirely shapes his imagination of the future, Grigoleit notes the sharp distinction between fear of the present and for the future. Where fear of the present is always a fear of some thing, something external, something more powerful, fear for the future is a concern for “our future,” a concern for the fragilities of the political world born of the fact that one is inextricably bound up in it with others.

Against Karl’s fearful isolation, then, Grigoleit is after the constitution of collectivity in the face of its vulnerability. And yet, his collective is an imagined one, made up not of those who are interwoven in a fabric of action, but by their shared interior uprightness: they are defined not by what they do, but by being “anständig” of all things! Though Grigoleit is trying to expose Karl’s prioritization of domesticity as thinly veiled selfishness, he does so by appealing to moral imperatives that hyperbolize his point; it is no coincidence that Grigoleit’s indictment arouses shame and guilt in Karl as opposed to a renewed sense of power and responsibility:

“Second, my dear chap, you ought to know that it doesn’t matter if there’s a handful of you against many of them. Once you’ve seen that a cause is true [wahrhaftig], you’re obliged to fight for it. Whether you ever live to see success, or the person who steps into your shoes does, it doesn’t matter. I can’t very well sit on my hands and say, Well, they may be a bad lot, but what business is it of mine?”

“Yes,” said Hergesell. “But you’re not married; you don’t have to look after your wife and child…”

“Oh, you go to hell!” shouted Grigoleit, manifestly disgusted. “Enough of that sentimental twaddle of yours! You don’t believe a word of it anyway! Wife and child! You idiot, it doesn’t seem to have occurred to you that I could have gotten married twenty times over, if starting a family had been my intention in life! But it’s not, see! I say what right [Recht] do I have to any personal happiness while there’s room for such unhappiness on this earth!”

Grigoleit, the novel’s most doctrinaire communist representative, is clearly well attuned to the consequences of privatizing one’s “business.” But he falls prey to his own dogmatism: his notion of

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83 Fallada, 284/384.
political action is tied to a complete renunciation of domesticity, to the notion that having a family — indeed, the enjoyment of anything “personal” — is incompatible with a commitment to political change. The notion that one has no “right” to domestic well-being while others are suffering simply reinstates the moral paradigm in which there is no contradiction or impossibility seen in the coexistence of personal happiness and communal unhappiness, only a lamentable inequality resisted by a moral imperative for the equal distribution of the good. So long as the family and the polity remain parallel domains that stand in competition for resources and commitment, only moral exhortation can mediate between them. Because of this, Grigoleit’s exposure of Karl’s family life to its political ramifications is absolute, and the relation between Karl and Germany he construes is that of total identity:

“We have drifted apart!” murmured Karl Hergesell, half sadly, “My happiness doesn’t cost anyone else a thing.”

“But it does! You’re stealing it! You’re robbing mothers of their sons, wives of their husbands, girlfriends of their boyfriends, as long as you tolerate thousands being shot every day and don’t lift a finger to stop the killing. You know all that perfectly well, and it strikes me that you’re almost worse than real dyed-in-the-wool Nazis. They’re too stupid to know what crimes they’re committing. But you do, and you don’t do anything against it! Aren’t you worse than the Nazis? Of course you are!”

“Here’s the station, not a minute too soon,” said Hergesell as he set down the heavy case. “I don’t have to listen to your abuse anymore. If we’d spent any more time together, you would have told me it wasn’t Hitler but Hergesell who actually started the whole war!”

“And so you did! In an extended sense, of course. In a broader sense, your apathy made it possible…”

Now Hergesell could contain himself no longer: he started to laugh, and even the grim Grigoleit broke into a grin when he looked into that laughing face.84

This moment, an echo of the earlier accusatory identification of Otto and “his” war in Anna’s “du und dein Führer,” again contains a thoroughly political call to responsibility veiled in an indictment of

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84 Fallada, 284-85/384-85.
complete moral guilt. The empowering potential of Grigoleit’s politicization of Karl’s domesticity is lost in his total dissolution of the private at the hands of the political. Erkner certainly seems to substantiate Grigoleit’s diagnosis of the dangers of misdirected fear: in place of a communal world mediated by vulnerability and mutual determination guided by a concern for a shared future, a polity that acknowledges and sustains subjectivity in its relationality, Erkner is little more than a pointillistic collection of homes turned inward and related only by suspicion and a competition for survival, by a fear, in other words, of one another and the world from which they shrink back.

But Grigoleit’s appeal sounds more like a call for courage in the face of this fear, a resolute setting aside of personal concerns for public good, a call which has particularly minimal traction in a community where the notion of a public sphere it itself the source of fear. It is no surprise that Karl finally just laughs him off. What Grigoleit doesn’t say to Karl, but which the novel goes on to make all too clear, is that the political vacuum compounded by their dormancy may erect a kind of moral shield (Grigoleit “bravely” standing on one side, Karl cowering on the other), but it won’t protect them from the brute fact of their political entanglement, nor does it empower them to legislate over their future. In short, it does nothing to convey the rather simple point that within their fear of their world lies buried a deeper fear for its future. This is the political fact in its purest form: Karl and Trudel’s future is not only not in opposition to, or contingently inseparable from, but is defined by the future of Erkner and all of Germany.

4. Angst

The fears of Karl and so many others that restrain their political aspirations to the mere preservation of conscience are, of course, far from unfounded. Nazism has made life, for everyone, significantly more precarious, relationships more treacherous, futures more uncertain. Hardly a page
goes by without this pervasive fear being invoked, and the novel abounds in violence and intimidation that is undeniably terrifying. It hangs thick in the air and everyone uses it to make sense of the failure of German political life from whatever side they happen to approach it: it explains complicity as much as inaction, it testifies to guilt just as it much as unthinking herdishness, it suggests obedience of ordinary Germans to Nazism as well as any friction between the two, and perhaps above all, it characterizes a mistrust between friends, colleagues and total strangers.

There is a pent-up fear mediating almost every relation in the novel that is in some way frail or damaged (which characterizes most, if not all relations in it). As the cases of Judge Fromm and the Hergesells make painfully clear (albeit in very different ways), common to many of these relations of fear is the attempt to externalize it and flee from it. That this flight is largely unsuccessful is not so much a feature of the reach or pervasiveness of the monstrosity they have to fear, as though the *Riesenmaschine* had tendrils long enough to reach inside every home and every psyche. This is, again, the kind of mythological totalization of Nazism that stokes this fear to begin with and consolidates the power of those who claim to represent this monstrous collectivity. On the contrary, no one is immune to this fear, just as there is no internally coherent, monolithic political beast roaming the German lands and terrorizing its helpless innocent civilians. To return to Grigoleit’s remark, the problem is not the power of the object of this fear but that the fear itself compounds itself and precludes a concern for the future in which relations could regain their cohesion in the face of shared futural possibilities.

This fear (*Angst*), then, is pervasive not because of the reach of its object, but because of the condition of its subjects. It shouldn’t be understood in terms of its object at all, but as the

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85 I mean this more or less literally: in the novel of under 700 pages, the word *Angst* appears over 300 times.

86 See the discussion below of the novel’s most prominent Nazi official, Inspector Escherich, and his eventual succumbing to the very forces of paranoia and surveillance for which he was responsible.
manifestation of an inner friction, of a tension that is manifest in each and every German and whose resolution cannot be war, however courageous. Indeed, *Angst* can just as well be translated as “anxiety.” If fear emerges from the encounter of two distinct and unequal powers, anxiety mediates the conflicts between what is possible and what is actual, between the world one finds oneself in now and the world one imagines in the future. To put this in an Arendtian idiom, fear functions in a moral register of unmediated war between individuated agents, while anxiety brings into view the frailty and contingency of the political world in which action is already understood in terms of the possibilities and impossibilities afforded by that world, the difficulty of mediating differences. Fear is predicated on the separation and antagonism (*Widerstand*) of individuals from one another, while anxiety grows out of the urgency of maintaining a shared world and negotiating the inherent pluralism and instability of such a world.

In the case of the Hergesells, this collapse of anxiety into sheer fear is particularly tragic as it silences the productive and empowering agency that working in a wartime factory had aroused in them, precipitating their descent into inaction and hopeless self-protection. The problem is not that they live with a bad conscience in Erkner, as Grigoleit would have it, but that the political entanglements that defined them in Berlin cannot be exorcized and simply grow stronger if repressed.

If bearing the weight and uncertainty of this anxiety is the challenge of life in Berlin at this moment, the question remains where the Quangels lie in relation to this retreat from political anxiety into familial, private, moralizing fear.

This escape to a position of imagined political neutrality to wash their hands of the chaos outside their window, is, in some sense, exactly how Otto and Anna had tried to live through the Third Reich up to the point where the novel begins and the letter from the front disrupts their domestic complacency. Otto, Fallada writes repeatedly, had never thought himself a political person. Reclusive and private to the utmost, he had always preferred to focus on his work and pursue safety and quiet.
over anything public that could jeopardize the comparative normality that he and Anna had managed to construct for themselves. And though this is the novel’s pre-history, and their lives are irrevocably altered (and the novel opened) with the arrival of the letter from the front, the Quangels don’t exactly take to the streets and agitate. They remain reclusive, asocial, and highly attuned to the dangers of their world throughout the novel, with much of the drama (as noted above) taking place within their own building, even their own living room. Does the novel, then, simply juxtapose these modalities of action? Does it combine them? How do these modalities of action figure in Fallada’s Berlin?
V. Domesticated Politics

It may still seem largely voluntaristic or arbitrary why this character or that, and indeed the novel itself, "chooses" to understand themselves and their world politically or morally. To get at the context in which moralization seems the only option, or in which relations of responsibility are able to disclose themselves, the particular form of alienation, which I called the "domestication" of politics above, must first be clarified in its particular strategy of disfiguration. This particular form of political disturbance begins to address the pressing, and as of yet unaddressed, question of the specificity of Nazism in this inquiry, and paces the way to a reading of the novel’s formal fabric into which the scenes of acute reckoning and bounded agency presented above can be woven. Doing so circumvents the paradigm of Widerstand, freeing Fallada to develop characters that are both actors and sufferers of their world and to represent the banal strands of everyday Resistenz as figurative of the novel’s world as a whole.

Several (related) questions emerge at this point that deserve to be treated head on. First, what kind of distinction is at work between the domestic and the political? Are they adjacent physical spaces? Competing institutional realms? Opposed hermeneutic approaches to action? Historical moments of social development? Are they to be understood typologically at all or is their difference itself political, suggesting two different ways approaches to the division itself? And second, to what degree is the relation between the political and the domestic brought into view by Fallada’s novel specific to Nazism? Is political alienation an essential condition of being political or is it a historical wrinkle in a wider trajectory of political possibilities? Fundamentally at issue in these questions is whether the political is itself essentially a condition of alienation and, though it may sound a bit peculiar, whether the domestic is essentially domesticated.
The snippets from the novel presented above already go some distance in addressing these Arendtian questions. In each of the scenes given here, the possibility of moral existence is negotiated in positional or locational terms. The premise of the good seed lies in its separability from the soil; Fromm hides at home in hopes that his physical invisibility will assure a political one; the Hergesells flee the countryside assuming that Nazism could be located in the administrative buildings and prominent representatives of the party in Berlin; and, of course, the Quangels have long assumed that their quiet living room, empty of political material or people, is itself immune to the forces outside. Whether by taking a stand, staking out a moral position, or choosing to be alone, distinguishing oneself from “the others” or from “the state” seems always a matter of spatial separation. The very possibility of moral action in these moments looks to be a matter of the persistence and coherence of the private sphere under the suffocating conditions of the Nazi public sphere. If this were right, the possibility of resistance would be a matter of the rivalry between parallel domains; this hope would not emerge from within a contested and malleable collectivity but would stand on faith in the durability of the domestic realm, a durability promised by the distinct neutrality and apolitical nature of the domestic. Dissident action understood in terms of this total separation of the political and the domestic becomes a matter of the perdurance of private action long after the political realm has been taken over and snuffed out by Nazi rule.

Fallada himself seems to suggest precisely this relation of the private and public as distinct and competing domains, even spatially separable ones, when describing the Hergesells’ plight in Erkner:

[Trudel and Karl] suffered greatly under the atmosphere of hate they were obliged to live in at Erkner. But they told themselves that it didn’t concern them and that nothing could happen to them, as they were doing nothing against the State. “Thoughts are free,” they said—but they ought to have known that in this State not even thoughts were free.

So, increasingly, they took refuge in their happiness as husband and wife. They were like a pair of lovers clasped together in a flood, with waves and currents,
collapsing houses and drowning cattle all around them, still believing they would escape the general devastation by the power of their love. They had not yet understood that there was no such thing as a private life in this wartime Germany. No amount of pulling oneself back could change the fact that every German belonged to the generality [Allgemeinheit] of Germans and had to suffer [mitleiden] the German fate — just as more and more bombs were falling indiscriminately on the just and unjust alike.87

Here, Nazism seems an atmospheric phenomenon, a climatic force that sweeps up and consumes everything in its path by sheer force. And so, the great private powers of love and thought brace themselves against the rising tides of fear, hatred, and anxiety. Though the island of their love fails to withstand the flood of Nazism, they drown as do the cattle and houses: in total innocence.

The inevitable politicization of private life – even private thought – that marks the lives of Judge Fromm, the Quangsels, the Hergesells and so many others in the novel would, then, be attributable to the totalitarian colonization of even the most removed and insignificant homes and relationships by the powerful machinery of the “State.” The devastating and invading flood of Nazism suggests that while the distinction between the private domain of morality and the public arena of politics might be tenable in a healthy polity, the illness of the Nazi regime is marked precisely by its elimination of the distinction and the total breach of privacy by the overbearing forces of the party.

Read in this way, the novel responds to the two questions posed above by insisting on the spatial separability of the home and the polity. Moral quandaries of what is just can only be answered in a private space, shielded from the forces of political coercion, fortified by the private conditions of love, self-reflection, and intimacy; as we would put it in the contemporary idiom: in a space of authenticity. Political issues, then, play out in the external arena of diplomacy, compromise, and ideology. The public and private must be typologically distinct and can (and should) exist in parallel. But in the Nazi State, “not even thoughts were free,” and “there was no such thing as a private life in

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87 Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, 278/376.
this wartime Germany.” The particularity of Nazism is, in this reading, its cannibalization of the private sphere: the politicization of the domestic.

This diagnosis of Nazism is itself expressed from the domestic vantage point: it raises the question of what happens to the domestic realm, in answer to which it observes that it has been infected by an alien domain, the political. The peculiar consequence of this interpretation is that the force of politicization is understood morally: the forceful invasion of one space by another is the mechanism of negotiating differences morally (in a political vacuum). In this sense, to preserve the sharp separation of the private and the political is to assume the primacy of the private and to ground the difference between them in terms of the apolitical logic of the private sphere.

There are, however, the traces of another reading of the novel in this passage. To say that “no amount of pulling oneself back could change the fact that every German belonged to the generality [Allgemeinheit] of Germans and had to suffer [miterleiden] the German fate” could itself be a claim, not about the specificity of Nazism, but of the nature of political life as such.88 Indeed, the notion that everyone belongs to their “generality” is an ahistorical and nearly tautological formulation of what it is to be a political animal at all. To say that fate is not an individual matter but a communal one has nothing to do with Nazism. If the language of authenticity — predicated precisely on moralistic individuation and its promise of a personal, private, just fate — is exposed for its apolitical naïveté, the specificity of Nazism doesn’t seem to lie in its politicization of the private. Indeed, the clean separability of the two realms begins to seem a false, even dangerous, evasion of collective life. Trudel and Karl’s sinking island of love (their Verinselung, we might say) is, then, not so innocent as it may have seemed, but condemned by its disempowerment, willful naïveté, and anxious paralysis in the face of its collective future and fate.

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88 Recall Arendt’s language of the subject as actor and sufferer of the world.
It is my claim that underneath these isolated scenes of moral reckoning that seem to create chains of individuated fate, there lies a much more intricate narrative fabric of communal relations that places each and every German — each and every act — within the generality of collective life. The fabric reconstitutes the threads of political responsibility and power in order to poetically figure the mechanism between part and whole, individual and collective, which Nazism sought to dis-figure so carefully. The novel reclaims, then, the coherence of a multitude of spaces that had seemed private, marginal, isolated, and unconnected, weaving a single narrative world within which each character is able to place itself within its Allgemeinheit, perhaps even to glimpse their dialectical relation to its transformation.

Read in this way, Fallada tries to address Nazism as a political form masquerading as a partisan or tribal one: his novel attempts to unearth the everyday practices in Berlin’s public sphere through which these identitarian celebrations of blood, soil, and the elimination of difference could purport to stand on their own ground. The novel shows, then, that Nazism consolidated its power and suppressed dissidence not by politicizing the purity of the domestic but by domesticating the plurality of the political. Nazism didn’t invent or impose the experience of Allgemeinheit but controlled and naturalized it, maintaining a monopoly on the political processes through which individuals collectively figured themselves as belonging to a coherent whole.

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It is worth noting, and briefly exploring, the fact that Arendt’s own analysis of the relation between the political and the domestic is riddled with ambiguity on precisely these two questions of clean separability and historical specificity. Though her 1968 essay on collective responsibility and her analysis of the “web of stories” that constitute political activity are, as I hope to have shown, excellent analytic spaces for articulating the reciprocal constitution of actor and collective world, Arendt is infamously drawn into a multitude of rigid typologies that seem to neatly slice stratifications of
practices, spaces, and objects out of the universalizing web on which her thought rests. Most infamously, her distinction between labor, work, and action often seems to tip into total separation and typologization. This typology reappears in her notorious distinction between the public and the private, both of which are contrasted with the modern and problematic “rise of the social.” It is the relation of these three terms that interests me here and which both clarifies and confuses the notion I have been developing of Nazism as the domestication of the political.

At their most basic level, the three terms refer to different configurations of human collectivity. Very simply, the private (manifest in the household, or oikos) is marked by the maintenance of life by carrying out “natural functions”: most quintessentially, nourishment and birth. The domestic sphere, Arendt argues, is thus the space of necessity in which members of a community are solely organized around the “natural” forces of violence and sovereignty: “the whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense in which we understand them as well as the regulated order attending them, was felt [by the Greeks] to be prepolitical and to belong in the private rather than the public sphere.” The private sphere, in Broszat’s idiom, is formed around Herrschaft. The public sphere (manifest in the polis), by contrast, knows only “equals,” and is mediated by the possibility of freedom as opposed to the necessities of natural life. Thus, taking up the old Aristotelian distinction between despotic and political rule, Arendt insists that to be in the public sphere of political negotiation is not simply to be free from necessity or the violence of rule (for the despot is as unfree

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For an excellent overview of these issues as emergent from a “phenomenological essentialism,” as well as interpretive paths forward, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), particularly Chapter 5.

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as is the peasant), but to be free for the possibilities of action afforded by the inherent equality of citizens. The public sphere is shaped by the collective configuration and reconfiguration of Gesellschaft. Lastly, “the collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one superhuman family is what we call ‘society’,” “whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping.” Society, we might say, is Herrschaft scaled up and disguised to appear as Gesellschaft. But the three don’t simply form a clean taxonomic trio. As Arendt puts it:

The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state.

If this is right, there isn’t so much one tripartite distinction as two different dyadic ones: first, the fundamental differentiation of the public and the private as a constitutive aspects of human plurality, and second, the historically specific, and rather recent, emergence of the social that differentiates itself by a particular distortion of the first distinction. Surely, then, the dyad private-public is primary while the emergence of the social is derivative and therefore (negatively) normatively charged. Although much ink has been spilt over the question of Arendt’s ambivalent modernism and nostalgia for the Greek polis, that is not our concern here. Whatever Arendt’s position on the Greek polis, its primary analytic function is to help expose the modern nation-state’s conflation of necessity and freedom, the sovereignty of the domestic realm and the negotiated pluralism of the political. More specifically, Arendt’s analysis of the emergence of the social against the backdrop of the oikos

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92 See Arendt, The Human Condition, 13, 30–32.
93 Arendt, 28–29.
94 Arendt, 28.
and the *polis* traces “back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins.”

A critique of nationalized politics should not, then, impel us to return to a city-state founded on slaveholding households. But does it not suggest that some sort of renewed delineation of the public and the private spheres is needed? That to peel back the confusion and alienation of socialization requires that we cordon off life’s natural functions from those actions that mediate the common world of freedom? This would accord with the initial reading of the image of the flood I discussed above in which it seemed that the derangement of Nazism stemmed from a political tide (here, the “social”) so strong that it washed out all possibility of distinguishing private spaces from the forces of the public. This would imply that modern sociality is fundamentally the encroachment of the political into the private – the politicization of domesticity.

