A Branch of Magic, or the Possibility of Myth in Esther Kinsky's *Am Fluß*

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The concept of myth is often evoked in discussions of contemporary walking literature and psychogeography. In the dizzying proliferation of literary walks in recent years, the intersections between walking, myth, and other signifiers of the magical, sacred, or transcendental can be confusing. This article seeks to advance a reading of the mythic as encountered in literary walks. I do this through a close reading of a text which ostensibly resists both categories of "myth" and "psychogeography": *Am Fluß* (*River*) by Esther Kinsky.[1] *Am Fluß* (2014) is not an overtly mythical novel, nor is it a book about the specific qualities of walking. It is, however, immersed in an environment which can only by experienced on foot. Furthermore, the narrator's experience of the quotidian, the aesthetic, the natural, and the political offers glimpses of situations which are open to the transcendental. The text reaches in manifold directions, like the discursive thoughts of a walker, taking in migration, borderlands, marginal communities, post-war experience, home, and the limits of the fantastic in urban space. As such, it is an ideal text with which to hold a dialogue about the function of myth in literary walks.

The reader's journey through *Am Fluß* is guided by the narrator's walks through cities and by rivers as she encounters dispossessed characters who occupy social and mercantile ecosystems seemingly disconnected from mainstream economics. The novel is replete with leitmotifs and symbolism of inversion, paradoxes, and liminality, such as a city's edgelands, the end of industry, sedentary travelers, gold that is never gold, and teeth that often are.[2]

I begin with an overview of literary and theoretical trends which make tentative appeals to the sacred and transcendental. I then propose a definition of myth which addresses the problem of parsing evocations of the mythic in literary walks. The rest of the article is devoted to a close reading of *Am Fluß* from a myth-theoretical perspective. My conclusion demonstrates that the novel's engagement

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[1] Psychogeography has its origins in the socio-political critique of Guy Debord and the Lettrist International (and later, the Situationist International) in the 1950s. It is the theorization of the praxis of *dérive* or 'drift,' i.e. the redrawing of the city's map in relation to randomized, intuitive, anti-cartographical associations of atmospheres and emotional response to the environment (Knabb 4, 5-8, 50-54). The present understanding of psychogeography rests largely on the work of Iain Sinclair (though he has been known to distance himself from the term). Typically, it denotes writing and walking the city with a view to delineating occult traces, erased histories or random affective links or elective affinities.

[2] "Edgelands," following the work of environmentalist Marion Shoard, connotes the liminal spaces between urban development and the natural world: usually at the limits of urban building, but also, evocatively, in interstitial areas where nature has reclaimed abandoned urban space.

with myth is comparable to magical psychogeographic writing, or post-secular nature writing, and is consistent with mainstream definitions of myth.

The Possibility of Transcendence

To consider walking and myth together is to approach the busy conjunction of numerous prevailing trends in contemporary literature and theory, particularly with regard to questions of re-enchantment, which is an area that intersects with the new nature writing, ecocriticism, new materialism, and the post-secular. Among the many critiques of modernity, Max Weber's concept of *Entzauberung der Welt* 'disenchantment,' or 'the elimination of magic from the world,' (Weber 61, 178 n. 19), has proved especially tenacious. Although the elimination of magic is not universally regarded as negative, it is associated by many with a psychological fragmentation which myth holds the potential of ameliorating within the individual psyche (Main 129-32). For such an enduring term as *Entzauberung*, it is not surprising that the methods of those who would contest or seek to reverse it are many and various. This century has seen a turn towards the "post-secular" in literary criticism, seeing literature as "neither an alternative to, nor a substitute for religion, but a way in which religious experience can happen" (Bradley *et al*. 5). Such theory is appropriately open to exploring the evocations of the ineffable of which literature and the arts are abundantly capable. However, it is also telling that literature is seen as the site of or conduit for the religious experience: the sacred is accessed through language, but also confined to it. Alexander Hampton links new nature writing with the post-secular, while Rochelle Johnson links new materialism with re-enchantment. Both sets of connections indicate that these various theoretical turns and literary trends have broad areas of intersection. Although not about walking or slow travel per se, their considerations of, for example, Henry David Thoreau (Johnson) and Robert Macfarlane (Hampton)—avatars old and new of slow travel—strongly imply the connections.

Hampton adumbrates "three key sacred-secular dichotomies: understanding the self as either open or closed to transcendent forces, conceptualizing ontological reality as either epistemologically or metaphysically located, and finally viewing nature itself as either disenchanted or enchanted" (455). In his discussion of Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, Hampton concludes that there is nothing "transcendent," or "supernatural" in the book, but that it is a new, hybrid form which constitutes "a turn away from the secular social imaginary that is not a return to the sacred social imaginary" (462). This clarifies his claim that, in "a post-secular space the sacred once again becomes available, albeit tentatively" (459). The portal is open, but the numinous stays firmly on the other side: it does not irrupt into our realm. The growing discourse of ecocriticism has similarly been grounded in the materiality of the ecological situation. Bron Taylor makes a case for a "Dark Green

Religion," which he defines as "religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care" (ix). This religion is not necessarily transcendent, spiritual, or ineffable. Taylor concludes that his search is for a religion which is "sensible" in both senses of the word, and "that is rationally defensible as well as socially powerful enough to save us from our least-sensible selves" (222). The need for a rational case for treating nature with reverent care is surely necessary for communicating with the positivists in positions of power, but in so doing stresses the difficulty of taking the transcendent seriously.