But, for the reasons already given above, this is simply not a coherent narrative of alienation. To say that the flourishing of a polity rests in some kind of balance between two distinct spheres, and that each must be protected from the tendencies of the other, is to place them at odds as though they were themselves competing modes of management and activity. It is, to reiterate, a domestication of the distinction between the two, and casts our “social” alienation as a problem to be understood, not politically, but by the very management typical of the nation-state. (For this reason, it is equally

95 Arendt, 6.

96 Arendt repeatedly suggests as much by lamenting the loss of a private sphere that could provide shelter from the glare of the space of appearance. This is most marked in passages such as: “The most elementary meaning of the two realms [the public and the private] indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all,” (Arendt, 73.) or “A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. [...] The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in.” (Arendt, 71.)

This conservative thread in her thinking, which continuously leads her distinctions to become full-fledged separations, is unfortunate and confusing but in no way inherent to (and, as I have tried to show, actually antithetical to) her radical analysis of “the political.” For a thorough discussion of this tendency, see Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. 
incoherent to speak, in the reverse, of alienation as the encroachment of the private into the political. The problem of sociality is that it treats these two modalities of collective organization as realms or discrete “spaces” that abut and vie for supremacy.)

What, then, is this alienation? Arendt offers an answer in her very definition of the social: it is the replacement of the city-state with the nation-state, the replacement of a collective political infrastructure with that of a “super-human family” defined by affinity, homogeneity, and subjugation. It is to replace the commonality of collective self-determination with the commonality of a shared ruler; the replacement of the collective navigation of differences within the equitable web of action with the tribalistic attempt at survival and the assertion of identity. Our alienation is thus the perversion of the political into a colossal household. It is, quite simply, the domestication of politics. Such domestication (which is confused and undermined by the nomenclature of “socialization”) is an essentially political process: no force, no act of war or compulsion could bring this about since it is a change in the configuration of a polity, not a household.

This further clarifies why Arendt’s separation of the material “world” of artifacts from the immaterial “web” of action is incoherent. To treat these as distinct realms of human plurality is to open the door to the analytic counterpart to the very political alienation her notion of sociality takes such pains to describe. To suggest that Karl and Trudel’s plight is a function of an imbalance between their private domesticity and the political forces around them would be to diagnose Nazism as a politicized tribe or family (as a “social” force in Arendt’s sense), when that understanding is precisely the deception and propaganda behind which Nazism was able to consolidate itself to begin with. To break this cycle of social norms naturalizing themselves as essential pillars of a national community requires that one first recognize that the management and fabrication of the material world is always already a political process that mediates action. To put this in yet another Arendtian idiom (confusing because she uses the term “world” in The Human Condition to refer to (at least) two very different
things): if we are to understand our “flight from the earth” and our flight from “the world” as one and the same process of alienation, it is imperative to recognize the domestication of politics as a disruption of our management of the material world (the “earth”) just as much as it is a distortion of our negotiation of the immaterial world (the “world”). Those worlds are one and the same. The private and the public are themselves only intelligible as logics of political order.

It is by this very same reasoning that guilt and responsibility cannot refer to different domains of accountability but can only be different logics of collectivity. The notion of responsibility therefore grounds the possibility of thinking in terms of guilt.97 So, too, do the pressures of political coexistence and the challenges of plurality produce the possibility of thinking and acting in terms of sovereignty, affinity, race, and homogeneity.

If everything (including the private) is, in this sense, political,98 what remains of the domestic sphere? If it is not, as Arendt would like it to be, a “reliable hiding place from the common public world,”99 what are these very real spaces and how does one describe what happens there? Is there a way to differentiate the importance of domestic spaces from the dangers of a domesticating logic? Arendt actually seems to provide the beginnings of an answer when she notes:

the fences inclosing private property and insuring the limitations of each household, the territorial boundaries which protect and make possible the physical identity of a people, and the laws which protect and make possible its physical existence, are of such great importance to the stability of human

97 See the discussion above and chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of the consequences of the Heideggerian focalization of authenticity on guilt and its individuation.

98 Though this is not the place to do so, one could also reexamine the arguments over whether the “personal is political” by disambiguating the various meanings of those two terms. That the very same phrase could have been used, for example, to argue that feminist struggles for reproductive rights are, contrary to their initial dismissal, essential to any project of collective freedom and to argue that certain decisions about one’s body or beliefs should remain outside the sphere of generalized legislation, simply demonstrates how slippery these terms are and how important it is not to equivocate on them. For a succinct (though by no means complete or definitive) foray into the shifting terms of these debates over the past half-century of feminist theory and activism, see Megan Behrent, “The Personal and the Political: Literature and Feminism,” International Socialist Review, no. 92 (2016): 39–64.

99 Arendt, The Human Condition, 71.
affairs precisely because no such limiting and protecting principles rise out of the activities going on in the realm of human affairs itself.\textsuperscript{100}

Here, she actually seems acutely aware of the logical priority of the political order, and that the “physical” importance of the private spheres that are inscribed within a polity must themselves be political in the sense that they exist only as carefully maintained constructions within the unbounded medium of non-identitarian life.

What Arendt seems unable to admit in this passage, however, is that the “boundless” “medium” of political activity is by no means unarticulated; she seems stuck with an image of the political in which the equality of the web of action is so universal that it contains no internal means of organization, division, or identification, necessitating the inscription of private terrains into this undifferentiated field to create demarcated territories. But why the need to create rigid boundaries? Was the hallmark of the “socialization” of humanity in modernity not the rigidly bounded nation-state? Arendt, in fact, goes out of her way to insist that the polis

is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. “Wherever you go, you will be a polis?”; these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.\textsuperscript{101}

The freedom made possible by political life is necessarily universalizing; the Allgemeinheit that it configures out of the most banal and provincial scrap of everyday activity is, necessarily, total.\textsuperscript{102}

The fact that the political, an unfinished and always shifting fabric of relational actions, may not be organized by its outer limits and boundaries does not, however, prevent it from being organized

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{100} Arendt, 191.
\bibitem{101} Arendt, 198. Though this passage could also be read as the reassertion of the immateriality of the political, which would yet again undermine the point.
\bibitem{102} The limitation of Karl and Trudel’s collective belonging to the German generalization of their lives is, then, already an indication of the nationalization (and domestication) of their political sensibility.
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at all. Quite the contrary: far from the violent and primitive organization of the nation-state that must impose boundaries in order create some semblance of a polity (it is structured, after all, around the negative freedom from others), the political fabric is nothing other than the “constellation” of spaces of appearance that are created, maintained, and shifted by the ongoing activity of those who live in and through it. Political action is thus inherently spatializing\(^{103}\) in that it establishes a medium through which differences are arranged in their mutual participation in a single world. It does not function like a force that is fully sovereign over a predetermined domain, but it is a vulnerable and diffuse way of navigating relations with others: of being an actor and a sufferer. It is peculiar that Arendt doesn’t allow for this inherent differentiation and configuration of collective space given the way she develops this notion of boundlessness just several sentences earlier:

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act initiates is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. […] This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action within a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.\(^{104}\)

To speak of politics as an ever-shifting constellation of actions that continuously redefines the its collectivity as a whole is to have entirely given up the notion of a subject’s well-being defined in

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\(^{103}\) Which should not be conflated with localizing. There is nothing essential or permanent about the material landscape of a certain political configuration, but that in no way obviates its concrete spatiality at any given time. Indeed, the spatial concretion of politics is one way of expressing its durability and coherence over space and time, as well as its malleability. (See chapter 3 for an extensive discussion of the uneven and combined geography of political life, and its tendency toward alienation through localization.)

\(^{104}\) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.
terms of privacy, protection, hiddenness, or any kind of defense against an invasive sovereignty (whether from within or without the bounds of an oikos). Just as a polity is not strictly localizable, neither are the actions of any member delimitable within some portion of the polity. To depart somewhat from Arendt’s image — so focused on the pure originality (what she calls “natality”) of action that she seems to think that every action must originate out of nothing and reverberate infinitely (as though one could speak of a future without a past) — we can instead speak of action as itself being the shift in a certain “framework of circumstances,” action itself taking shape in the tiny, though far-reaching, re-constellations of the fabric into which it is woven.

To return to the figure of the previous chapter,105 this structured boundlessness of action is its ecstatic quality: constituted by the very shifts to the medium of which it is a part, possible only within a certain kind of space of structured differences, action no longer names a localized event but describes its constant reconfiguration of the political medium. If we are to speak of domestic spaces in a mode that is not domesticating, then their walls must be seen as partitions within a wider political infrastructure as opposed to its basic building block. Similarly, their promise as sites of enclosed refuge must be seen as a flight from their reality as rooms, homes, and nations ecstatically inscribed within a universal Allgemeinheit.

This is not to say that there are not forms of collectivity in which boundless action is considered a sufficiently threatening challenge to the regnant constellation that reconfiguration is made taboo, hidden, and even made to seem impossible. Indeed, because the political weave is an active project and not an ideal form, a space of negotiating heterogeneity and not ironing it out,

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105 Arendt, clearly responding to Heidegger’s flattened notion of “Mitsein,” is, functionally, articulating a notion of social facticity: she is explaining the possibility of novelty, caprice, and freedom through the fact of its always already being structured by its place within the larger collective project. Though, as I note above, she often tilts “natality” back into an act of “initiation,” seemingly forgetting her own maxim that we are not the authors of our own actions, thereby needlessly obscuring the historicity of novelty. See chapter 1 for an extended discussion of Heidegger’s fraught attempt to unify facticity and logicity in his phenomenology.
polities will always be marked by the irony that the very differences that constitute their unity often tend toward their consolidation and intensification as opposed to fluctuation and mediation. Political freedom is a fragile project that tends towards its own alienated frustration. Because the fabric of political life is not an ideal immaterial given but a very practical material contingency, it is both the space of freedom (the possibility of equality) and, contra Arendt, a space of perpetual inequality. This is neither a bug nor a feature, it is simply what it means for politics to be an ongoing project of negotiating difference collectively. What it does not mean is that in the face of this inequality we should abandon the mechanisms of mediation and erect fortresses of interior robustness (as, for example, in liberal discourses of inalienable “rights”). No declaration of rights could loosen Nazi hegemony and pave the way towards transformation from within.  

Fallada’s Berlin, a polity in which the desire to find refuge from the deadly glare of the public sphere could not be more pervasive, may seem an unlikely place to find clues about a commitment to unbounded political action. Karl and Trudel certainly try to wall themselves in, and we have already seen ample scenes that hover on the edge of fleeing the political for the false safety of the moral. But this may well be a feature of the mode of reading I have kept to thus far, focusing on exemplary scenes of condensed activity. If, however, we are to take seriously that the fabrication of a story is nothing other than the fabric of the world that it continuously configures, then our reading of the novel must instead be attuned to the threads that weave through the novel, that tug on one another and incrementally alter the spaces in which the novel can move forward. To attend to Fallada’s novel in this manner is to give it a chance as a thoroughly political story.

106 Hence the creation of an international tribunal to consider human rights violations. Of course, in the post-war aftermath as the U.S. basked in perceived global heroism, interventionist salvation seemed an unproblematic mechanism for correcting the course of totalizing collectivities from without. Though this is not the appropriate moment to delve into these issues, it should go without saying that this moralizing saviorism has shown itself to be a thin guise for economic imperialism that exacerbates rather than ameliorates these incarnations of political disfiguration; “foreign” policy is as incoherent a solution to political ills as are intensifications of the “domestic.”
VI. Fallada's Fabrication

1. Jablonskistraße 55

As the scenes of resistance described above make all too evident, when Fallada’s characters fail to break free from their political entanglements to a space of moral refuge it is not for any kind of corruption or lack of trying. Instead, Fallada’s Berlin weaves them tightly enough into a shared world that such a flight becomes unthinkable, un-narratable. But where many stories turn toward schools, churches, courts, marketplaces, and other public institutions to root their protagonists in a world of which they are both actor and sufferer, Fallada’s Berlin exists in the wreckage of these spaces of political infrastructure. The Nazi domestication of political life banishes action from its usual media, pushing the novel into new spaces where action is more muted, less direct.

For this reason, most of the novel takes place in living rooms, hallways, small offices, jail cells, empty streets, staircases, and other marginal spaces seemingly cordoned off from the political. But these are not respites from the action, narrative eddies that produce psychological depth, inner turmoil, or any other domestic buildup for a political sprint to the next interior space for recharging and reflection. To map a novel of this kind would require two elements: nodes of contained and controlled interiority, whether of individual people or relatively static groups, whose inner drama, so to speak, springs out into lines of (inter)action, “plot,” which in turn tie all such nodes together. This would be the novelistic equivalent of a web of stories in the strict sense: private nodes that provide the shelter from (and form the material substrate for) the immaterial glare of public interaction. The unity of this narrative configuration remains external to its material, an imposed or retroactive coherence added to a psychological pointillism. Whether or not any story really has this structure is questionable, but my contention here will be limited to Fallada’s novel: namely, that its domestic spaces
are themselves *ecstatic:* they contain the threads of their interrelation and thus always exceed the boundaries they seem to be defined by.

This ecstatic domesticity makes itself apparent, on one level, by the constant presence of those who are not where they are meant to be. The definition of a private space is not simply its boundedness but its exclusion: it is always for some and not for others. This carving up of space according to predefined economic, ethnic, historical, and even aesthetic factors is what (ostensibly) lends the private realm its shield against the total openness and democracy of public space. It is this spatial logic that the novel systematically unsettles, not least by the fact that its living rooms, offices, and workplaces are in a constant state of disruption by those who are not expected or welcome. These transgressions of spatial boundaries disclose the deep disturbances to planned action to which every character is subject. The novel is full of commitments and resolutions, but just as full of messy entanglements in the lives of others that either compromise or fully derail those moments of agential clarity. Between these points of reflectivity in which characters declare a change to the course of their lives by sheer conviction, willing themselves onto a new path through a psychological or moral reckoning,¹⁰⁷ there lie the many encounters that weave threads of mutual implication: threads of knowledge, debt, commitment, fear, and trust.

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In the week of Otto Quangel’s inner drama following Anna’s accusation, “*du und dein Führer,*” while carefully calculating what to do next, another drama unfolds within his own apartment building, the decidedly un-calculated consequences of which end up making the decision for him. Though most of what follows happens inside the building, under the cover of night, and outside any clear legal

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¹⁰⁷ And there are plenty of such moments. Beyond the scenes described above, more or less every character goes through these moments. Perhaps the most extreme, even comical, is the repeated failure of Enno Kluge to find his way back to economic stability, employment, and general normalcy. (See Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, 90/115, 206/281, 206/285-86, 221/302.)
pursuit, the forces at work are undeniably political. The building’s stairwell, connecting the four apartments, becomes an opaque public space in which unplanned encounters have profound consequences. The apartments themselves are not the mere domiciles of four adjacent families, but a contested channel through which power is mediated and manipulated in very different ways. This is perhaps most apparent on the top floor where a Jewish couple, the Rosenthals, have been forced to live since being evicted from their previous home.

Actually, Frau Rosenthal has lived in the apartment alone ever since her husband was abducted by the Gestapo. She is the only Jewish resident of Jablonskistraße 55 and everyone is well aware that this greatly weakens any legal barrier to breaking in and pillaging her belongings, in effect opening her apartment to anyone who cares to enter and claim it for themselves. And sure enough, the first and only time the novel finds its way into her apartment is through the late-night thieving escapade of two opportunistic and desperate neighbors, Enno Kluge and Emil Barkhausen.

In the afternoon, Emil Barkhausen (a resident of a cellar-level apartment in the back of the courtyard, not the front of the house in which the Quangels, the Persickes (an SS family), Judge Fromm, and Frau Rosenthal live)\textsuperscript{108} stops by to see whether he can find his way into Frau Rosenthal’s apartment. Standing at the top of the stairs, waiting to see if she will answer the door, Barkhausen gets unexpected company in the form of Baldur Persicke, the eldest and most audacious son of the SS family. Though neither Barkhausen nor we as readers find out what business Baldur has up there, he assumes the position of sovereignty and chases Barkhausen away. We can only imagine that Baldur wants to keep the spoils for himself, and as Barkhausen comes to realize this, he changes tone and tries to appeal to their shared aim. Baldur seems to see an opportunity as well and orders him down.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{108} One cannot help but read the floor-levels of the building as a dark trace of a social hierarchy of the past. Frau Rosenthal’s elevation above all the others is both a mark of her great wealth and the literal height from which she falls to her death.
into his apartment, presumably to strike up some kind of deal. Barkhausen leaves with twenty marks and a light step. Beyond this curious new alliance (if that’s indeed what it is), a third party has inserted herself into the action on the stairs: Anna Quangel, for reasons she herself cannot name since she generally follows her husband’s manner of ignoring the neighbors, had cracked her front door and overheard the entire exchange between Barkhausen and Baldur. She finds herself quite agitated afterward, with grand and not obviously related thoughts running through her head: “They aren’t going to have killed my son without consequences. I can also be different [Anderssein]…”109 Though she isn’t sure what she even means by this “Anderssein,” it is clear that by slowly inserting herself in the lives of her neighbors she is recognizing that she was always implicated in their lives, not least by her son who was sent to war by the very animus and belligerence that Baldur and Barkhausen embody.

When we return to the house that evening, again with Barkhausen, he has his friend Enno in tow. This time they avoid confrontation on the stairs and slink unchallenged into the apartment full of Rosenthal’s belongings but apparently empty of her. We later realize that she is hiding in the Quangels’ bedroom, presumably brought there by Anna during the afternoon to protect her from precisely this return visit.

The notion that a home can be a hiding place, a refuge from the political fray outside, has been amply undermined by the novel as we have already seen, and though Anna may still view it this way (we never learn the details) it is undeniable that in opening up their home to Frau Rosenthal they are not simply enlarging their refuge but accepting that it is both a matter of privilege and contingency to have rooms that are not under constant threat and that they are thus under a certain kind of obligation to put that security in jeopardy for those who lack such a space. This is, we might say, the Quangels’

109 Fallada, Every Man Dies Alone, my translation*/33.

*Though these are included in Hofmann’s translation, his rendition hides the ambiguity of the “they” and totally skips over her glimpse of potential transformation.
first deliberate political act of the novel, the first moment in which they (in this case, solely Anna) respond to the complicity they carry in the death of their own son through a new appreciation of the responsibility they carry for the vulnerability of Frau Rosenthal. It isn’t clear that this act is exactly intended as such or that Anna has fully considered its consequences — Otto is clearly still very resistant to any involvement in the affairs of others. Upon returning home that evening and seeing the lights on in Rosenthal’s apartment, Otto takes note and immediately recognizes that “there’s something wrong!” But just as he wonders what could be going on in the lives of those above him, he quells this curiosity with a predictable rejoinder, “But what’s it to do with me? I want nothing to do with those people. I live for myself [alone]. With Anna. [Just] the two of us.”

Yet Otto hesitates in front of his door. The indictment, “du und dein Führer,” somehow thwarts the simple mantra by which he had hitherto separated himself from the concerns of others and keeps him in the stairwell from which he can see the light and hear the harsh voices spilling out from Rosenthal’s open door. At this moment, a small but forceful hand, that of Judge Fromm, as Otto soon realizes, turns him toward the staircase and asks him to go ahead, assuring him that he will follow shortly. Otto does not hesitate and ascends the stairs to insert himself in a situation he does not know the contours of and with even less sense of what he is to do. It turns out he is to do very little, hardly anything other than stand in the doorway and appear on the scene. By that point, the scene has become rather chaotic: Enno and Barkhausen have discovered Rosenthal’s liquor cabinet and are clinging to consciousness; Baldur Persicke, joined by his two younger brothers and bumbling father, all also rather inebriated, have just entered the apartment much to Barkhausen’s chagrin. They’ve had just enough time to give Enno and Barkhausen a few unnecessary punches and to start gathering up a few suitcases of Rosenthal’s possessions to take with them, their father stumbling into the bathroom. Otto walks in

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110 Fallada, 63/79.
on this chaos, a convoluted tangle of entitlements, fears, and desires created by this unlikely constellation of figures with varying (and rapidly changing) degrees of economic, physical, and legal power. All in the vacuum of the presence of Frau Rosenthal and any kind of institutional mediation of her apartment. And yet, in the wake of the forms of political mediation these figures and we readers are accustomed to, a new kind relational medium is established by rather simple means. Otto simply stares at Baldur, and Fromm soon appears from the other side of the room, casually but deliberately taking inventory of everything in the apartment and reminding the Persickes of the “honor” they could carry if they took responsibility for the case and turned Enno and Barkhausen in.

Without any threat, without any kind of forced inversion of power, Fromm and Otto simply change the conditions of the situation sufficiently to push the Persicke’s calculus in a new direction. Anna has opened her home to Frau Rosenthal, and Fromm and Otto have managed to give the impression that there still are other subjects in Rosenthal’s apartment to whom one must be answerable. It is in this sense that Otto and Fromm take action: not as executors of a particular profession or social station, not as representatives of a moral alternative, not even rhetorically (Otto hardly says a word) or by way of reflection or intention (Otto, recall, is literally pushed into the room). Instead, it is by their sheer presence, by inserting themselves into the fray and forcing the others to recognize that even if they are not answerable to the police or the law in other forms, they remain answerable to their neighbors. This is both an assertion of power by forcing another’s actions to conform with one’s presence, as well as an extension of vulnerability. Otto and Fromm are now, however minutely and blindly, asserting themselves as actors in the house, threads of coherent responsibility that all others must at least take account of. In short, Otto and Fromm have introduced threads of Resistenz, acts that reconfigure and strengthen the damaged fabric on which the opportunistic thieves sought to capitalize. (It must be said that precisely because of the limitations of their power and the openness of their homes thanks to which they can take Rosenthal in in the first
place, Rosenthal cannot be saved so simply. There are simply too many forces coursing through Berlin, through their building, and through their homes that seek to ferret out and punish Rosenthal for being Jewish, and Otto and Fromm for daring to act politically. Rosenthal hides in Fromm’s apartment for a week after Otto kicks her out, but after consuming a large number of sleeping pills in hopes that she will fall asleep during the day and catch a glimpse of the nocturnal Fromm to exchange so much as a word with another person, she begins to hallucinate the return of her husband and leaves Fromm’s apartment only to collide with Baldur on the stairs. Within two hours she has fallen from her fourth-floor window after tussling with an executioner from the Gestapo. Fromm and Otto simply do not have that much weight to throw.)

This chaotic night and its aftershocks fall during the period of silence during which Anna and Otto are mulling over their complicity in their son’s death. They are well aware that something is changing in their relationship to their world, but their language lags behind their actions. As we have already seen, out of simplicity, out of fear, and perhaps out of a righteousness that is not difficult to imagine, their response to their apolitical past is entirely moral. They declare war against their Führer and his followers, they pursue decency (the veneration of Anständigkeit could form another study of this novel), and they double down on their fear of the outside world as they come to recognize the vulnerability they have always already had and the increased danger they will face as they begin to resist. In a telling moment, as Quangel and Fromm are walking down the stairs from Rosenthal’s apartment, Fromm offers to take in Frau Rosenthal if Otto has any trouble “because of her.” Otto protests, even if only performatively: “What do I care about Frau Rosenthal? I barely know her.”

This only intensifies when Otto discovers that Anna has allowed Rosenthal to hide in their bedroom:

“I don’t want anything unsafe, and above all I don’t want to be dragged into other people’s unsafe business [Geschichten]. If it’s to be my head on the block, I want to know what it’s doing there, and that I’m not sticking it out because

111 Fallada, 66/84.
of some stupid things that other people have done, but because I did something that I wanted to do. I'm not saying that I'm not going to do anything. But if I do anything, I'll only do it alone with you, and with no one else” […]

He knows he will get his way. Tomorrow morning, the flat will be clean again, and Anna will give in. No more wild business. And just himself. Only him!

This desperate attempt to keep his home “clean” of any outside influences, to imagine that he and Anna can safely lie in wait behind their domestic fortress and step out to act at the moment of their choosing, this domestication of his own agency belies the very intervention he had taken part in just minutes earlier. The paradoxical desire to act on the world without suffering it in any way is a clear symptom of the alienation that hangs thick in the air of the Quangels’ home as much as anywhere else. And yet, within this murky city there are innumerable moments of action, consequence, community, trust, and betrayal, and all the ripples that these relations generate.

This is perhaps what makes Fallada’s novel so interesting. Weaving a narrative fabric is nothing unusual, and its intelligibility is a function of its everyday familiarity. Encountering your neighbor, entering some facet of their lives as a member of their community to whom they are accountable and to whom they can in turn appeal, participating in norms, bending them, breaking them, and recreating them — this is the unremarkable stuff of everyday life. Where Fallada’s Berlin becomes of real curiosity is in the persistence of these mundane acts of political fabrication as the maintenance of a shared world under conditions that so forcefully contort and strangle them. Thus, the events in Frau Rosenthal’s apartment are both totally ordinary and familiar and simultaneously unimaginable and horrific. As the material conditions of a polity become ever more intolerant and dangerous, so, too, do the lines between political action and moral self-preservation become harder and harder to discern, making the mundane and everyday appear heroic and unusual.

Fallada, 69/87, translation altered for accuracy.
The fear that pervades almost every interaction actively muffles the productive political anxiety that could push against it. Fear, as explored above, is the ultimate agent of political suffocation and of the blind reproduction of the status quo. The ecstatic structure of life becomes a liability and, whenever possible, is buried under the comfort of strict boundaries of control and self-limitation. Accepting the sovereignty of others over oneself comes to seem a small price to pay for the sovereignty one can imagine to have over oneself.

But against this bleak landscape glimmers the defiant hope of pluralism, the inextinguishable ecstasy of social life, and the ineliminable fact of the contingent and therefore protean fabrication of collectivity. Fallada’s hope lies in the potential of transformative anxiety buried within every instance of alienating fear. Fallada has hope that even Nazi Berlin could be reconfigured anew. That hope begins in the viability of poetic representation of a coherent whole at a time when the political mechanisms of that representation seemed lost.

2. The Post

To trace all the threads that emerge from this one night at Rosenthal’s apartment would require that we read through the minutiae of the entire novel, which is obviously not the task here. And although it would run counter to the notion of the novelistic fabric to speak of exemplary scenes or tropes that act as keys to the entire novel (recall the deceptively isolated scenes of Widerstand above), there is something like a through-line, a central figure that illuminates this difficult navigation of political action under the conditions of its own persecution. Perhaps more precisely, a figure that clearly transforms the fabric structure of the novel from mere static backdrop (a “milieu”) to the dynamic medium of action itself.

This strand of the narrative medium is the post. How does a novel even find its way into the protected intimacy of households, the contested sites of crime, the offices of the Gestapo, and even
prisons in which the “little people” of Berlin die, how does a novel gain entry to these spaces at a time when they are so carefully guarded and try so hard to seal themselves off from prying eyes like our own and from stories that would weave them back into the greater public world? In Fallada’s case, the answer is simple, and it begins with a character we have not yet discussed but with whom the novel both begins and ends: Eva Kluge. The novel begins:

The postwoman Eva Kluge slowly climbs the steps of Jablonskistraße 55. She is slow not so much because of her tiring route, but because she has one of those letters in her bag that she hates to deliver, and which she must now, in just two steps, deliver to the Quangels.¹¹³

Before she does so, she delivers a party newspaper to the Persickes, the father of whom we get a quick introduction to thanks to Eva’s daily, even if narrow, experience of him. We also learn of the Rosenthals before turning back to the Quangels to deliver the fateful message. It is through Eva that the novel is able to find its point of entry — and its ending, though I won’t discuss that here — into the lives of our protagonists. However frail and seemingly insignificant, the residents of Jablonskistraße 55 are all tethered to one medium of information and communication equally: the German postal service. In their case, Eva Kluge.

And as I have already detailed, this dreaded letter from the front with the news of Ottochen’s death is the irritant that sets off the machinations of the entire novel, spreading to the lives of dozens of people all over Berlin and with highly divergent and perhaps unexpected effects. If the scope of the novel’s fabric had to be defined in some way, one could simply say: the novel concerns itself with and only with the threads of action that are tangled up in this one letter. The letter, to use the spatial language from above, pierces the domestic complacency of the Quangels’ home, the ecstatic ramifications of which are seen across the city.

¹¹³ Fallada, 9/9.
These ramifications take many forms (the scene in Rosenthal’s apartment, for example), but one of the most concrete threads of action to emanate from the Quangels’ politicized domesticity are the postcards that they themselves send out into the nooks and crannies of Berlin. After stewing for that long week, Otto resolves to react to the letter by disseminating letters of his own, leaving postcards once a week or so in stairwells across Berlin. This plan has a clear logic to it: the Quangels’ response to Eva’s delivery is to multiply and disseminate the message through an ad hoc postal web of their own.

Mother! The Führer has murdered my son. Mother! The Führer will murder your sons too, he will not stop till he has brought sorrow to every home in the world.114

These are the words of their first postcard. The tactic behind it could not be more apparent: to translate the dissonance and anxiety they have felt since receiving their own letter into the lives of others; to awaken them to the self-destruction at the root of their allegiance to the regime. The Quangels are plenty aware that these postcards will be received by everyone principally with fear. The question is whether this fear of the postcard will be able to translate itself into fear for their future: into animating anxiety.

The path of this first postcard is rather short but not without its ripples. Otto drops it in a stairwell as planned and it is soon discovered by Max Harteisen, an actor whose recent falling out with Goebbels has left him out of work, disenchanted with the promises of National Socialism, and fearful for his future. Max has just left a meeting with his old friend and lawyer, Erwin Toll, who had just assured him that they were totally alone in the room, that the door was padded and locked and that they could “speak openly together.” Upon finding the card in the stairwell, Max enters a panic, fearing someone has seen him picking up the card. He begins to wonder if Goebbels has set him up and

114 Fallada, 132/183, 134/185.
whether someone hasn’t been following him the past few days. Not knowing what else to do, Max brings the dangerous thing back to Toll’s office. In a frenzy to protect himself, Max suggests Toll tear it up and put in the trashcan.

“Much too dangerous, my dear fellow! It would just take the office boy or some nosy cleaning woman turning it up, and I’d be in it up to my neck!”

“Burn it, then!”

“You forget we have central heating here!”

“Take a match, and burn it over your ashtray. No one would ever know.”

“You would know.”

Pale-faced, they stared at each other. They were old friends, going back to school days, but now fear had come between them, and fear had brought mistrust with it. They eyed one another silently.115

Though the moment passes and they hand the card off to the law office’s political commissioner, the power of the card is undeniable. The fragility of Max’s relation to Goebbels and Nazi favorability more generally is suddenly visible in his oldest friendship. This fear, not yet a developed anxiety about his own commitments to the world and his opportunistic work with high-ranking Nazis, still manages to dislodge the notion that any space, however well sealed, and any relationship, however old and intimate, is safe from the volatility of the political world. Dismissing the writer of the postcard as a terroristic madman endangering others, Max asks, “And for what? What is he actually saying? Nothing that each one of us doesn’t already know! He must be a madman!”116 But it isn’t clear that Max already fully understood his own vulnerability as a function of his complicity. Toll had, just moments earlier, derided him for speaking of Goebbels as “my Minister” in the same breath as he complained of the consequences of falling out of favor with him. Max has clearly only thought about his decisions from

115 Fallada, 150/206.
116 Fallada, 151/207.
the point of view of their most proximate effects, and has thus not thought about his future or about others; he has not had the capacity to understand himself and his actions politically. With this card in his hand, Max is confronted with the bitter truth that his decisions and his affiliations are both highly consequential and quite contingent on factors that are out of his control. This truth certainly manifests itself as fear, even fear of his best friend, but a fear that might nudge Max further toward understanding the collective and futural consequences of his commitments. Though the novel doesn’t follow Max long enough to see if this fear becomes an effective anxiety — and that may well be because it does not — the postcard has at least disturbed the complacent and childish selfishness of Max’s self-understanding. Holding the card in his hand, Max sees himself under the shadow of presumed guilt that seems so pervasive as to be almost ontological. Whether Max is able to levy that guilt into political accountability, into responsibility, is a question for another novel.

German, don’t forget! It began with the Anschluss of Austria. The Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia followed. Poland was attacked, Belgium, Holland…

The second postcard that the novel follows has a remarkably similar initial reception. Otto slips it into the mail slot of a doctor’s office to be found minutes later by its receptionist in the hallway. She immediately brings it to the doctor and claims to have seen a suspicious man in the waiting room go to the bathroom moments before the card appeared. This poor suspect is none other than Enno Kluge, Barkhausen’s accomplice (and the postwoman Eva Kluge’s burdensome husband), who the receptionist already resents for repeatedly sneaking into the bathroom to smoke a cigarette. And yet it is the doctor who, sitting there with the card in his hand, finds himself in the position not just of the current possessor but potentially of the suspected author of the card; his whole life flashes before his eyes from the vantage point of guilt to the regime:

Really, this card was the final straw. Now the police were on their way, perhaps he would find himself under suspicion, they would search the premises, and

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117 Fallada, 179/246-47.
even if it turned out that their suspicion was wrong, they would still find, in the servant’s room at the back…

The doctor stood up, he at least had to warn her…

And sat down again. How could he come under suspicion? And even if they found her, she was his housekeeper, which was what it said on her papers. It had all been thought about and talked through a hundred times, ever since that time over a year ago when he had had to divorce his wife, a Jew — under pressure from the Nazis. He had done it principally in response to her pleas, to keep the children safe. Later on, after changing his address, he had installed her as his “housekeeper,” with false papers. Really, nothing could happen, she didn’t even look especially Jewish…

That damned card! Why it had to involve him, of all people! But probably that was how it was: whoever it came to, it would create panic and fear. In these times everyone had something to hide!

Perhaps that was precisely the purpose of the card, to provoke panic and fear? Perhaps such cards were a fiendish device, to be distributed among suspicious individuals, to see how they reacted? Perhaps he had been under surveillance for a long time already, and this was just a further means to monitor his response?

At any rate, he had behaved correctly. Five minutes after the card was found, he had got in touch with the police. And he was even able to come up with a suspect, perhaps some poor devil who had nothing to do with the affair. Well, it wasn’t his problem, he had to get himself clear if he could! The main thing was that the doctor was spared.\footnote{Fallada, 173/237-38.}

Receiving the card has little to do with receiving any kind of information, little to do with the Quangels communicating anything in particular (the cards hardly seem to be read for the specifics of their message). Instead, the very existence of the card and its rather simple provocation brings out the feeling of universal guilt on which the regime maintains its power. The fear is a stark reminder that a small postcard is all that lies between survival and the gallows.

In the case of the doctor, and possibly also Max Harteisen, this fear has been made so strong that the cards may simply exacerbate their sense of powerlessness and political paralysis. Not only do the recipients not join the ranks of an underground card writing resistance, but, for some of them,
contact with the cards is fatal: the terrified and confused Enno Kluge is eventually killed as a result of his entanglement in the card’s discovery. As the cards trickle up the ladder of power, however, eventually landing in the hands of the Gestapo, their effect is markedly different. Fear of punishment slowly turns into curiosity, excitement, and in some cases irritation with the bother of finding the disseminator. The great irony is that in the hands of those who are inoculated from the initial fearful paralysis, there is space and time for a different and perhaps more consequential entanglement with the card to develop. This is most clear in the case of the Gestapo official charged with tracking the card writer down, Inspector Escherich. It is in the novel’s most prominent Nazi official, I will argue, that Fallada expresses his greatest hope in the political plasticity of even the most totalizing totality.

3. Inspector Escherich

Inspector Escherich is perhaps the quintessential bourgeois functionary in whom Arendt sees the dangerous replacement of civic concerns with sheer professionalization, the kind of man that Himmler relied on to carry out the Nazi agenda. As Arendt describes this “modern man of the masses”:

He has driven the dichotomy between private and public functions, of family and occupation, so far that he can no longer find in his own person any connection between the two. When his occupation forces him to murder people he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination but in his professional capacity. Out of sheer passion he would never do harm to a fly.119

It would be difficult to describe Escherich more succinctly. As Fallada makes clear, Escherich is a “hunter,” a “lover of the chase. It was in his blood. Others hunted wild boar; he hunted humans. The fact that the boar or the human had to die at the end of the chase—that didn’t move him at all. It was

foreordained for the boar to die like this, as it was for humans if they wrote such postcards.”

Escherich shields himself from the fact that sheer caprice separates those who are condemned to fall within his crosshairs from those who are spared: rumor, fear, and the whimsies of his superiors dictate this fateful separation of the hunters from the hunted. He shields himself from the ugly fact that he is carrying out his party’s dirty work by cloaking it in the language of fate, professionalism and even justice (note the echo of Judge Fromm’s self-exculpation).

And so, even within the logic of his profession, quite apart from its dissonance with his life as a passionate and vulnerable citizen, there is a deep contradiction. For a hunter to do his job, the principle by which prey is separated from everything (or everyone) else must be apparent. And yet, as Escherich himself laments:

> These Germans were a disgrace! With the greatest war in history being waged to assure them of a happy future, they persisted in their ingratitude. There was a bad smell wherever you stuck your nose. Inspector Escherich was firmly convinced that he would find a knot of secrecy and deceit in well-nigh every German home. Almost no one had a clean conscience—of course with the exception of Party members. And he knew better than to institute the sort of search he had conducted at Fräulein Schönlein’s at any Party member’s home.  

How is Escherich to hunt the guilty when everyone is guilty? This not only compromises the ethical pretense of Escherich’s job, but disrupts the mechanics by which he sniffs people out. Once the first handful of the Quangels’ postcards have landed on his desk and no clear leads have offered themselves, Escherich gets a visit from his boss, Herr Obergruppenführer Prall. Prall is not a detective, is uninterested in the art of the hunt, and as a high-ranking party functionary, is primarily interested in maintaining his status by capturing and punishing those who have violated his or his party’s

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120 Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, 165/226.

121 Fallada, 263/358.

122 Recall Arendt’s warning: “Where all are guilty, nobody is.” (Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 43.)
sensibilities. Prall, impatient to find the postcard writer, wonders whether any residents of the houses in which the cards were found were at all “suspicious”:

“Suspicions? Suspicions beyond suspicions! There’s suspicion everywhere nowadays. But there’s nothing informing it beyond a little anger toward a neighbor, a bit of snooping, eagerness to come forward with an accusation. No, out of that we’ll get no leads.”

“And the people bringing them in? All beyond suspicion themselves?”

“Beyond suspicion?” Escherich twisted his mouth. “Good God, Obergruppenführer, no one is beyond suspicion these days.” And, with a hurried glance at the face of his superior, “Or everyone is.”

This is a problem, as we have come to see, less with the disgraceful Germans than with the notion of guilt itself. All that remains is the superficial and capricious distinction between those within the Party and those without. A moralized political difference that Escherich masks as an ethical or juridical one for his own peace of mind and for the satisfaction of his superiors: Prall is so steeped in the dogmas of his own partisan ranks that he does not even fully realize that what they have come to call suspicion and guilt is a paper-thin artifice concealing the completely opaque tangle of accusations, fears, and vendettas with which the Gestapo is flooded.

The frailty of this artifice is broken by the moments in which this contradiction is brought to the fore. It is in exposing this contradiction that the Quangels’ actions are perhaps most potent. Already in the exchange with Prall above, Escherich is forced to come in contact with the deeply partisan logic that makes his work nearly impossible. Escherich certainly fancies himself the smarter, more nuanced, and more professional of the two, separating himself and his work from the crude agendas of those that employ and heckle him, but this separation is tenuous, and as Prall becomes more and more impatient with Escherich’s hunt, Escherich loses the space in which to disentangle his
tactics from the crude demands of the Nazi party. The postcards bring Escherich just a little too close.\textsuperscript{124}

The doctor does end up using Enno Kluge as the scapegoat for the postcard that has landed in his office, and Enno is taken to Escherich for interrogation. Though Escherich immediately realizes that Enno is far too fearful and confused to be the man he is after, the pressure from Prall to produce the evidence of some kind of lead compels him to at least carry out the pretense of pursuing someone. After a long back and forth during which Escherich assures Enno of the insignificance of the postcard, he convinces Enno to sign a confession of having placed it in the doctor’s office, assuring him that it is just a formality that will have no repercussions and as thanks for which Escherich will go to his boss in the factory where he is supposed to work and make it clear that Enno is to be paid whether he shows up for work or not. Escherich lets Enno run free (though under the watch of two Gestapo shadows) and Escherich goes to report to Prall. With this strange exchange of favors (or so it has been billed to Enno), the Quangels’ card continues its path into the lives of many more unwitting Berliners, propelled by this unlikely new relationship and the mounting tension that it carries.

Almost immediately, things do not go as planned for either of them. Hours later, Escherich gets a call that his shadows have lost Enno in the crowds of the subway. In the week that follows, Escherich falls into a frenzy searching for Enno (though he is well aware he has nothing to do with the postcards), a desperation that leads him to all those with whom Enno has managed to entangle himself. First, Eva Kluge’s neighbor, Frau Gesch, is intimidated by Escherich and forced to watch over the Kluges’ now empty apartment (Eva has fled to the country) should Enno return to it; next,

\textsuperscript{124} Already during Prall’s first visit, the pressure to resolve the case of the postcards reveals the political caprice that has kept them (Escherich, Prall, and every other member of the Party) on the side of the hunters and not the hunted. Though Prall’s warning that Escherich’s cocksure patience could, were it to fall into Himmler’s hands, land them both in the concentration camp, does not seem to ruffle Escherich, it is an early warning that his complacent professionalism has consequences not just for his political prey but also for himself.
Escherich goes to the factory where Enno is supposed to work and does, in fact, hold up a version of his side of the bargain, ordering them to ignore any absence of Enno’s, but mostly just asserts his power to forcefully collect any information he can on Enno; the barkeeps at the locales where Enno is a known regular are charged with reporting any sighting of Enno (Escherich later finds out that one of them chose not to do so, a moment of dissidence, no matter how peripheral and minor, that is sure to carry its consequences); when Emil Barkhausen comes to Escherich to complain about the Persickes yet again, Escherich redirects him by promising him five hundred Marks for finding Enno; Barkhausen quickly finds Enno with Frau Hete Häberle, a pet store owner who has taken Enno in to shelter him from the Gestapo, and not only extorts her of two thousand Marks, but uses his son, Kuno-Dieter, to watch over Enno and Hete until Escherich is able to come to the scene and collect him; Hete, who has caught wind of the impending danger, sends Enno to stay with a friend of her’s, Frau Schönlein, but Kuno-Dieter follows him there, allowing Barkhausen to end the chase and call Escherich in. All of these lives, in various ways and to different degrees, find themselves compromised, pursued, and caught in a dizzying net of distrust that is spun between Enno and Escherich. In all of this, the postcard brings latent relations of fear to the surface, forcing neighbors, sons, friends, and lovers to face the frailty of those connections under the pressures of their domesticated polity.

More than anyone else, however, it is Escherich who is ensnared in his own trap. In his case, the postcards have brought the relationship with his own superiors, which had seemed straightforwardly professional, into sharp relief as tenuous and even compromising. The tension between knowing that he is hunting the wrong person and the mounting threat embodied in the increasingly impatient and violent Prall pushes him toward something his profession had not demanded of him before: self-justification. A part of him even comes to believe that Enno does have something to do with the postcards after all. But this shallow self-deception is not enough to wipe
away the fear. As Escherich leaves his office to pick up Enno from Frau Schönlein’s apartment, he

grabs a pistol from his desk, pauses, and

takes a last look around. Something odd happens: without meaning to, he
makes a sort of salute to the room, he bids goodbye to his office. So long… A
dark presentiment, a feeling he’s almost ashamed of, that he won’t see the
office in quite the same way again. Till now, he was an official, someone who
hunted human beings in the same way you might sell stamps: diligent,
methodical, by the book.

But when he gets back to this room later tonight, or maybe even early
tomorrow morning, he might not be the same official. He will have something
on his conscience, something he won’t be able to forget. Something he alone
knows, but all the worse for that: he will know it, and he will never be able to
exonerate himself [freisprechen].

Escherich’s dispassionate shell of professional alienation is finally cracked. He already
knows that he

will have to sacrifice Enno that night to save himself from the consequences of intentionally creating

a false lead. But it is too late: not only is Enno’s fate sealed (Escherich does, in fact, convince him that

night that the SS believe his confession, that all is lost, and that his only path to freedom from their
torture is suicide; Enno accepts and uses the pistol Escherich brought along to end his poor life), but

so, too, has Escherich walked himself into a “dead end” from which no sacrifice will keep him. His
stint as a dispassionate hunter is over: he has willfully killed a weak and confused man to cover up his
inability to catch his real prey and to ward off the ugly forces from above. It is those forces from
above, Prall and his fellow Party functionaries, that destroy the very pretense of apolitical
professionalism and hierarchy on which their authority and agenda depends, the charade of his
freedom finally exposed.

Though Enno and Escherich could not be more clearly asymmetrical in their institutional and
physical power, they come to be bound by the same false confession and all of its consequences. To
be a hunter, a member of the Party, an SS officer, one who acts without fear of repercussions, is to be

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125 Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, 256-57/349.
separated from one’s prey. The fearful little Enno Kluge is the one to show Escherich that every actor is both doer and sufferer. Already in the moment that Escherich reports having let Enno go free to Prall, Prall loses his temper and torments Escherich “just as a couple of hours ago he himself had tormented the skinny Kluge.”

The strength of the threads of action that ensure that everyone must also be subject to as much as the subject of their actions is made all the more apparent, even heavy handedly so, by Fallada in the moment that Prall, almost a year after the fiasco with Enno, finally runs out of patience with Escherich. After a meeting that Escherich thought would end with congratulations for solving various other cases, Prall rapidly turns on Escherich and has him dragged to his office by two SS guards, referring to him as a “prisoner,” and beating him like one. As the SS guards then take him to the basement cell where is to be kept, Escherich realizes that he is being dragged down the very same hallway and thrown down the very same steps that he had so lightly thrown Barkhausen down just a year before. Even after he is called back up months later, his replacement equally disgraced and imprisoned in his place, Escherich never regains the confidence of the hunter dispassionately aloof of his prey: “Escherich once felt very secure. He once thought nothing could happen to him. He worked on the assumption that he was completely different from everyone else. And Escherich has had to give up these little self-deceptions. It happened basically in the few seconds after the SS man Dobat smashed him in the face and he became acquainted with fear.”

The strange recapitulation of Escherich’s victims’ lives in his own descent into fear ends where it must: with Escherich’s own death. We jump now to the final portion of the novel in which Otto and Anna are finally caught and taken to the Gestapo. But the encounter to which Escherich had looked forward for two full years does not end in the satisfaction of catching an elusive criminal. After some resistance, Otto admits to having written the postcards. Escherich asks if he knows that harsh

126 Fallada, 195/267.
127 Fallada, 352/469-70.
sentencing and possibly death will face him. “‘Yes, I know what I’ve done. And I hope you, too, know what you’re doing Inspector?’ ‘What am I doing?’ ‘You’re working for a murderer, delivering new victims to him. You do it for money; perhaps you don’t even believe in the man. No, I’m certain you don’t believe in him. Just for money…’”

That night, Escherich is forced to celebrate Otto’s capture with Prall and other higher-ups. After plenty of Armagnac and shouting, Prall and his comrades drag Escherich with them back to Otto’s cell for some fun. They wake him up, jeer, pour their drinks and break their glasses over his head, demanding Escherich to do the same. It takes Escherich four faltering attempts to break his glass. All the while, Escherich has the feeling that Otto is staring directly at him through the streams of blood and Armagnac, saying: “So this is the just cause for which you murder! These are your henchmen! This is how you all are. You know very well what you’re doing. But I will die for committing crimes that I did not commit, and you will live—so much for the justice of your cause!”

Facing Otto, the fear of his superiors becomes shame, horror, and a deep anxiety about the work he always treated so dispassionately. Escherich cannot flee from the political reality of his work and from the fact that all this time his relative power and protection did not immunize him from being subject to the world of suffering, persecution, fear, and death that he helped shape. Long before being hit over the head with the reciprocity and entanglement of action by his own SS man Dobat, thrown down his own stairs and locked in his own cell, Escherich had been, however repressively, prey to the Gestapo for whom he considered himself the hunter. And though this closure of the karmic cycle, to speak morally, instills plenty of fear in Escherich, confronting him with something like the mantra “no one is free from the Gestapo,” it takes the Quangels and their quiet ecstatic power to bring him to see the true damage and depravity of his actions.

128 Fallada, my translation/501-2.
129 Fallada, 379/503, translation altered for accuracy.
Escherich has a map of Berlin on the wall of his office with little red pins stuck in at every point where a card had been found. What had seemed a collection of dots, endpoints of the movement of an unknown criminal, becomes a map of the dizzying fabric of places, people, institutions, and events into which Escherich had inserted himself, instilled fear, manipulated civilians, thrown the enormous weight of the Gestapo, and altered the very landscape of the city to match his needs. The Quangels’ postcards are thus as much ecstatic appendages of their political potency, weaving lives together haphazardly and mostly blindly, as they are a medium through which Escherich exercises his power, hides the responsibility he carries, and (finally unsuccess fully) protects himself against the fragile fabric he himself is undermining. This pent-up responsibility, so neglected and so toxic, so totally alienated from the power he wielded, is clearly too much for him: Escherich returns to his office and shoots himself with, we are to presume, the same pistol he had pressed into Enno’s hand a year earlier.

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We return, then, to the tempting question with which we began: were the Quangels successful or did they live and act in vain? Berndt Springer’s moralistic reading would have it that they were politically impotent but that they did not act in vain since they managed to preserve their moral decency (Anständigkeit), reminding us “that there is something in a person that cannot be broken or corrupted, an unshakable good seed that withstands all seduction, intimidation, threatening and violence.”130 Plenty of figures in the novel seem to think something more or less the same. If, as Anna and Otto had imagined at the outset, their postcard writing aimed at arousing a group of fellow dissidents, writing postcards of their own and starting a revolutionary movement that could even

topple the regime,\textsuperscript{131} then it is indeed difficult to say that the Quangels achieved their goal. Separated from each other in the Gestapo prison, they die, as the novel’s title promises, entirely alone.

But what of Fallada’s hope at the end of his early essay on the case of the Hampels/Quangels?

Their protest echoed unheard, they sacrificed their lives, seemingly for nothing, to a hopeless fight. But perhaps not entirely hopeless? Perhaps not entirely for nothing after all? […] I, the author of a yet to be written novel, hope that their fight, their suffering, their death was not entirely for nothing.\textsuperscript{132}

The Hampels, as we know them from their Gestapo files, seem to have fallen short of their imagination of dissidence: coordinated mass resistance that would imperil the regime. They die, at best, with the consolation prize for “Most Anständig.” Do the Quangels, in the hands of Fallada, fare any better? As I have tried to show, the criteria for effective dissident action are totally different within the political landscape of the novel than they are in the Gestapo’s narrative of legal combat along moralistic lines. The Quangels are relieved of their role in the war against the state, the Nazi party, their neighbors, even themselves. In place of this clash of opposing forces in which they can only appear, to use Escherich’s language, as isolated and impotent mosquitos nipping at an unperturbed elephant, they serve the unlikely function of illuminating and reconfiguring the relations of complicity, trust, fear, and responsibility that course through Berlin.

Though they remain rather isolated and almost entirely unaware of their ecstatic entanglement, the wide circulation of their postcards forms the central mechanism of the novel’s fabrication of a political world. Their postcards weave innumerable lives together, exposing the city’s hidden political infrastructure.\textsuperscript{133} To make sense of the psychology of any particular figure, let alone their relation to

\textsuperscript{131}Fallada, \textit{Every Man Dies Alone}, 135/187-88.

\textsuperscript{132}Fallada, “Über den doch vorhandenen Widerstand der Deutschen gegen den Hitlerterror,” 218.

\textsuperscript{133}The Quangels’ distribution of these cards reveals that even a system as apparently hegemonic and centralized as the postal system is, in fact, always made up of a multitude of channels, both “official” and not, and that any participation in it is a continuous process of contesting the structure as a whole.
others, requires an elaborate and always unfinished story of their entanglement in the past and future actions of others and the shifting fabric of responsibilities and commitments that this creates: they must be figurable as participants in a coherent world. Through the flow of their ecstatic postcards, Fallada is able to bring into view the world that unifies the likes of Enno and Escherich. They are bound, not by the application of rules or a common despotic Herr, and they do not appear as instances of a type, representatives of an institution, or expressions of an idiosyncratic disposition. Both Enno and Escherich come to be intelligible in terms of the agential threads that are constituted by a single world of action whose consequences they suffer and whose possibilities they can take advantage of. Their differences are figured within the same collectivity.

This is what makes the Quangels potent: not, as they thought, as instigators of a new movement, rebels sowing the seeds of resistance, but as occasions to reveal (to poetically create, in fact) the continued political reality and possibilities of life in Berlin under the most inhospitable conditions, a reminder that dissidence is possible at every level and that action remains open and necessary regardless of the totalizing alienation that nearly snuffs it out. In this sense, the Quangels are remarkable for being narratable; they enable a story in which Nazism can appear as the fabricated polity that it is, in which dissidence is therefore always possible and the future both demands immediate attention and shows itself to be contested and open. If the novel makes a political claim it is this: beneath the fear, death, and partisan monopoly of everyday reproduction, there perdures a single, collective, and protean fabric within which everyone plays a role in preserving and potentially changing the medium of political life.
CHAPTER THREE

Metabolism:
Ironizing Consumption in the “Sinking City” of Ben Lerner’s 10:04

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I. Introduction: Alienated Eating

Ben welcomed the Occupy protester, famished and filthy after a week of camping out in the Financial District’s Zuccotti Park, back into the luxurious fold of private domesticity. While the protester washed himself and his clothes, Ben prepared a stir fry that “was destined to be a meal of prodigious blandness.” Though he had happily consumed innumerable meals labored over by friends and family, Ben suddenly realized that this was the first meal he could remember preparing for anyone, ever.

I would like to say my recognition of this asymmetry led me to meditate [...] on the pleasure I was taking in cooking for my fellow man as he bathed, but I was aware at that point of no pleasure. I would like to say that, as the protester finished his shower, I was disturbed by the contradiction between my avowed political materialism and my inexperience with this brand of making, of poiesis, but I could dodge or dampen that contradiction via my hatred of Brooklyn’s boutique biopolitics, in which spending obscene sums and endless hours on stylized food preparation somehow enabled the conflation of self-care and political radicalism. Moreover, what did it mean to say that Aaron or Alena had prepared those meals for me, when the ingredients were grown and picked and packaged and transported by others in a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity?1

This scene, one of many ironic crescendos in Ben Lerner’s recent work of autofiction, 10:04: A Novel, weaves together a variety of manifestations of urban, middle-class estrangement. Ben, a newly successful writer, has stayed firmly on the receiving side of the kitchen counter his entire life. This is not simply due to his heady, urban, male existence, but out of an open celebration of his ineptitude as “endearing clumsiness.” While an uneven distribution of culinary labor may leave Ben estranged from yet another “brand of making,” it exposes a more fundamental separation of active labor and receptive consumption that no number of stir fries could ever mend: the alienation of eating under globalized agriculture.

1 Lerner, 10:04, 46–47.
While Ben’s distance from the kitchen may be a lifestyle choice over which he can performatively agonize, the dislocation of his dinners from their global circulation through fields, packing plants, distribution centers, and landfills is anything but a matter of individual will. As Ben resentfully acknowledges, one can (ostensibly) smooth over the domestic manifestation of this imbalance of production and consumption by merging one’s roles as cook and eater. This is why farm-to-table meals, farmer’s markets, food coops, and laborious culinary DIY projects are billed as salves for bourgeois guilt as much as opportunities for gastronomic pleasure. “Foodies,” however, have not closed the political gap between the forces that shape agricultural production and those that condition the consumption of food any more than the much larger number of people forced to carry out domestic food labor by cultural or economic pressures. The rift between farming, logistics, and waste management, on the one hand, and supermarkets, restaurants, and home-cooked meals on the other, is inextricable from an agricultural system founded on profit. It isn’t so much that Ben is an inexperienced cook, then, but that his meals are socially, geographically, and economically dependent on people, places, and incentives that are inherently hidden from him.² This scene, therefore, stages the tension that animates much of the novel: what kinds of political action are available to the lone urbanite? What kind of “making,” of poiesis, can Ben, the isolated and cerebral consumer, turn to, not simply to dabble in production, but to create some form of legible community out of the fissured landscape of his world?

² Even when one or two of these relational modalities seem to cohere, they are strategically severed by the other. Pineapple pickers in Hawaii and the Philippines may occupy similar socio-economic positions or even work for the same company, but are prevented from forming a collective union or otherwise creating collective consciousness by the physical distance that separates them; likewise, the landfill just out of olfactory reach may only be known, and certainly only ever visited, by the few who either work there or find themselves culling through others’ waste for survival; it is no coincidence that the restocking area of the grocery store, just steps away from the clean, bright isles, is hidden from view and remains a mysterious place of potentially endless bounty to the consumer wondering if the very thing they want may be waiting “in the back.” Such situations in which relations of labor are strategically hidden from themselves define the fractured world of global capitalism, though, as I will argue, it is particularly egregious and literal in the world of contemporary agriculture.
If that is indeed the driving question of the novel, Lerner's aesthetic project is traversing conceptually well-trodden ground. That this system of “great majesty and murderous stupidity” is marked precisely by the increasing alienation of the conditions of production from the experience of consumption has become a unifying diagnosis among humanists and social scientists of many stripes, who invariably tie it to the notion that our contemporary moment is defined by the process of globalization. As literary critic Ursula Heise points out, the wide range of theoretical articulations of “globalization” is unified by the question of “what cultural and political role attachments to different kinds of space might play.”  

3 These theorizations approach the purportedly free circulation of commodities, practices, information, and people, first and foremost, as a disruption in the geography of our lives.  

4 Not only have local and regional forms of identity been swept up in a global market of frenzied exchange, but the nation-state, the spatio-political entity that had organized modern life and tyrannically sought to iron out local internal difference, has suddenly come to seem a potential site of resistance against the new, larger, hegemon: multinational corporations and their cultural imperialism. Theories of globalization, then, attempt to show that this scrambled geography is always a matter of political reorganization and a potential challenge to traditional forms of sovereignty and representation.

Ben’s helpless domesticity stages this coincidence of two seemingly distinct forms of alienation: the geographic dislocation of the small-from the large-scale and the social rift between private consumption and the collective (re)production of our world.  

5 In this chapter, I argue that this poetic

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3 Heise, Sense of Place, 4.

4 This was, for example, precisely what Fredric Jameson argued set modernism apart from “postmodernism”: “we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.” (Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 16.)

5 I should note the multiple points of contact this chapter’s argument has with Michel de Certeau’s well-known phenomenology of everyday urban life, if only to partly explain Certeau’s relegation to a few footnotes in this
Building on Caleb Klaces’ classic problems of aesthetic mediation, thin spatiality (see follows) manifest Klaces’ could outmaneuver opposed fragmented, Press, and from chapter. It is “interested not only in representing climate change, but in representing what kinds of challenges climate change poses for literary representation,” I suggest that a particular kind of poetic production of collectivity could, in fact, be politically radical. Several claims follow from this reading. If the alienation of globalized consumption is fundamentally a problem of spatial fragmentation and disorientation — situating the comforts of everyday life in the urban West within the world of rampant inequality and outsourcing —, then the ecological crises that we so often approach technocratically are, at root, problems of representation. Anthropogenic climate change, an extreme symptom of this uneven globalization, revives classic problems of aesthetic mediation between particular and general, material and abstract, part and whole, as the key obstacle to collective action and an equitable universal politics. Eco-literature, therefore, is neither a genre category nor does it simply name the literary thematization of “natural,” phenomena: it is a formal category that ties...
current material crises to old problems of representation, world-making, and the poetic production of space. I articulate this line of argument through two complementary aspects.

On the one hand, I propose that we understand the isolation of consumption from production as a symptom of the alienation of a single process: the active re-creation of our world. By shifting the narrative (and the geography) from that of the linear commodity chain bookended by the active, productive farmer and the passive, consumptive eater to that of the collective world continuously reproduced and transformed, in which each of us is passive and active, determined and determining, social and material, the alienation of our food system becomes legible as a rift in our labor as such: a rift in the way that we re-produce our entire world. Though this attention to the geography of consumption (as opposed to the history of production) may seem to transgress the traditional Marxian framework, I suggest that the most powerful figure to describe this rift is one developed by Marx himself: that of our “metabolic” relation to the world. To re-describe eating metabolically (as opposed to consumptively) offers a dialectical description in which all stages of agricultural labor are visible as moments in a single process of actively reproducing our world. Moreover, it begins to articulate a politics of eating (and transformative labor more generally) grounded in the slow and collective process of reshaping our world, taking the place of our regnant neoliberal faith in aggregated passive demand. As the literal and metaphorical aspects of the term suggest, metabolism makes sense of the degradation of our material world and the inequality of our social world in terms of a single rift in our collective reproduction (what Marx called the “social metabolism”) of the “whole of nature.”

The alienation of labor is, therefore, not simply manifest in the mutual degradation of town and country but is only comprehensible within the global geography of capitalism. In this sense, the metabolic relation maps individual experiences of production and consumption onto the global geography of capitalism. This rift in our social organization has more than purely aesthetic consequences or manifestations: it is itself essentially a problem of the dynamic relation between the
materiality of individual activity and the structural whole on which it depends and which it continuously re-produces: it is a problem, quite simply, of representation.

This formulation already begins to pivot toward the second aspect of this chapter’s argument, namely that poetic creation offers a mode of world-making through which this rift can be rendered visible and successfully critiqued. I propose to read Ben’s agricultural alienation as symptomatic of this rift in the metabolic reproduction of his world. The “brand of making” that Ben finds himself wanting for would not, then, cleanly unify the spheres of production and consumption in the comfort of his own home, but would fashion a world in which the metabolic exchange between creation and utilization, between phenomenological experience and global forces of economy and culture, could be coherently represented as modes of transforming — working over (“bearbeiten”), as Marx put it — a single world.

Whereas Marx understood metabolism as the social and material locus of alienated labor and the opportunity for a unified communitarian mode of production, there is also, I suggest, a metabolic poetics. As the geography of consumption and production becomes increasingly abstracted and fragmented, capitalism offers increasingly impoverished and destructive representations of the unity of our world. To so much as imagine the possibility of collective consciousness and the organization of universal struggle requires radically new modes of representation that transparently and democratically mediate between — metabolize — material particularity and abstract totality. Only with such an aesthetic could one work to “reproduce the whole of nature” in such a way as to situate everyday experience within the global circulation of labor and reveal the inseparability of material and

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7 “Freedom, in this sphere [of civilization], can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power.” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (1894; repr., New York: Penguin, 1992), 959.)
social alienation. The social circulation of labor through agriculture and eating, though by no means the only avenue for such a project, offers itself as both the most universal and the most literal instantiation of the global metabolism of the world in everyday life.

While Ben laments his distance from production and confronts what appears to be his political impotence, Lerner pursues a kind of poiesis that could re-describe consumption not simply as an instance of production but as the metabolic creation and recreation of the entire world under the limitations imposed by it. The novel is littered with scenes of pseudo-political activity that seem to critique the possibility of Ben acting politically, but the novel itself accomplishes a representation of the structural political alienation to furnish the ground upon which a collective political consciousness could be built. If 10:04 is an instance of “world literature,” it is not one defined by its thematic reach or the exploration of spaces that had once seemed peripheral to the traditional Western novel, but as a poetic medium through which the worldliness of globalized life can be represented. It is poetic production as world-making.

Analogously, although the novel is bookended by hurricanes Irene and Sandy and the specter of these storms leaves a shadow over the entire book, I will argue that these extreme weather events offer only superficial geographies of unity. If the novel is a paradigmatic example of “environmental literature,” it is not because it includes unusually bad weather; in fact, the hurricanes, I argue,

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8 For this reason, metabolic poetics offers a model for literary representations of ecological crisis that are firmly rooted in social critique and the global geography of our unsustainable reproduction of the world. Building upon the work of Ursula Heise, I hope to show that a truly environmental literature (and politics) is rooted, not in the reclamation of localities or the neat closure of commodity chains in small producer-consumer cooperatives, but in the navigation of the single environment — our collective and only world — that we have so unevenly and ineptly shaped. As I hope to show, a lot rides on how that unified geography is described: globe, planet, earth, world, and a variety of other spatial figures offer themselves. Each of these figures of totality lead to markedly different politics.

9 In this sense, I would propose Lerner’s novel as an attempt at world literature in the critical geographic tradition of “combined and uneven development.” For a wonderfully clear differentiation of world literature in this sense from those emergent from multicultural comparative studies or from postcolonial theory, see Warwick Research Collective, Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 1–48.
representationally undermine themselves, contesting the use of big climatological events to construct community or to capture the fundamental challenges of climate crisis.\(^\text{10}\) Instead, the novel responds to the political challenges of climate change by representing the globalization of unsustainable and unequal production through the alienation of urban consumption. By producing a poetic medium through which these appear as aspects of a single social geography, Lerner’s novel reminds us that the “environment” of ecological crises and the “world” of uneven globalization are one and the same. Whether Lerner succeeds in this brand of world-making will remain an open question, but the very reorientation of literature toward the representational challenges of our uneven geography is, I think, worthy of consideration in and of itself.

\(^{10}\) Environmental literature is increasingly defined as a distinct genre (as evidenced by the recent rise of the term “cli-fi”). Though this definition may be shaped variously by its protagonists (often non-human), its plot (filled with severe weather events), its ethics (largely dystopian and anti-modernist), or its spatio-temporality (cosmic and/or geologically expansive), a common thread of this new wave of eco-fiction is its animation of the natural backdrop against which novels had hitherto uncritically taken place. Speculating on the reasons behind climate change’s banishment to genre fiction, novelist and critic Amitav Ghosh captures the key premise of these calls to normalize extra-human events and characters in mainstream literature. Ghosh does not blame an inadequate understanding of climate change for this, but accuses the modern novel for being too tied to the “the probable” and “the everyday.” The problem, Ghosh seems to be saying, is not that we are too fixated on the climatological symptoms of radical inequality and geographic fragmentation, but that literature (specifically, the modern novel) is predicated on the mimetic recreation of a believable series of events. Setting aside the fact that extreme weather has littered fiction from its very inception, and ignoring the fact that we are much less likely to believe in the existence of global structures of inequality and arbitrary division than we are in the weather that we can’t help but experience for ourselves, Ghosh is, I think, making the case for the modern novel’s peculiar ability to represent the challenge posed by anthropogenic climate change. By translating the improbable, the occasional, the unbelievable, into the rhythms and patterns of everyday life, the novel is able to re-present the erratic symptoms of climate change in terms of the everyday world that has caused it. In a formulation oddly prescient of the argument of this chapter, Ghosh proclaims that this is the “irony of the ‘realist’ novel,” though I will suggest that this irony increases its veracity as opposed to concealing it. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 15–24.
II. The Geography of Irony and Sincerity

1. Tentacular Experience

If Ben’s encounter with the Occupy protester marks the moment in which Ben comes to realize his political impotence, how, exactly, does the novel diagnose this passivity? As the passage suggests, Ben blames the “asymmetry” between his consumption and others’ production. While the protestor has found a way to leverage his participation in American capitalism to challenge the very core of the global economy, Ben can’t so much as cook his own dinner. Contrary to his friends’ foodie fantasies, however, this isn’t a function of Ben’s laziness or complacent position at the end of the food chain, a product of not integrating creative labor into his receptive consumption. Instead, I will argue, the entire first section of the novel builds toward Ben’s realization that his passivity as a consumer reflects his deeper inability to form community. Whereas the protestor has joined a political collective through the strategic occupation of space, Ben’s meal is fully displaced from its circulation through the world of agriculture. Instead of situating him in a social system of continuous and active reproduction, eating reminds him of his dislocation from the world around him, inciting a crisis of the very intelligibility of his surroundings. In what follows, I trace the complexifying spatiality of scenes of consumption, each of which stage the impotence Ben experiences because of his inability to fully place himself in a social world. Behind these moments of ironic self-deprecation, I suggest, lie sincere narrative attempts (thematized by Ben’s actions, but staged by Lerner’s narrative) to create an alternative social map of the globe.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Or, as Ben puts it after his encounter with the protester, to redirect his desire to be needed and “let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit.” (Lerner, 10:04, 47.) Though already in this formulation, the sincerity of this project is tinged by its ironic recycling of leftist jargon. This alloy of ironic sincerity, or sincerity posed within a fragile ironic frame, is a key poetic motif that I return to below.
Ben’s fraught ingestion begins in the very first line of the novel. The story opens with a familiar literary prologue: Ben celebrating the advance he has received on his next novel, thereby staging the conception of the very book we hold in our hands. He and his agent walk along New York’s High Line, still digesting the “baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death.” The little mollusks seem to have gone down with some discomfort, perhaps channeling the more general unease Ben feels about capitalizing on his poetry. Ben works through the standard reflections of a remorseful carnivore, squaring the pleasure of those “impossibly tender little things” with his cursory awareness of their intelligence and complexity. But this detached concern of the ethical consumer is quickly supplanted by a very different indigestion, one born of his physical assimilation of the octopi as opposed to their moral autonomy. In a moment of near transmogrification, Ben’s perceptive (even proprioceptive) boundaries rapidly expand before being cut short by a different kind of narrative zoom, the return of the ironic framing:

We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me: the ability to perceive polarized light; a conflation of taste and touch as salt was rubbed into the suction cups; a terror localized in my extremities, bypassing the brain completely. I was saying these things out loud to the agent, who was inhaling and exhaling smoke, and we were laughing.\(^{12}\)

We might be inclined to say that this tentacular perception gives Ben, the protagonist, a kind of ecstatic experience of the world through an imaginative embodiment of another being, a perspectival shift or blurring of eater and eaten that is only broken off by the sobering irony in which even the most transporting experience can just as soon be deflated by retroactively placing it within the mouth of a protagonist overcome by cliché. These narrative poles of irony and sincerity may do more, however, than stand in opposition. Already in these opening lines, the tonal shift between the impersonal —

\(^{12}\) Lerner, 3–4.
perhaps even public — sensorium of Ben’s extended embodiment and the interiority and reflexivity of his meta-fictional protagonist laughing off that very mystical experience provides the narrative with a bridge, however tenuous and undeveloped at this early point, between radically different narrative scales.

This push and pull between earnest realism and postmodern irony continues throughout the novel: this proprioceptive flicker is but the first of many imaginative probes into the global contours of everyday life that Lerner continuously advances and then retracts, dancing between cynical mundanity and naive imagination. Indeed, Lerner anticipates this in the lines that follow. Speculating on what will organize the novel he must now write — and which we must now read — Ben tells his agent:

“I’ll project myself into several futures simultaneously,” I should have said, “a minor tremor in my hand; I’ll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid.”

If read attentively, this passage (like many others) prefigures the novel as a whole. I will, therefore, take some time to work through each part of it.

Formally speaking, oscillation between irony and sincerity describes the relationship in 10:04 between the author, Lerner, and the protagonist/narrator, Ben, as much as it does the tone of the narration itself. This slippery bond between a historically bounded writer and the poetically flexible narrator allows the novel to thematize the challenges and the possibilities of a poetic imagination that straddles otherwise disparate perspectival positions. If irony and sincerity do not simply refer to

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13 Lerner, 4.

14 This is far from incidental. Because the novel, as I will argue, turns to poetic representation to establish new “figures of collectivity,” it is only fitting that it should replicate this attempt within its own unity. This is yet another feature of its auto-fictional strategy: it constantly experiments with tropes, phrases, images, and patterns that attempt to capture the shape of the entire novel. Its passages, in other words, constantly try to pre-figure, re-figure, and con-figure the novel’s own coherence. Though I won’t explore this systematically, I will, indirectly, develop this aspect of the novel’s self-figuration throughout this chapter.
practiced distance, on the one hand, and vulnerable transparency, on the other, but are rather twin poetic strategies for moving between perspectival scales and thereby achieving a form of representation neither simply remote nor intimate but trained on the integration of the two, Lerner is promising something rather specific here. This oscillation (at its strongest, a dialectic), I will argue, lies at the core of this novel, and is not a postmodern gimmick of an endless series of false authorial bottoms exposed one after the other, but is a rather sober process of using the old tools of realism to chart poetic maps adequate to our sinking cities.

2. Twin Representational Challenges

This project makes all the more sense when we recognize that, in the passage above, Lerner is clearly positioning his novel at the juncture of two contemporary representational challenges, both of which involve a new sensitivity to scale. First, Lerner is affirming the increasing sense that the interiority, relativity, and political blindness of postmodern aesthetics has become untenable, even dangerous — a sentiment that gained steam in the 1990s and greatly accelerated (especially in the United States) after 9/11, as writers like Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Richard Powers worked to resurrect faith in the veracity of fiction and its ability to grasp the contours of the shared world outside of closed interiority. Critics have tied this trend to an attempt to revive fiction’s stable hold on public truth, dubbing this post-post-modernism the “New Sincerity.” Second is the challenge

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15 The term was first introduced by Adam Kelly who drew on Lionel Trilling’s distinction between the inherently public truth communicated by sincerity and the private self-expression of authenticity: Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131–46. This New Sincerity, Kelly suggests, is evident in a generation of writers who sought an alternative to the spiraling “hermeneutics of suspicion,” characteristic of postmodern irony, that aimed toward a truth buried in the depths of authenticity. In contrast, writers like Wallace sought to resurrect an “awareness of the public self,” though not in the mode of a nostalgic return but by navigating the bald superficiality of new media in which “truth may be uncannily on the surface.” (Kelly, 133, 138.) See Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972). It is worth noting that this repudiation of authenticity is, at least indirectly, a way of wresting a publicly constituted form of self-truth from the grip of Heideggerian individualism. See chapter 1 for an extensive
posed by the “sinking city,” a clear reference to the rapidly changing landscape of social life due to anthropogenic global warming. As the now prevalent neologism “the Anthropocene” suggests, one of the crises raised by this climatological specter is methodological: if geological and historical time are no longer distinguishable, then the very basis on which stories of human life have defined themselves against the glacial temporality of the earth is now jeopardized. This poses a representational challenge to literature as much as to history: if each human life is now clearly implicated in a tangle of processes that span the geography and the history of the earth, how can one tell a coherent story adequate to those dizzying scales? Both the attack on the World Trade Centers and increasingly violent weather patterns indicate that even the most encompassing of cities, New York, is no longer intelligible independent of a history and geography that far precedes and exceeds it.

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16 Though the term “Anthropocene” was first proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and marine biologist Eugene Stoermer (Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” IGBP [The International Geosphere—Biosphere Programme] Newsletter 41 (2000): 17.), it was historian Dipesh Chakrabarty who first observed the dramatic consequences for the human and social sciences of this collapse of temporal scales in his now classic essay: Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History.” See the introduction for a discussion of Chakrabarty in this context.

17 Though the geography of consumption (and its literalization in eating) is, I suggest, the strongest environmental strand of the novel, the disruptions to daily experience brought about by these climatological events will take on tangential importance in my reading of certain scenes. For a more direct reading of the novel’s narrative use of weather, see Ben De Bruyn, “Realism 4°: Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner’s 10:04,” Textual Practices 31, no. 5 (2017): 951–71.

18 A number of scholars have responded to this challenge by calling for a “scaled up” literature that could etch human stories onto the expanse of deep geological time. Wai Chee Dimock, for example, has provided a sustained re-reading of American fiction as world literature by inserting the geographic and historical specificity of “America” into what she calls “deep time.” (Wai Chee Dimock, Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time (Princeton University Press, 2008).) For the argument that literature should take up a truly geological scale of millions of years, see Mark McGurl, “The New Cultural Geology,” Twentieth Century Literature 57, no. 3/4 (2011): 380–90. See the introduction for a discussion of the “deep ecology” on which many of these gestures are based.
While these global threats to the paradigmatic organization of modern everyday life, the metropolis, are easily assimilated into the large-scale narratives of both climatologists and foreign policy hawks, the challenge to the representation of human life only emerges when trying to situate the minutiae of first-personal experience within this new geography. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it, this newly attained magnitude of human agency at the world scale “requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded history; species thinking and critiques of capital.”\(^\text{19}\) It is, therefore, only in finding new ways to bridge these narrative modalities that climatological, agricultural, geo-political, and other such paradigmatic crises become visible as the ugly faces of neoliberalism’s individuating geography. These two representational challenges, manifest in the explosion of New York’s social geography onto the world as a whole, demand that literature make concrete and intuitable the otherwise abstract machinations of capitalism at a global scale.

As will become clear later in this chapter, taking on these twin challenges is precisely what makes 10:04 such a powerful novelistic response to the climate crisis. At its best, Lerner’s text redefines the scope of everyday experience, rebuilding a map of globalized life out of the fractured provincialism of New York. In this sense, it works toward the kind of aesthetic that eco-critic Ursula Heise has described as a turn away from a static and narrow “sense of place” — attachment to a particular locale — (to which we might add a dilated “sense of geology”) and toward a dynamic “sense of planet — a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines.”\(^\text{20}\) To put the novel’s aesthetic project in another idiom, one suggested by Fredric Jameson, this multi-scalar representation offers the aesthetic grounds for a truly global political

\(^{19}\) Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 213.

\(^{20}\) Heise, Sense of Place, 55.
movement in so far as it “maps” “existential data (the empirical position of the subject) [onto] un-lived, abstract, conceptions of the geographic totality.”

3. “Figuring the Global”

That this formal project of charting the embeddedness of a single narrative perspective in far-flung global realities should be situated in the “vulnerable grid” of New York is, then, only fitting. The city’s electrical grid is, of course, physically threatened by the strengthening hurricanes. But the image of the “grid” is more than the geometric description of infrastructure: it is the apex of neutral and abstract spatial coordinates onto which the largest and most complex social systems can be easily mapped. At a very specific scale, New York does exhibit highly regular griddedness: Manhattan’s street layout may be one of the most iconic symbols of planned urban life, giving a densely dynamic social space a sense of intentional order and a(n aerial) perspective from which all the city’s social and geographic unevenness comes to seem perfectly smoothed over. By belying the true complexity and inequality of the city, the grid image promises everyone in the city an easy set of coordinates through which to perceive municipal unity and within which to orient their daily lives; the grid asserts a liberal

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21 Jameson, Postmodernism, 52.

22 As Jameson puts it, the “logic of the grid” reorganizes the “older sacred and heterogeneous space into geometrical and Cartesian homogeneity, a space of infinite equivalence and extension,” facilitating the endless chains of exchange and the universal equivalency of wage labor necessary for market capitalism. (Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1988), 349.) Though he associates the grid with the earliest stage of capitalism, the emergence of monopoly and, eventually, multinational capitalism has only exacerbated this abstraction and homogenization of space.

23 It isn’t incidental that Thomas Edison’s initial patents of the electrical grid began as superimpositions on the gridded geometry of New York City (whose grand 1811 street plan was about to be unveiled). For an excellent account of the history of the electrical grid and a critical exploration of its metaphors, see Michael Warner, “On the Grid (and Off)” (Paper presented at the 2017-2018 Tanner Lecture Series on Human Values at UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 2018), https://tannerlectures.berkeley.edu/2017-2018-lecture-series/.
ideology of even universality as much as it facilitates movement. More specifically, it uses the abstraction of a particular scale and piece of urban design to hypos tatize the aspirational notion of social equality via homogenous geography.

While the well-functioning grid suggests an even geometry of immaterial connectivity, this infrastructure, once threatened, reveals the highly uneven geography manifest in the material that mediates our social life. Thus, when the flow of electricity is jeopardized, the messy networks of infrastructural media that actually bind our world together suddenly come into view. It is only fitting, then, that as hurricane Irene comes bearing down on New York, Ben begins to experience his urban environs as belonging to a new kind of whole:

From a million media, most of them handheld, awareness of the storm seeped into the city, entering the architecture and the stout-bodied passerines, inflecting traffic patterns and the “improved sycamores,” so called because they’re hybridized for urban living. I mean the city was becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single centered eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled. There were myriad apps to track it, the Doppler color-coded to indicate the intensity of precipitation […]

24 As Warner puts it, “the metaphor of the grid allows this vast field of connection to be perceived as a unity.” (Warner, 14.)

25 Warner, building on Lisa Parks’ and John Durham Peters’ work on the inherent concealment of infrastructure, ties the strategic obfuscation of the electrical grid (and thus our convenient ignorance of our energy sources, usage, and disposal as well) to the abstracted geometry of griddedness:

The idea of a network subtracts the need to be conscious of underlying geography. Power circulates, as far as most of us can tell, in abstract geometry. The grid has its own geography, but also its own anti-geometry, so to speak; it is inherently deterritorializing. Now you see it, now you don’t. One could imagine a map of all the oddly shaped parcels of land that have stanchions, transformers, or cables on them—the junked-up interstices between things we actually notice. But when one imagines the grid it has less to do with these actual spaces than with immaterial schematics and whole territories.

The metaphor of “the grid” is especially apt, from this point of view, because it is a two-dimensional schematic realized in three-dimensional material structures. It is an extreme case of abstract space superimposed on the built environment, a “concrete abstraction” as Henri Lefebvre put it. (Warner, 12–13.)

Because every conversation you overheard in line or on the street or train began to share a theme, it was soon one common conversation you could join, removing the conventional partitions from social space; riding the N train to Whole Foods in Union Square, I found myself swapping surge level predictions with a Hasidic Jew and a West Indian nurse in purple scrubs. In place of a city unified by a pre-given geometry imposed by planners, utility companies, and political aspirations, the specter of a shared crisis weaves together the otherwise private snippets of conversation and movements of daily life into a fragile whole. The octopus returns again, now going far beyond the sheer dissolution of proprioceptive boundaries, instead offering a tentacular pattern through which the minutiae of daily life could be organized into a representation of the planet.

But does this aerial view of New York (depicted on the novel’s cover – see above) not further localize the city, clearly bounding it and offering a superficial camaraderie drummed up by disaster? Has New York’s suddenly planetary significance, centered on the weather radar and framed by the eye

Figure 1: Faber and Faber’s cover for 10:04

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26 Lerner, 10:04, 17.
of the storm, actually closed it off from the world and entrenched its already strong tendency toward provincialism? Bruce Robbins, reflecting on the aesthetic challenge amplified by 9/11 (as encapsulated by the opening line of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*: “it was not a street anymore but a world”), expresses exactly this quandary in a passage that could just as well have been written in response to this scene from *10:04*:

The street is what most novels take for their subject most of the time. It is by watching society at street level, so to speak, that the novel reader’s sense of identity and relationship has mainly been formed. Most novels do not train our eyes to look very high or very low, or for that matter very far away; they do not encourage us to look at superstructures, or infrastructures, or the structuring force of the world capitalist system. There are notable exceptions […] but as a rule, worldliness is not natural to the novel. This does not immediately change after 9/11. Like the protagonist in a suddenly darkened street that has been struck from above and from far away, the post-9/11 novel is first of all disoriented. If we can say that, like the street, the novel takes on the attributes of a world, the first meaning of this statement would have to be (this is how I understand Heidegger’s sense of worlding) that the event has created its own unique local surround, a restricted time/space that replaces and cancels out any abstract planetary coordinates. In this sense the worlding of the novel would leave it less worldly rather than more.27

Robbins’ distinction here between worldliness and what we might call localization28 is incredibly important. To say that the street, a city, or any locale takes on the attributes of an entire world — to suggest that it is a unified and closed geography — does not open the local onto its entanglement in the structures that extend far beyond its spatio-temporal limits, but entrenches the

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28 Though Robbins’ point does not rely on his reading of Heidegger’s notion of world, it confuses matters to use “world” synonymously with “environment,” both because it entirely misses the point of Heidegger’s analysis and creates a seeming tension where there isn’t one. See chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of Heidegger’s development of “world” as an explicit departure from spatial organization according to proximity. Though Robbins is right that Heidegger does not use the term to denote a general container of things near and far, it is just as little a term for one’s immediate or “restricted” environs, a notion for which German has the conveniently literal “Umwelt.” Indeed, the radicality (and final shortcoming) of Heidegger’s phenomenology is that the extensiveness of his phenomenological world is not spatial, but existential. Space, in the sense of distance, is derivative of the arrangements of meaning (what we might call social geography) that shape our world. It is, therefore, inappropriate to the Heideggerian notion of world to ask “how far” it extends, or whether a certain planetary coordinate is contained within it.
provincial notion that a place of sufficient power and planning (paradigmatically, New York City) could function like a complete world. In one sense, this is precisely what hurricane Irene accomplishes in 10:04: it offers a sufficiently abstracted point of view (the aerial radar of the storm) from which New York could not only be significant enough to be “viewable from space,” but could be contained enough to be neatly circumscribed by the storm’s eye.29

Ben’s mundane everyday is mapped onto a grand scale, but to what effect? No one actually sees the world through the eye of the storm; the Doppler radar’s entirely abstract geometry metaphorically maps by describing one scale of experience in terms of another.30 This zooming tool, or scalar toggle, gives Ben a convenient way to make sense of the strengthening winds, panicked murmurs, and new patterns of conversation and movement. And yet, in doing so, it obscures all understanding of the relation between Ben’s everyday experience and the enormous threat of the storm: the very technology that now tracks the winds, the modes of transportation that Ben and others take to stock up on supplies, and all the overlapping grids of infrastructure that are now under threat are themselves, at least obliquely, responsible for the storm and its highly disparate impact on the neighborhoods of New York. The Doppler not only obscures the material relation between the vulnerability and the culpability of the grid through which Ben moves, but also hides the dependency

29 While metaphysical notions of worldwide interconnectedness have been traded at least since Heraclitus speculated that the “kosmos” was reducible to manifestations of a single element (fire), it was only in the late 1960s with the release of the first satellite images taken of the earth from space that the physical unity of the globe could be represented so plainly. The iconic Blue Marble image from 1972 became the visual backdrop of the environmental movement, representing the beauty and magnitude of “Mother Earth” as much as its fragility. The irony of using an image whose scale strategically obfuscates human inhabitation to advance a movement decrying human-induced catastrophe is a symptom of simply magnifying localist traits of unity, harmony, and purity to a global scale. Ursula Heise traces the afterlife of these images in the proliferation of “allegories of connectedness” that take a holistic view of globalization, from Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the “global village” to James Lovelock’s “Gaia” theory (Heise, Sense of Place, 22–28.)

30 Michel de Certeau described this hasty totalization of abstract space in his well-known phenomenology of urban life. Looking over New York from the top of the World Trade Center, Certeau contrasts the “panoptic” viewpoint from which the city appears a neat and rational whole to the “microbe-like” practices whose “swarming activity” continuously resists and undermines the totalizing and disciplining administration of the city as a concept. Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 96.
of the threat posed by the storm on the resiliency of that infrastructure.\textsuperscript{31} To put it bluntly: the dams, roofs, generators, and private jets to high ground do not uniformly (or arbitrarily) distribute the storm's damage, a reality invisible from space.\textsuperscript{32}

If Ben's organic intuition of municipal holism is a political non-starter, is the project of “mapping” experience also a naive dead-end? As defined by Jameson above, the project of mapping “existential data (the empirical position of the subject) [onto] unlived, abstract, conceptions of the geographic totality” seems to promote precisely this problematic transposition of life onto abstract coordinates.\textsuperscript{33} How, then, to represent the interconnected geography of the globalized world without erasing the heterogeneous social geography whose injustice fuels that very globalization? To put it in slightly different terms, if life at street level has been disoriented, how might we recuperate a sense of

\textsuperscript{31} This echoes the problem discussed in chapter 2 of the separation of material from political infrastructure. Hannah Arendt’s attempt to cleave the “immaterial” web of social relations from the physical world of objects on which it depends is, as I argue there, theoretically incoherent, and obscures the constant tendency of the political sphere — defined by the possibility of equality — to alienate itself in inequalities. The unevenness of political life remains entirely obscure until the material and political projects of universal freedom are understood together.

\textsuperscript{32} Poet M. NourbeSe Philip has put this rather pointedly in her recent critique of the supposedly democratizing pervasiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic. As she puts it: “if we were truly ‘in this together,’ we wouldn’t be in ‘this’ at all.” (M. NourbeSe Philip, “Are We Really In This Together? With M. NourbeSe Philip,” The PEN Pod, April 9, 2020.) (Thank you to Cecilia Sebastian for pointing me to this wonderfully succinct formulation.) This contravenes the patently false and yet continuously repeated phrase of “[choose your natural phenomenon] doesn’t see class/race/geography/power.” This is simply the other side of the false holism buttressed by the Doppler's abstraction from the unevenness of social life that created and, in turn, is exacerbated by these phenomena. For an excellent critique of this false universality of environmentalist ideology, see Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez Alier, \textit{Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South} (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997). For a classic analysis of the production of natural space as a strategy for consolidating liberal capitalism, see Neil Smith, \textit{Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space} (1984; repr., London: University of Georgia Press, 2008). I return to Neil Smith at length below.

\textsuperscript{33} It is telling that Jameson borrows the term from the rationalist urban planner Kevin Lynch, whose 1950s vision of the dis-aliensated city was anything but democratic or materially grounded. As Robert Shields points out: “The notion of communal 'cognitive maps' occludes [the] diversity of thought and person. In brief, 'cognitive mapping' summarises a monological vision of the popular imagination and the cultural role of myth from the authoritative viewpoint of modernist regimes of bureaucratic urban planning and administration which is difficult to simply 'cleanse' from the phrase.” (Robert Shields, “Social Science and Postmodern Spatialisations: Jameson's Aesthetic of Cognitive Mapping,” in \textit{Postmodernism and the Social Sciences}, ed. Joe Doherty, Elspeth Graham, and Mo Malek (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992), 42.)
coherence without simply assuming spatial unity at another, larger, scale? As I have suggested, the danger (and contradiction) of unity achieved through aerial abstraction is that it tries to stabilize one scale of experience with recourse to a second scale, even though the latter is constituted by the former.34

4. Metaphorization and Abstract Space

The problem, which Jameson himself acknowledged,35 is that the spatiality of this map is strictly metaphorical. Critical geographer Neil Smith articulates this problem very clearly: “metaphor is inherently juxtapositional; it reveals one truth by asserting it as another. If we are to get beyond the reassertion of space, then, in search of rapprochement between the spatial and social, it will be necessary to fill in the conceptual abyss between metaphorical and material space.”36 Smith, drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s sweeping analysis of capitalism’s abstraction of space, reminds us that this metaphorization of special terms (“boundary,” “sphere,” territory,” “globe,” “scale,” etc.) lies at the heart of the modern rationalization of injustice and violence. Spatial figures come to organize every aspect of modern life, but as the uncritical ground against which the machinations of history unfold instead of as dynamic tools of analysis. Space has become “dominant but dead,”37 following a “general

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34 Heise is quick to point out the contradictions of the satellite image’s constructed unity: it offers “an antitechnological rhetoric relying on an image produced by advanced technology, an at least partially antiscientific discourse recurring to scientific insight to convey its message about the state of the world, and an emphasis on interconnectedness that was variously used to demonstrate the planet’s fragility or its resilience to human interference.” (Heise, Sense of Place, 24.)

35 “‘Cognitive mapping,’” he readily admitted, “was never anything other than a code word for ‘class consciousness.’” (Fredric Jameson, “Marxism and Postmodernism,” New Left Review, no. 176 (1989): 44.)

36 Smith, Uneven Development, 224.

37 Smith, 226.
metaphorization which, applied to the historical and cumulative spheres, transfers them into that space where violence is cloaked in rationality and a rationality of unification is used to justify violence.\textsuperscript{38}

We can now better formulate the challenges that Jameson sought to navigate with his notion of “mapping” and the reason that literature may be in a privileged position to negotiate them. Behind the task of reorienting, in Robbins’ terms, life on the street in terms of the (infra)structures of capitalism, lies the more general problem of how to mediate between, to put it crudely, distinct levels of phenomena. The question, as Ben himself reflects, is how to “figure the global” without reinforcing the gridded abstraction responsible for the very social disorientation in question. How, instead, might we “fill in the conceptual abyss” between them? Are irony and sincerity, then, perhaps not so much tied to particular spatial scales as to different strategies for relating scales? Or perhaps different, or even complementary, strategies for producing spatial coherence? If fiction performs, as its primary representational experiment, the challenge that all language takes up — how to achieve successful reference to the material truth of our world — then metaphor, irony, and other linguistic tropes are not simply linguistic embellishments but attempts to (re)establish a relation of truth to the world. They might all, in this sense, contain the possibilities of both realism and obfuscation. But if sincerity simply names the poetic project of establishing truth through fiction, it isn’t opposed to (or even an alternative to) irony at all. We face a slight proliferation and muddying of concepts at this point; before returning to Lerner’s text, I will digress somewhat further to pin down a few of these key poetic terms.

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Metaphor, as Smith and Lefebvre see it, simply passes the burden of explanation of a phenomenon onto another perspective. In the case of the metaphorization of space under capitalism, however, that perspectival shift takes on the specific character of abstraction, displacing the

heterogeneity of material space with an ideology of even unity, thereby obscuring the act of metaphorization itself. Smith, writing in the early 1980s and responding to poststructuralism’s strained relation to language, aligns this development in economic history with disciplinary biases, suggesting that, contrary to geography’s attention to spatial materiality, this abstraction is inherent to the literary metaphorization of space. More important than the contemporary influence of poststructuralist concerns over language’s ability to easily refer to the material world, was surely Lefebvre’s privileging of embodied experience over its sublimation in language. Lefebvre, rejecting the Saussurean notion that the “meta” of metaphor, metonymy, and other linguistic figures indicates a second-order of language, returns to the Nietzschean premise that all language is metaphorical in its basic transposition of fleshy experience into signs. “Metaphor and metonymy are not figures of speech,” Lefebvre concludes, but acts that “decode” and “dissolve” space through the metamorphosis of the body.

And yet, if figuration is not simply a linguistic flourish but a basic act that links embodied experience to other moments in space and time, it is hardly dispensable. The wholesale rejection of

39 For example:

For those of us trained in geography, the materiality of space (socially as well as physically constituted) is such a central assumption […] that it goes virtually unchallenged. This is by no means to exclude alternative understandings of space, but rather to highlight the priority accorded material space. For those trained in social and especially literary theory, however, space intervenes largely as metaphor. It is not that material space ceases to exist in these discourses; rather its materiality is, for them, so unproblematic (absolute space) that it raises few if any worthwhile questions. The interesting questions emerge instead from a gamut of personal, psychological, social, and conceptual ‘spaces’—arenas, realms, contexts, fields, conjectures—in which the dramas of human thought and interpersonal relationships are played out. (Smith, Uneven Development, 222–23.)

40 Certeau offers a strikingly similar critique of the reduction of sensory life to conceptual clarity, suggesting that the very premise of the “urbanistic ratio” lies in its “transformation of the urban fact into the concept of the city.” (Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 94.) This contrast is, at root, between the contradictions of bodily experience and the rationalization of sight; Certeau suggests that life at the street level is characterized by “tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation,” while its reduction to pure spectatorship follows the “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more,” leading to the panoptic totalization from abstracted elevation. (Certeau, 97, 92.)

41 Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 137–40.
unification, organization, or “mapping” of lived spatiality is as incoherent a goal as it would be counterproductive to resisting the deadening of abstraction. (This is, as Heise points out, the allure, the confusion, and the danger of fetishizing a “sense of place” in response to the homogenizing violence of globalization.) Just as Nietzsche had done a century before him, Lefebvre quickly concedes that, far from a retreat into mute physicalism, the necessary challenge to fixed and naturalized metaphorization is language in another form: its pluralization and free play — what he calls the inventiveness of “language in action.” Lefebvre, a trained Marxist committed to universal liberation, is acutely aware that any resistance to the abstraction of capitalist space must offer its own kind of spatial unification and organization. In fact, the specific problem with the capitalistic spatiality of the “globe,” Lefebvre argues, is that it asserts sovereignty over otherwise disparate spaces only by devising a hierarchy of newly fragmented spaces (as, for example, in the crude division of nations into various stages of “development”).

The problem, then, isn’t unification or even abstraction as such, but a unity that overwrites the material heterogeneity that it is meant to make sense of. The unification of space begins to rationalize violence when it employs metaphors that are devised to obscure their metaphoricity and mask the link back to their material referent. Far from establishing a representational bridge between

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42 Lefebvre, 138–39.

43 Lefebvre, 282.

44 It is here that Certeau’s analysis of urban alienation falls short of offering a clear politics of resistance. Certeau takes issue with the very project of making the city “readable” or “knowable”: the resistance of daily practice that he continuously extolls exists “below the thresholds at which visibility begins,” made up of bodies that “follow the thick and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of space that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms.” (Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 92, 93.)

It comes as no surprise, then, that Certeau conflates “geometric” and “geographic” constructions of space; to him, both smack of figurative maps that deviate from the immediacy of practice. As a consequence, he is forced to maintain that these networks of everyday practice that resist and subvert the regularization of rationalized urbanism remain “daily and indefinitely” outside any kind of representation. (Certeau, 93.)
material and metaphorical spatiality, the capitalist “globe” organizes social space in one direction only, continuously abstracting, fragmenting, and stratifying space, smoothing over any material resistance that could challenge its sovereignty. The hurricane, as seen on the radar, doesn’t simply take the perspectival position of an unmarked globe, but glides neatly over the clean geometric delineation of city, state, and national boundaries. Despite Ben’s romantic intuition of an organic unity to the city (a unity which, at the very least, would require a bi-directional relation of matter and form), New York’s unity is, at that moment, constructed by sublimating the millions of frantic people, each receiving and responding to the threat differently, into a single, impersonal terrain. If this one-directional abstraction compounds the disorientation it seeks to address, to what alternative modes of “figuring the global” does Ben have access?

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Though Smith and Lefebvre allow us to diagnose the representational challenge Ben faces as the erasure of material difference through metaphorical homogenization, they don’t offer much in the way of representational alternatives for literary imagination. For this, we might briefly borrow the conceptual precision and dexterity of another theorist of the spatiality of linguistic figuration, Kenneth Burke (through whom I will return to Lerner). Burke, like Lefebvre and Nietzsche, sees in the basic figures of language more than descriptive embellishments: they are, in his mind, fundamental strategies for discovering truth. Burke identifies four distinct, though complementary, tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Each of them asserts, as he puts it, a form of “poetic realism.”  

Beyond the mere correlation offered by their scientific counterparts, these poetic devices lay claim to truth by establishing coherence through spatial translations. Far from deviations from the materiality

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of our world, then, these devices each, in their own way, increase the reality of phenomena by enriching the dimensionality of the world in which they are placed.

Metaphorization, if understood as a poetic device for establishing reality, seems a much more innocuous and mundane tool through which we simply “consider A from the point of view of B.” This perspectival shift need not involve any kind of zooming out from or simplification of an original embodied experience. Nor does it undermine the veracity of the phenomenon (as it does in the case of scientific realism, for which perspectival plurality threatens a problematic relativism); quite the contrary, poetic realism increases “in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which [a phenomenon] can with justice be perceived.” Metaphorization establishes reality by translating horizontally, we might say, between views of one and the same world. Though it does loosen a phenomenon from its material specificity by translating laterally, it need not abstract or homogenize the space it establishes through vertical translation: it does not, necessarily, zoom between scales.

If we follow Burke’s typology, then, Ben’s vision of the storm as a cephalopodic organism, a clear attempt at translating his life on the street into a massively scaled up aerial view of the city, isn’t really metaphorization at all. Recall, however, how Ben comes to that image:

From a million media, most of them handheld, awareness of the storm seeped into the city […] There were myriad apps to track it […] The reality of the storm is only intuitable through the accumulation of countless media. Though Ben doesn’t specify — and it’s entirely possible that a single radar image or emergency message is blasted

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46 That isn’t quite right. Despite Burke’s insistence on the primacy of poetic reality, he hasn’t entirely overcome the Nietzschean myth of language’s corporeal origins. “Language,” he notes, “develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible; then in the course of time, the original corporeal reference is forgotten, and only the incorporeal, metaphorical extension survives.” (Burke, 506.) And yet, Burke seems to be referring only to the calcified metaphors of everyday “scientific realism,” which have lost their ability to translate in both directions. “Poets,” by contrast, “regain the original relation, in reverse, by a ‘metaphorical extension’ back from the intangible into the tangible equivalent.” This reverse movement, as we will see, is what he calls “metonymy.” (Burke, 506.)

onto every person’s smartphone or TV —, to say that awareness “seeped in” suggests that the storm’s presence is gathering diffusely and horizontally. How, then, does Ben translate this perspectival collage of media across the city into the brief glimpse of aerial unity? Through what kind of spatial unity, in other words, does this pluralization of perspectives actually increase the storm’s tangible reality? Far from the mere aggregation or abstract triangulation of these media, the “awareness of the storm” appears as organized and present in the very material infrastructure of life at the street level. Ben notices this growing awareness

entering the architecture and the stout-bodied passerines, inflecting traffic patterns and the “improved sycamores,” […] I mean the city was becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space.

Instead of moving from the material toward the abstract, the storm acts as a principle of unity through which the alterations of everyday life come to make sense as patterns belonging to a single (changing) world.

For Ben to intuit the city as organic does not, as Neil Smith feared, posit or presuppose its unity through the ideological erasure of its material parts; rather, it asserts a bi-directional translatability between whole and part. It is, to return to Burke’s typology, the integration of metaphor and metonymy through synecdoche. While metaphorization allows Ben to re-describe the phones, conversations, and TV screens around him as media for the communication of a single phenomenon, the storm is able to manifest itself through the material minutiae of everyday life via its metonymic translation into tangible particulars. Whereas scientific knowledge concretizes abstract phenomena through reduction, Burke argues that the metonymic translation of the general or abstract into the particular and corporeal is rooted in the poetic knowledge that “human relations require actions, which are dramatizations.”48 If the pluralization of metaphor or the concretization of metonymy were to work in isolation, they would

48 Burke, 506.
spiral into relativism or fall into reductionism, respectively. For these translations to remain visible as acts, they must facilitate coherence in both directions as an ongoing process, or “drama.” This “relationship of convertibility” is nothing other than synecdoche. In a rudimentary sense, Burke points out, synecdoche is synonymous with any instance of representation: all works of fiction (or, for that matter, works of art) are synecdochic in so far as elements within the work claim to “stand in’ for corresponding relations outside it.” Similarly, all societies are organized in some way around the premise that certain individuals may represent the will of the people as a whole. But if we consider representation not simply as substitution but as a mechanism for translating neatly between social spaces, synecdoche appears a figure through which we mediate between part and the whole, the material and the abstract, the street and the world, in both directions; it suddenly furnishes the coordination of pluralization and concretization.49 It starts to seem like precisely the kind of production of space that Lefebvre called for: unified yet heterogeneous, a vehicle for collective class consciousness that would build upon and not erase differences among people.

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Though she describes this reductive concretization in terms of allegory, Ursula Heise articulates this problem, specifically as it arises in environmental aesthetics, in strikingly similar terms:

The rhetorical figure that predominated in the textual as well as visual representations of Planet Earth that surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s was undoubtedly allegory, broadly understood as the figuration of abstract concepts and connections by means of a concrete image. […] these representations relied on summarizing the abstract complexity of global systems in relatively simple and concrete images that foregrounded synthesis, holism and connectedness. The efficacy of these tropes depended not only on their neglect of political and cultural heterogeneity […] but also on a conception of global ecology as harmonious, balanced, and self-regenerating.50

49 Burke, 507–9.

50 Heise, Sense of Place, 63.
Heise clearly looks to go beyond this representational reduction to achieve planetary unity without overwriting internal heterogeneities. But by turning to aesthetic forms like collage and montage, she remains in the additive idiom of multiplying and juxtaposing scales and perspectives, an aesthetic without any clear sense of the single geography to which they all contribute. Though this kind of decentralized aesthetic may facilitate smooth translation between parts, it isn’t clear what kind of unity it could be productive of. It is one thing to depict an intricate web of linkages within a static or pre-given whole; it is another to represent those elements as mutually generative of the very horizon of unity against which they are intelligible as parts. The aesthetic challenge is not simply to discover or posit the right kind of synecdochic unity, but to describe the reciprocal process by which a problematic form of unity could be re-worked and re-produced into a democratic and transformative one. This is, as I will suggest below, nothing other than the final element of Burke’s typology: dialectical irony.

5. “Bad Forms of Collectivity”

Ben’s position as an alienated consumer, it is now apparent, is not lacking for global imagination, but is trapped within impoverished and abstracted figures of the global, in which consumption can only appear as a passive part of a totality over which it has no productive power. It isn’t lost on Ben that there is a “system of great majesty and murderous stupidity”; he readily intuits

51 The political symptom of this aesthetic approach is her celebration of “cosmopolitanism,” without fully determining what kind of collectivity this world citizenship would entail. The term, in and of itself, offers little political specificity other than its aspiration toward universality: it can appeal to visions of utopian collectivity that range from Kantian ethical imperatives that furnish the basis for rights-based commonality, to Smithian economic celebration of liberal capitalism and citizenship of the world market, to Marxist appeals to the shared subjectivity of the international proletariat. Heise draws upon more recent revivals of the term in the work of Ulrich Beck, Martha Nussbaum, and Anthony Giddens, particularly with the notion of the “risk society,” in which global citizenship it created in the face of shared vulnerabilities. Though, as Beck’s famous line that “poverty is hierarchical, smog is democratic” indicates, the utopian fantasy at work here is as liable to erase the unevenness of vulnerability to risk as other modes of organizing global community. Though Beck hopefully asserts that “risks display an equalizing effect,” the geography of ecological vulnerability has shown that to be hopelessly naive. See Heise, 119–59; Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, trans. Mark Ritter (London: SAGE, 1992), 36.
the mess of New York as a cleanly unified meteorological octopus. This problematic totality comes to a telling, if somewhat humorous, head as Ben tries to explain a motley collection of anxieties to Roberto, a young boy that he has been tutoring. Roberto tells Ben of his recent dreams that meld his confused — though not entirely unwarranted — fears of a coming ice age, faraway dictators, a recurrence of 9/11, and memories of his traumatic escape from El Salvador. In response, Ben, far from offering a neat accounting of the globe in which these anxieties could be placed and allayed, is himself overtaken by the crude yet overpowering vision of global calamity gestating in Roberto’s dreams. He experiences

an increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes an alien artifact, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse, or paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration, as when a Ugandan warlord appears via YouTube in an undocumented Salvadorean child’s Brooklyn-based dream of a future wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns and an imperial juridical system that dooms him to statelessness; Roberto, like me, tended to figure the global apocalyptically.\(^{52}\)

The scissors are not defamiliarized because they break, nor because they are removed from a proximate sphere of work.\(^{53}\) Far from a problem of functionality, Ben’s scissors lose their familiarity because they both do and don’t succeed in disclosing the spatial and temporal relations in which they are made and used. Their functionality and familiarity go unchallenged so long as they appear in a context of cutting paper, being on sale at the office supply store, posing a danger if used improperly,

\(^{52}\) Lerner, \textit{10:04}, 13–14.

\(^{53}\) Though this may be reminiscent of the classic Heideggerian broken hammer, note the radically different everyday geography underlying this scene. In Heidegger’s account of everyday defamiliarization, the totality that comes into view is not infinite but discrete and specific: the totality of one’s life. Because first-personality is the frame for everything else in Heidegger’s phenomenology, there is always a built-in stop to the spiraling zoom triggered by crises of meaning. To put it another way, there is only \textit{one} scale at which meaning (i.e. coherent unity) is possible for Heidegger, and that is the scale of first-personality — the horizons erected by “my life.” Needless to say, an aesthetics grounded in the bi-directional relation between phenomenology and worldliness cannot rest on this kind of absolute frame for organizing experience. See chapter 1 for an extended discussion of Heidegger’s phenomenological discovery and disfiguration of worldly coherence.
etc. But as soon as the coherence of those relations is threatened, the intelligibility of the scissors is put into jeopardy. This “collapse” of space and time, however, does not simply come from a narrowing field of intuition or the rupture of a proximate life-world, but through an overwhelming integration of these at a global scale: whereas consuming the octopi had caused Ben to collapse into an intensification of proprioceptive particulars, this agnostic disorientation moves in the opposite direction toward a dizzying view of global totality. When an everyday object ramifies itself out into every corner of the globe equally and indiscriminately, it signifies just as little as when its raw materiality erases its functionality: to haphazardly bring Robert Kony, climate change, and immigration policy together in a pair of safety scissors can only exacerbate alienation’s isolation and passivity; Ben and Roberto are left to grasp for coherence without any meaningful figurative tools to produce it. Total global integration via global conspiracy is simply the other side of siloed isolation.\textsuperscript{54}

It is here that we return to the fractured geography of alienated consumption and where a reciprocity of part and whole offers itself as a potential alternative for poetic realism. If, as I suggested at the outset, Lerner’s signal achievement in diagnosing the representational challenge posed by climate change is shifting our focus from severe weather events to the isolation of consumption from the dispersed geography of production, we might rearticulate the political passivity Ben finds himself confronted with as he cooks for the protester. The problem is, quite simply, that the act of eating has been severed from its world. In the maps of global unity readily available to Ben — grids, “free” marketplaces, aerial radars, “world-wide” webs of information technology, YouTube conspiracy — consumption figures as an isolated part with only a passive relation to the whole. In this neoliberal individualism, the only relation between consumption and the spheres of production (farming, logistics, waste management, land policy, seed ownership, crop subsidy, and so on), is purchasing

\textsuperscript{54} Jameson astutely notes that conspiracy theories are simply “degraded attempt[s] […] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.” (Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 38.)
power. By reducing the consumer’s representation in the world of agriculture to the weight of their wallets, eating is shielded from its dependency upon and production of the world of agriculture.\textsuperscript{55} The fractured geography of globalized agriculture has reduced eating to a private matter of gastronomic pleasure and caloric accounting, conveniently occluding the vast web of relations through which that experience is mediated.

As Ben makes his way to the grocery store to stock up in anticipation of potential shortages after the storm, he experiences another instance of sudden global integration, this time neither conspiratorial nor aerially abstract, organized instead around the concrete circulation of an everyday object. Surrounded by frantic fellow preppers and alarmingly empty shelves, everything appears just a little different, a little less familiar. Because the threat of the storm suddenly makes Ben “viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy,” he chances upon one of the store’s last cans of instant coffee as if striking upon some kind of treasure.

I held the red plastic container, one of the last three on the shelf, held it like the marvel that it was: the seeds inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellin and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura — the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space

\textsuperscript{55} As many critics have noted, the alienation of eating — most obvious in the wealthy and urban, but equally, if not more nefariously, present for the poor and rural — is a direct consequence of the reduction of political participation to consumerism, the shadow of political potency remaining in a globalist geography devoid of any relationality between consuming and producing our world. Armed with this critical geography, the contradictions of the locavore movement are all too clear: in the face of the perceived placelessness of globalized agriculture, celebrating food systems for their geographic proximity gives up on the possibility of universal collectivity or a system of agriculture that serves everyone, and instead rests content with the microcosms of backyard, garden, or “foodshed.” Recent movements that foreground “food justice” and “food sovereignty” have highlighted the convenient elitism and exclusivity of this kind of backyard provincialism. See, for example: Julie Guthman, \textit{Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California}, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Alison Hope Alkon, “Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism,” \textit{Gastronomica} 14, no. 2 (2014): 27–40; Raj Patel, “Food Sovereignty,” \textit{The Journal of Peasant Studies} 36, no. 3 (2009): 663–706; Chad Lavin, “Pollanated Politics, or, the Neoliberal’s Dilemma,” \textit{Politics and Culture} 2 (2009): 57–67.
and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close.\textsuperscript{56}

Has Ben managed to extract something like a synecdochic map out of this otherwise unremarkable tub of beans? The coffee glows with its own commodity history, puncturing the closed economy of the grocery store with a long horizontal chain of metaphorical translations between otherwise scattered scenes of labor and exchange. The disorder threatened by the storm discloses, it seems, forms of globalization other than sheer abstraction, instead integrating the sad scene of his consumption into a multitude of spaces of production. And although Ben manages to couple himself onto this grand chain of production, he remains the only link that does not reciprocally shape the entire world of social relations organized around that coffee. As the consumptive endpoint of this linear series of translations, Ben remains passive, powerless to do anything other than accept or reject the commodity delivered to him. He has, in other words, mapped out a materially specific and geographically uneven world out of his act of consumption, but has no role in that world to change it; Ben may be a more enlightened consumer, but is no more a contributing member to his political community than before. To use one of Lefebvre’s distinctions, Ben has succeeding in relating his purchase to spaces of production, but has not managed to represent his consumption as participating in the production of space.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Lerner, \textit{10:04}, 19.

\textsuperscript{57} It comes as no surprise, then, that as soon as the hurricane has fizzled (it passes almost unnoticed in its anticlimactic landing), the estrangement that had fueled Ben’s new attunement to the global agricultural economy fades along with it. The coffee is “no longer a little different from itself, no longer an emissary from a world to come.” Without the specter of the storm, the synecdochic translation between strangers and the city as a social whole, between commodities and their global supply chains, vanishes. Moreover, “because those moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained; they’d faded from the photograph.” (Lerner, 24.) Here, the novel’s two recurring intertextual references collide to remind us of the fraught temporality of any reciprocal — dialectical — production of space: Walter Benjamin’s infamous Angel of History, propelled by a windy storm with its \textit{back to the future}, warns us that the construction of a coherent “world to come” is only intelligible retrospectively, while Marty McFly’s unintentional revision of the present through his blind meddling in the past (in \textit{Back to the Future} — a cheap, though remarkably incisive, pun) underscores the dependency of the future on the interrelations of minutiae in the present.
To represent Ben’s consumption as truly participatory in — productive of — the global supply chains in which he finds himself entangled requires more than bi-directional synecdoche: it requires a dynamic relation between parts and their whole. It requires, in other words, a production of space clearly situated in historical time. This dialectical representation of totality is, aesthetically speaking, nothing other than dramatic irony. As Burke puts it, irony names the moment at which a plurality of terms relate in such a way as to “produce a development which uses all the terms.” Burke is careful to distinguish this “classical irony” from the particular form cultivated by the romantics, in which the opposition of elements doesn’t further the development of poetic reality but is an “aesthetic opposition to cultural philistinism,” placing the artist “outside of and superior to the role he was rejecting.”

Though this relativism of perspectives is a perpetual temptation of ironic dialectic, its classic form, Burke insists, strengthens the poetic claim to a singular reality by arranging the aesthetic terms “in an orderly parliamentary development,” in which each perspectival element is “neither true nor false, but contributory.”

If we read Lerner’s pledge to move from irony to sincerity in Burke’s terms (as a commitment to a dialectical figuration of consumption aimed toward the poetic development of a coherent world), the novel’s project suddenly becomes much clearer. Sincerity no longer invokes a tenuous revival of some kind of pre-ironic naïveté from the ruins of modernity’s aesthetic fragmentation; instead, it simply asserts faith in the ability of poetic language to establish a democratic form of representation through the continuous development of spatial figuration. The very notion of consumption, however, resists this: its passivity refuses participation in this process of spatial (re)production, tending toward

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For an extended reading of Lerner’s use of these two textual references, especially as they relate to the temporality of the novel’s political imagination, see Pieter Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future,” Political Theory 45, no. 5 (2017): 659–81.

58 Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 512, 514.

59 Burke, 513.
the interiority of authenticity more than the publicity of sincerity.60 Consumption, so long as it is the receptive “taking in” without any active “giving out,” remains a one-directional affair, a piece of a whole to which it will never contribute.61 Consumption is, of course, only one of many ways to describe the practice of assimilating and receiving the world, one which emerges from the long chain of globalized production. Ever since biologists, chemists, and philosophers realized that humans fundamentally alter the world around them, however, a different term has circulated, one which is entirely contributory, sincere, and dialectical: metabolism.

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60 As noted above, this notion of sincerity as a commitment to a publicly constituted reality and authenticity as a modern privatization of self-truth, is developed at length in Lionel Trilling’s excellent genealogy: Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. See, also, chapter 1 for a discussion of the clash of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) and worldliness (*Weltlichkeit*) in Heidegger’s work in particular.

61 There is, in this sense, something fundamentally incoherent in Certeau’s re-description of consumption as resistant to the very forces of capitalist production that create and control it: even the most dissident and “devious” consumption lacks a participatory or re-productive character so long as it stands outside the representation sphere of relationality. For consumption, in other words, to truly be productive, it cannot do so in a purely local or physiological way: it must participate in a *total re-production* of the world.
III. Metabolic Poetics

1. Laboring over the “Whole of Nature”

It is no accident that the theorists of “combined and uneven” worldliness that I have gathered here — Smith, Lefebvre, Burke (though only partially), Jameson, and (indirectly) Heise\(^{62}\) — all situate their thinking within the larger Marxist problematic of marshalling attention to material particularity toward universal collectivity.

Though Marxist critique has generally prioritized (as did Marx himself) a diachronic historical analysis of political economy over a synchronic geographic one,\(^{63}\) the tools for a spatial articulation of

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\(^{62}\) Burke, far from an orthodox Marxist (or, for that matter, orthodox anything), was nevertheless deeply intertwined in the problems raised by literary and cultural Marxists, particularly in the 1930s. He maintained that his idiosyncratic aesthetics, which he later termed “Dramatism,” was essentially the union of Marxist and Freudian rhetoric. In particular, Burke’s eventual integration of aesthetics and practice led to the redirection of literary critique toward cultural and social phenomena (as evidenced by his typology of tropes). For a more detailed discussion of Burke’s fraught inheritance of Marxist aesthetics, see Paul Jay, “Kenneth Burke and the Motives of Rhetoric,” *American Literary History* 1, no. 3 (1989): 535–53.

Heise relies on leftist critiques of both globalism and reactionary localism to articulate the social-geographic problem inherent to most forms of eco-fiction and -criticism. And yet, she freely blends the diagnoses offered by figures like Jameson and Harvey across ideological and political lines. Although this makes for rich and dexterous aesthetic hermeneutics, it blunts the practical import of her aesthetic critique (as evidenced by the ambiguity of her use of “planetary” and “cosmopolitan,” adjectives that reach toward a liberalist embrace of a mosaic of difference as much as toward a strategy for universal self-determination). Though she may not direct her critique toward collective consciousness and revolution, Heise certainly offers a diagnosis in which the representational challenges raised by anthropogenic climate change are matters of social organization, challenging environmental aesthetics to recognize the inherent linkage between the unevenness and integration of capitalist geography.

\(^{63}\) Though this prioritization of temporality over spatiality far exceeds the history of Western Marxism. As Michel Foucault, himself heavily reliant on spatial metaphors to capture the articulation and contestation of power, mused: “A critique could be carried out of this devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations. Did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.” (Michel Foucault, “Questions on Geography,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (1976; repr., New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 70.) Edward Soja has attempted precisely such a genealogical critique: see Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

Georg Lukács made an analogous argument with regard to nature. In what came to be a foundational sentiment for Western Marxism, Lukács insisted that dialectical analysis be
national alienation are particularly rich thanks to Marx’s fixation on the relation between the spheres of production and consumption. Indeed, David Harvey, who (together with Neil Smith and a number of other urbanists and geographers) has argued for a “historical-geographical materialism,” has suggested that the geography of social structures and the recognition of the plasticity of that geography have been clear at least since Marx first described the globalization of the capitalist market. Not only does the reification of labor in tradable commodities create a global market by allowing for the infinite circulation of goods across immense spaces that are otherwise heterogeneous — nowhere clearer than in the universal exchangeability and mobility of money —, but spatial reconfigurations (in this case, frantic globalization) offer capitalism a temporary resolution to its fatal contradictions. Capitalism’s continuous acceleration of labor, circulation, and cycles of demand, Harvey argues, are only possible through “long-term investments” in “elaborate and stable infrastructures for production, consumption, exchange, communication, and the like,” which not only enable increased production but also absorb the constant crisis of overproduction generated by this very frenzy.

And yet, despite the obvious spatiality of Marx’s and Engel’s radical suggestion that the new “world market” would enable an international class consciousness otherwise unimaginable, the tendency toward historicism has obfuscated the spatial re-organization at the heart of Marx’s analysis limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels’ account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels—following Hegel’s mistaken lead—extended the method to apply also to nature. However, the crucial determinants of dialectics—the interaction of subject and object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc.—are absent from our knowledge of nature.” (Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (1923; repr., Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971), 24.

64 See, for example, his classic work: David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
66 Harvey, 6.
of alienated labor. If this is partly because, as Harvey suggests, space seems to resist dialectical analysis and tend toward its own reification, that would seem to largely be attributable to a geographic sensibility that is itself reified from the outset. Indeed, it was Marx himself that developed one of the most dialectically suggestive figures of the rift between production and consumption in terms as much geographic as historical: that of a rift in our “social metabolism.”

The environmental crises of the early nineteenth-century (among others, population explosion, urban pollution, and rapid soil degradation) began to put into question the notion that nature was a static material substrate for the dynamics of social activity. Because of this, the fragile relation between the capitalist modes of industrial production and the resources on which they relied became of increasing concern to both industrialists and their critics. Marx, following on the work of agricultural chemists, particularly that of Justus von Liebig, became increasingly aware that the exploitation of labor and the exploitation of the soil were inseparable aspects of capitalist production.67

These twin processes, Marx argued, were not only coincident symptoms of the same industrialization of agriculture and manufacturing, but were only possible through one another. As early as 1844, Marx had argued that human freedom lies not in contemplation but in the particular way that human labor works (“bearbeitet”) the material word. Unlike the animal that builds a nest or digs a hole, human being, Marx argued, is distinguished by the practical fact that it does not simply

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manipulate nature here and there, but “produces universally”; animals “produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature.” This universality, which Marx called our “species-being,” manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic body, 1) as a direct means of life and 2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. [...] Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue [beständigem Prozeß] with it if he is not to die."

This continuous reproduction of the entirety of nature as an “objective world” does not simply ensure the survival of human being, but realizes its freedom to recreate itself. Because of this, the alienation of labor is manifest in the disruption of this reciprocal dependency and reproduction of human life and its material world; nature is “taken from him.”

Of course, Marx didn’t mean that every house we build or every meal we eat creates some kind of butterfly effect that rewrites the face of the entire globe. Our “universality” isn’t, in other words, a matter of the scale or scope of human labor. In an oft-cited passage clarifying the particularity of human labor from that of any other animal, Marx insisted that even the worst builder is superior to the most industrious bee in that they build the structure in their head before in substance. Any instance of labor, in other words, is representationally embedded in an idea of the “whole of nature.” The “working over” of nature in any one moment, to use the figurative language we have developed, is synecdochally related to the entirety of nature. Moreover, this exchange between the human body and its “inorganic body” is enabled by the possibility of change. “Through this movement [the human] acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.”

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68 Marx, Early Writings, 329.
69 Marx, 328.
70 Marx, 329.
72 Marx, 283.
Neither part nor whole have a pre-given form toward which they work: labor is free precisely because any moment of it is inscribed within a totality that is forever changing. Labor is inscribed within an ongoing drama of change, contributing to a collective dialectical history through the reciprocal transformation of part and whole.

2. A Material and Metaphorical Rift

The dialectics of labor's transformation of material and human nature became even clearer in Marx’s later writings. There, he re-described this bodily metaphor of human being’s reproduction of nature in the more precise and dialectical image of “metabolism” (“Stoffwechsel”). In this figure, labor is not simply the process of re-working or re-producing the natural world in the fixed image of man, but expresses a circulatory exchange of material that is both self-regulating and self-transforming. In the early nineteenth century, metabolism was an increasingly common concept used to describe the systematic exchange between a particular element of life and its material surroundings, whether at the cellular, organismic, or ecological level. Labor understood as “social metabolism,” as Marx came to call it, was thus always inextricable from its physiological reference (in particular, to digestion and respiration). More importantly, the physiological valence of the term provided a normative yet material basis on which to describe human labor as both transformative of nature and inscribed within it. The stakes of this are great: our freedom to transform the world around us is not a freedom from the conditions of nature but, to the contrary, a freedom to actualize our universal self-understanding.

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74 See, for example, Marx, *Capital, Vol 1*, 198–200. For a detailed analysis of Marx’s transformation of natural scientific theories of metabolic disruption into a general theory of socio-natural alienation, see Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 155–63.
through our particular material limitations. Expressed in the other direction, metabolic freedom is not simply a material exchange, a local reciprocity, but is the *participation in the continuous re-production of the world as a whole.*

The immense power behind this notion of labor also exposes its fragility. Because metabolism inscribes the ideality of freedom into the specific material conditions of labor, that freedom is historically contingent. Metabolism was, therefore, analytically essential for Marx not only to articulate the material unity of man and nature but also the potential for them to become alienated from one another.

This alienation, though it disrupts the *futurity* of freedom, is manifest in the *spatiality* of labor under capitalism.75 By showing that this alienation takes the form of a “metabolic rift” between society and nature, Marx was also able to tie the historical specificity of capitalist production to geographic reconfigurations in our working over of the material world, particularly in the industrialization of agriculture. Von Liebig had already tied the rapid depletion of the soil to the spatial separation of agricultural production and consumption through urbanization,76 an observation that became central to Marx’s critique of the land-ownership and land-use underpinning industrialization. In his critique of the market pressures exerted on agriculture by the privatization of farmland, Marx argued:

> Large landed property reduces the agricultural population to an ever decreasing minimum and confronts it with an ever growing industrial population crammed together in large towns; in this way it produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself [die einen unheilbaren Riß hervorrufen in dem Zusammenhang des gesellschaftlichen und durch die Naturgesetze des Lebens vorgeschriebenen Stoffwechsels]. The result of this is a squandering of the

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75 Metabolism, as Eric Swyngedouw has put it, integrates discrete moments across historical time as much as geographical space: because it is a “process of transformation-in-movement,” it “is a historical process, it has a time arrow.” (Swyngedouw, “Metabolic Urbanization,” 24, 26.)

76 As Liebig put it, “if it were practicable to collect, without the least loss, all the solid and fluid excrements of the inhabitants of towns, and to return to each farmer the portion arising from produce originally supplied by him to the town, the productiveness of his land might be maintained almost unimpaired for ages to come.” (Justus von Liebig, *The Natural Laws of Husbandry*, ed. John Blyth (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1863), 261.)
vitality of the soil, which is carried by trade far beyond the bounds of a single country. (Liebig)\(^77\)

This metabolic description of production and its alienation is both social and literal; more precisely, it is both figurative and material.\(^78\) In the agricultural circulation of nutrients through soil, farmer, distributor, consumer, and disposer, the seemingly local physiological exchange between the human body and its natural “inorganic body” is, in fact, inseparable from the universal metabolism of the “whole of nature.” For human activity to \textit{transform} its world, we must be able to represent its physical localization in any given action as participating in a single process of reproducing the entire world. Because the freedom of labor, according to Marx, is not traceable to the material content of that labor or to a state of mind while performing it, its alienation is, similarly, not simply a material matter of a physiological imbalance, nor even localizable to the mutual degradation of urban and rural. The “rift” is in our collective nature, our “species-being” as Marx puts it; it is a breakdown in the very capacity for our labor to figuratively universalize itself. \textit{Metabolism is thus a materialist description of human labor as dialectically regulated (and therefore fragile) world-making.} Because this \textit{poiesis} always re-makes its world both materially and figuratively, (free) labor projects the possibility of a different world to come by representationally enacting the relation between the particular and the whole.

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Though Marx was primarily concerned with the alienation of labor through industrialized production, the metabolic potentiality (and alienation) of labor has become increasingly visible in the isolation and de-politicization of consumption. The fragmentation and deadening of consumption


\(^78\) Swyngedouw expresses this nicely: “historical-geographical materialism could mobilize the concept of metabolism, neither as just an organic analogy to the social order […] nor as a mere metaphor to be transposed onto society, but as the very foundation of and lasting condition for the social.” (Swyngedouw, “Metabolic Urbanization,” 22.)
does not, then, lie in its passive opposition to the imagined liveliness of production: both find themselves internally severed from their participation in changing the world around them.

We may, then, finally be able to understand Ben’s insecurity around the Occupy protester. The irksome “asymmetry” Ben recognizes while preparing his tasteless stir-fry cannot arise out of a sheer imbalance between his roles as consumer and producer, a passivity born of distance from cooking or growing his own food. Indeed, Ben suppresses the contradiction between his “avowed political materialism and [his] inexperience with this brand of making” by reminding himself how much worse their superficial reintegration in self-righteous “boutique biopolitics” is. Tracing one’s coffee back to the plantation where it was grown may ease one’s conscience by offering a more “informed” or “ethical” consumerism, but it does nothing to reclaim one’s consumption of the coffee as participation in an ongoing process of collective (re)making of the world as such. The allure of reducing “food miles” with a locavore diet or of recreating the entire food system in the microcosm of one’s backyard rests on the conflation of the material satisfaction of production with the situation of labor within a universal politics of collective transformation. The “brand of making” to which Ben feels inadequate has less to do with the materiality of his labor (making his own food) than with its figurative mapping (making sense of his participation in the world).

This metabolic rift not only isolates Ben geographically from the world in which he lives, but severs his actions from their temporal projection of a different future. This expresses itself somewhat humorously in the moment that Ben’s desire to participate in producing his world — his desire to feel “depended upon” — is redirected toward a sudden longing for a child. But Ben catches himself,

79 By giving up on any sort of universally emancipatory agricultural project, these movements not only reduce the collective dialectics of our public world to the private self-containment of domestic life, but, in so doing, reduce political action to moral self-preservation. As Chad Lavin has recently put it, they “trade a politicization of consumption for a consumerist politics.” (Chad Lavin, Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 113.) See chapter 2 for an extended discussion of this reduction of politics to ethics via the containment of public life to private domesticity.
realizing how absurd and inadequate it is to replace the *poiesis* of collectivity with the self-reproduction of offspring:

Then I recoiled at the thought, wanted one not at all. So this is how it works, I said to myself, as if I’d caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household, that almost caricatural transvaluation of values lubricated by wine and song. Your gesture of briefly placing a tiny part of the domestic—your bathroom—into the commons leads you to redescribe the possibility of collective politics as the private drama of the family. All of this in the time it took to prepare an Andean chenopod.

Ben, Lerner assures us here, is not so naive as to allow himself such an easy victory. The danger of consumer politics, as Ben recognizes, is the easy substitution of a balanced domestic economy for a fractured and unequal global geography, a metonymic substitution of the proximate for the whole without any sense of reciprocal translatability into universality. So what is the alternative? Ben muses on:

> What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostatizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit.

Though not yet in an idiom with which Ben can make much of anything, Lerner gives us a flicker of the novel’s poetic project: redirecting the one-directional inwardness of consumption toward the “horizontal” figuration of collectivity (a process, we have seen, of metaphor). This communal construction of a world could provide an alternative map of the whole through which the specificity of any given moment could reappear as an element of something other than the static abstractions of capitalist totality.

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80 Lerner, *10:04*, 47.
81 Lerner, 47.
In what follows, I will argue that the rest of the novel describes — and performs — this “transpersonality” through the metabolic circulation and refiguration of language. Moreover, fiction (in this case, *poiesis* is, paradigmatically, prose) offers a way of rearranging this social infrastructure, illuminating the plurality of possible future worlds so as to remind us of the plasticity of the present moment. Ben, as he later describes the dialectical irony of this rearrangement, works “to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.”

3. **The Transpersonal Present**

The first section of the novel, in which this political challenge is articulated as an essentially aesthetic problem, concludes with a scene that begins to establish this representational potentiality of fiction. Ben and his close friend Alex go to see a portion of Christian Marclay’s looped 24-hour video installation, *The Clock*. The piece is made up of hundreds of film clips, each of which contains a shot of a clock or reference to the time of day, edited and synchronized to play out in real, local time. It functions, in others words, as a literal as well as a figurative clock. Though the time is its only ostensible organizing principle, patterns of behavior and genre emerge that span the decades and languages of the original footage: “Marclay had formed a supergenre that made visible our collective, unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day—when we expect to kill or fall in love or clean ourselves or eat or fuck or check our watch and yawn.” Unifying these emergent circadian patterns, the unusually neat unit of the 24-hour day leaves Ben struggling “to resist the will to integration” instead of piecing together coherence. At first glance, the film seems to suggest that what so readily unifies these scenes

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(indeed, **all** film — all fiction, even!) is the simple fact that they all take place within the easy ordering of clock time. Any scrap of fiction, in other words, can, minimally, be placed by its location in time: a cyclical whole so simple and complete that it readily assimilates any particular instance of fiction, no matter its status. If that were the poetic reality of *The Clock*, it would — as Ben had heard others describe it — “obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality.” And yet, precisely because Ben finds himself primarily working against the overwhelming integration of the footage, he experiences quite the opposite:

   while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock*’s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds. [...] As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction.\(^{85}\)

As an experiment in the organization of disparate snippets of life, the film performs two, seemingly antithetical, gestures of poetic production at once. It unifies hundreds of otherwise unrelated filmic snippets around the neutral passing of time, arranging life across the globe and history around the standardized ticking of the clock. But the poetic license that so easily combines all of these films through the apparent simultaneity of time also exposes the contingency of this arrangement, challenging the viewer to imagine the virtually endless possibilities of poetic order fashioned out of the vast material of everyday life (or, in this case, the archive of filmic footage).\(^{86}\) *The Clock* uses one

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\(^{85}\) Lerner, 54.

\(^{86}\) The fact that the piece has no set beginning or end already points to the endless variability of narratives available within Marclay’s particular selection of scenes. Ben and Alex walk in at 11:37 pm (despite having hoped to make it at 10:04 for the eponymous scene from *Back to the Future*) at which point the “tension of imminent midnight was palpable, the twenty-three and a half hours of film that preceded us building inexorably to that climax.” But this neat organization is undermined just after the clock strikes midnight, as the film cuts to a girl waking up. “The entire preceding twenty-four hours might have been the child’s dream, a storm that never happened, just one of many ways *The Clock* can be integrated into an overarching narrative.” (Lerner, 52–53.) Not only could the day have been built out of entirely different footage, but this very selection and arrangement of clips offers an entirely different day depending on when you begin and end. Indeed, the idea that it stops at a certain moment and then starts over from the beginning — at midnight, say — doesn’t seem to hold up: scenes from “later” in the day change the way “earlier” scenes will appear later on in one’s viewing experience.
of the many pre-given modes of abstract unification offered by capitalist standardization (the 24-hour day) to expose the seams of its own construction. With unity always already given at the outset, poetic production is free to illuminate the figurative translations created by mere selection and juxtaposition. The artwork’s emphasis is not on fictionalizing, on postulating an alternative world-order in which every person, thing, and act cleanly fits into a single logic, but rather on poetics, on showing “how many different days [can] be built out of a day.”

Far from offering an alternate reality, then, fiction rearranges by reviving the acts of figurative translation that stitch together our world as it is now, thereby releasing the immense plurality of other possible stories that could have been told. If poetic realism has the power to construct a “world to come,” it does not do so by positing a complete and singular map out of nothing. Rather, it levies the calcification and hypostatization of a particular arrangement of the world as it is against itself, imploding hegemonic unity into its constitutive pieces: the reciprocally transformative relations of part and whole. This immanent poetic critique is — to make good on Lerner’s initial promise — what it is to “project [oneself] into multiple futures simultaneously,” the “vulnerable grid” of the “sinking city” ironically leading toward a firmer grasp of New York’s uneven yet combined geography.

This reinforces the point that literature needn’t (perhaps can’t) speculatively posit an alternative universe in another space or time so much as expose the plasticity and plurality of the present world. “Cli-fi,” if there is to be such a thing, is, therefore, not a genre description of stories that present remote utopias or proximate dystopias but a formal strategy for the ironic critique of our rapidly self-annihilating

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Ben stays only for a few hours, returning in the weeks that follow for a chunk here and there. For all of these reasons, the piece continuously points to the plurality of wholes (days) to which the clips contribute.

87 The temporal analog to the spatiality of the grid, the clock is inseparable from the imperial and economic history of capitalist discipline. The field of scholarship on the social history of the standardization of time is vast and incredibly rich; for a historical overview of the specific entwinement of temporal standardization and the exploitation of labor, see Jonathan Martineau, Time, Capitalism and Alienation: A Socio-Historical Inquiry into the Making of Modern Time (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015).
organization of the world. Pieter Vermeulen has made a similar argument in his reading of Lerner’s novel, arguing that the political project of “transpersonality” redirects any attention on the future toward its nascent potentiality in the present. Vermeulen insists that the novel’s incessant metafiction does not “expose fiction as pure artifice or expose reality as an imaginative construct; instead, and in marked contrast to more familiar postmodern deployments of metafiction,” these reflexive moments “serve to assert the irreducible actuality of the reality that the novel describes.” If the novel constructs something like a “transpersonal connection” to come, he concludes, this poetic future “is less the triumphant transformation of the present than a continuation of an already fully meaningful present.”

Unlike the critical distance between fact and fiction opened by the relativity of postmodern (or romantic) irony, Lerner’s irony sets off a dialectical transformation immanent to our (present) world. Author and narrator relate as do the clock and The Clock: they are ways of arranging the very same world, the latter pluralizing and performing figurative translation through its friction with the former.

The possibility of transformation lies in the reconfiguration of “bad forms of collectivity.” To use Lefebvre’s phrase, the artwork intervenes in the arrangement of reality by putting “language into action.”

4. Prosodic Community

As the novel unfolds, it is not only in language but as language that the novel’s world is metabolically re-configured. Recall, for example, that as the radar imposed its own unifying image, the storm’s presence manifested itself at the street level in the “common conversation” quickly establishing itself in every subway car or grocery line. Every New Yorker was suddenly an armchair

88 Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)?,” 667, 676, 675.

89 Lerner suggests as much in another moment of self-interpretation ventriloquized by Ben towards the end: “I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures.” (Lerner, 10.04, 194.)
meteorologist, “swapping surge level predictions” with strangers, everyone adopting and contributing to a shared lingo with which to understand the looming threat.

When asked to give a speech telling the story of his beginnings as a writer, Ben returns to his earliest memories of this kind of collective discourse as his first true experience of poetry. Perhaps to expose the humorous contingency of this “projection back into the past” to “write the fiction of [one’s] origins” as a writer, Ben fixates on Ronald Reagan’s address to the nation following the televised explosion of the *Challenger* spacecraft. The speech entranced the young Ben, “entered [his] body as much as [his] mind,” and “simultaneously comforted and stirred” him with the awareness that “all across America those rhythms were working in millions of other bodies too.”\(^9^0\) However meaningless the content of Reagan’s speech, these echoing words offered a shared way of assimilating the horror of the accident to the nation’s unhampered march forward; it reintegrated an otherwise senseless phenomenon into the robust framework of Reagan’s America. The young Ben marveled at “the way the transpersonality of prosody constituted a community: poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world, it seemed to me.”\(^9^1\) Despite the absurdity of Ben projecting his beginnings as a poet back onto the dissimulating and self-serving assurances of Ronald Reagan, it captures the immense power and potentiality of crafted language to not only make sense of otherwise unintelligible moments but to *make community*. Reagan’s true (abuse of) power, in other words, lay in setting the terms through which every individual’s shock and grief could be reconfigured as the participation in national mourning and perseverance. His political representation of each and every constituent was enacted in his poetic representation of their participation in “America.”

There is a deeper sense in which Reagan’s speech performed the poetic constitution of community, one which revives the reciprocity and continuous transformation of circulating discourse.

\(^{9^0}\) Lerner, 111, 112.

\(^{9^1}\) Lerner, 112–13.
Reagan, Ben reminds his audience, did not pen the speech himself. Peggy Noonan, the author of many of his most famous phrases, wrote it. Not only was Reagan ventriloquizing language crafted by Noonan, but she herself lifted some of its most memorable lines from a poem, “High Flight,” by a young pilot who died, much like those aboard the Challenger, while flying (though he, John Gillespie Magee, in combat in the second World War). And Magee’s poem, Ben goes on, “was either a work of collage or an act of plagiarism”: much of it traceable back to an anthology, Icarus, of poems about flight. This, Ben readily admits, is simply what he learned from Wikipedia (its own form of “transpersonal” expertise), and the web of poetic repurposing surely stretches as far back as one would like to follow it. The speech, far from an authorial dictum conceived on high and passively received by its listeners, is itself the rearrangement of circulating words, a way of re-figuring those phrases to constitute a new whole within which they could appear necessary and new. Regan was simply metabolizing the language available to him in order to re-figure a national failure as a moment neatly inscribed within his vision for the country. Ben notes other “modes of recycling” that moved through the bodies and out the mouths of those reckoning with the image of the explosion. Among the kids at his school, a repertoire of jokes quickly established itself, each repurposing some element of the tragedy and its coverage to make light — make sense — of it. “The Challenger joke cycle, which seemed to exist without our parents knowing, was my first experience of a kind of sinister transpersonal syntax existent in the collective unconscious, a shadow language to Reagan’s official narrative processing of the national tragedy.”

Here, we return to starkly different modes in which language can circulate. It can, as Nietzsche and Lefebvre feared, simply be repeated, solidifying the framework of meaning that its particular figuration happens to have established and disguising its own history, its contingency, its mutability.

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92 Lerner, 115.
We can be, and often — perhaps mostly — are, simply consumers of pre-given language. Those who linguistically rearrange the world may be its “unacknowledged legislators,” but that does not make its community democratic. As Ben makes clear, Magee’s poem, Reagan’s speech, and the crude jokes at school were not exemplary, interesting, funny, or admirable. But, Ben wonders at the conclusion of his speech,

I wonder if we can think of them as bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility: prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world, a way of organizing meaning and time that belongs to nobody in particular but courses through us all.93

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What, then, is the relationship between this poetic figuration and the inherent freedom of all human labor? What, in other words, is the place of aesthetic representation in the political project of collective freedom? Is language expressive of, paradigmatic of, or a distillation of all forms of human labor? To pose the question this way is to invite the division of the material and figurative, first-order and second-order back in. The very force of a dialectical understanding of language is that its materiality contains the dynamism for its own transformation: the community that it relies on and fosters is one that must continuously make and re-make itself. It is an artificial framework for organization that creates the conditions for its own transformation. This combination of material durability and figurative malleability means that we don’t simply assert or will new social worlds, but, as Lerner repeats: we “build” them. Poetic representation is a matter of social construction in the most literal sense: through it we build the infrastructure through which and upon which all activity is possible.

Not only does language mediate our social life in its materiality, it moves through us: we embody it. As noted above, the Marxian notion of metabolic exchange is a way of describing the relationship

93 Lerner, 116.
between our materiality (our body) and the materiality of our world. By describing labor as metabolic, Marx was able to show that the materiality of labor was precisely what gave it its potential to transform the whole of our world; by describing poetry (in the broad sense of poiesis) as metabolic, we suggest, analogously, that our consumption of language is always a transformative embodiment of the entirety of our social infrastructure.

Lerner describes this malleable materiality of his “brand of making” better than I can. In a rather remarkable passage, Lerner (or is it Ben?) digests two earlier scenes (his proprioceptive dissolution while looking out over traffic from the High Line and his later intuition of an abstracted aerial unity in the face of the storm) and, we might say, re-figures the bad forms of collectivity that they had offered. Those moments converge here, coming into a transformative dialectical friction, ironizing one another in a material re-description of the poetic figuration of collectivity:

I breathed in the night air that was or was not laced with anachronistic blossoms and felt the small thrill I always felt to a lesser or greater degree when I looked at Manhattan’s skyline and the innumerable illuminated windows and the liquid sapphire and ruby of traffic on the FDR Drive and the present absence of the towers. It was a thrill that only built space produced in me, never the natural world, and only when there was an incommensurability of scale — the human dimension of the windows tiny from such a distance combining but not dissolving into the larger architecture of the skyline that was the expression, the material signature, of a collective person who didn’t yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts, even in their most intimate registers, were nevertheless addressed. Only an urban experience of the sublime was available to me because only then was the greatness beyond calculation the intuition of community. Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity—whenever I looked at Manhattan from Whitman’s side of the river I resolved to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body. What I felt when I tried to take in the skyline—and instead was taken in by it—was a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied, my personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract that every atom belonging to me as good belonged to Noor, the fiction of the world rearranging itself around her.  

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Although metaphorization may disguise itself as absolute truth, representation may forget its own popular mandate, and the poetic formation of community may serve to rob each participant of their own capacity to contribute and transform their shared discursive fabric, the poetic basis of community can never be entirely erased. Precisely because a social world is founded on shared representation, even its most calcified and authoritarian instantiation can be reclaimed, repurposed, and returned to its figurative fluidity. This poetic hope with which Ben concludes is the poetic expression of Marx’s own political hope. While Marx saw that labor within a framework of capitalist wealth circulated without any ability to change that particular arrangement of meaning, he insisted on the possibility (the necessity, even) that static circulation would always have to break back out into transformative metabolism. “Bad forms of collectivity,” precisely because of their reliance on the continuous reproduction of representations of unity, serve as the figurative material for the possibility of new, potentially more democratic, more poetic, collectivities. We will always embody language metabolically, reusing and repurposing our social infrastructure, figuring ourselves collectively in the medium through which universal freedom remains forever possible.
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