Within the broad-based discourses of new materialism there are efforts to reimagine the Cartesian self—to rehabilitate notions of spirit in discussions of materiality. Rochelle Johnson supports this with reference to Thoreau, in whom she finds enchantment configured not as delusion, but (following the work of Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon) as implicated in ethical engagement (Johnson 606). Enchantment for Thoreau, Johnson writes, "occurs not as a result of an escape from the material world but from the meeting of his sensory experience as a body, the material world, and the matter that is his mind" (609). It is a "commitment to something beyond the self," involving an "increased consciousness of the inter- and intra-relations of all life forms" (607). The materiality of spirit is therefore an anthropocentric spirituality, almost Blakean in recognizing the spirit residing with the human. The Blakean association of human with god is reconfigured by Page duBois, who asserts that polytheism is more consonant with contemporary life, in its mixed populations, psychic complexity, and interdependence, than Protestant monotheism (13). DuBois encourages us to reassess the values of a polytheistic worldview, while grounding it in material experience. To sum up this necessarily brief survey, in the present moment of new materialism, post-secularism, ecocriticism, new nature writing, and re-enchantment, there are numerous, diverse accounts of the availability of the sacred or the spiritual within logocentric discourse. But they are available only to contemplate in art or imagination, not for a transcendental spiritual communion.

Myth and Magic

The meaning of "myth" is fluid, and changes according to context. In political life it connotes the ideologies of a nation, state, or people, usually boosted by nationalist stories and rhetoric. In the arts it can suggest a personal mythos and the creation of an idiosyncratic worldview. Whereas for the cultural historian or literary essayist, myth is a secret history of a forgotten past—the traces hidden in plain sight on city streets, or the resonances between discrete artefacts or occurrences that a practiced eye will pick out and record. These are all myths without magic or gods; myths in a time of Weber's *Entzauberung* 'disenchantment' and Schiller's *Entgötterung* 'de-divinization.' In contrast to these stands what may

be called "archaic" myth: the mythologies of the ancients, or those which still survive in religions, rituals, and tales in numerous global cultures. I define archaic myth as providing a definitional cultural narrative while also expressing human contact with the divine realm.[3] This is in broad agreement with the definition of myth advanced by José Manuel Losada, that a myth must have a transcendent referent (Losada 32, 41-42).

The transcendental occupies a similar supernatural space as magic, which Alastair Bonnett sees as actively deployed in psychogeography, where magic is

> a way of offering an aura of depth, yearning and possibility that transforms walking into a practice and site of potential and drama. It is also shown that across the varied terrain of psychogeographical walking, magic is used to allow, or conjure, an openness and vulnerability to voices "hidden" in the landscape. (472)

Bonnett's description of the "openness" of magic corresponds with the openness of the sacred or post-secular approaches described by Hampton. But Bonnett interprets magic as having been appropriated by capitalism. He links this claim with Iain Sinclair's reactive use of magic against such capitalist magic to break "the spell of neo-liberal consumerism and passivity by enacting a walking-based counter-magic; following paths and making journeys that bring forth the hidden, strange and subversive" (477). As with the post-secular and new materialist examples above, magic here remains a strictly literary category. Sinclair himself implies this when he describes Barry MacSweeney's poetic image of Chatterton:

> [MacSweeney] risks everything. He aims at possession, identification with the doomed poet/pretender. He reworks what Chatterton left unfinished: as Blake reworked Milton. . . . "I will have Fame". He wants it, the whole curse: the poem that is true only to itself. (Sinclair, *Lights Out* 154)

It is rare to read Sinclair so effusively enthusiastic about anything amidst the dark humor of his survey of a grimly misaligned London. He effectively provides an answer to the question that runs, like a line of force, through his work of the 1970s to 1990s in particular: does Sinclair (as character-narrator) believe in the transcendental power of mythology and ley lines? The answer seems to be, *only within language*. It is in poetry that these lines of force are activated in the reader-

[3] This is a synthesis of definitions from folklorist Alan Dundes (myth as "sacred narrative," distinct from secular tales, 1), classicist Jan Bremmer (myth as "performances of traditional plots relevant to society," *Greek Religion* 57), and functionalist anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (who emphasized the total social role of myth in archaic societies as organizing and controlling the world, e.g. in Dundes 193-206).

audience. As with the post-secular experience, literature is the magic force: literature is the site of the mythical encounter.[4]

Am Fluß and The Impossibility of Myth

Am Fluß is narrated by an unnamed woman who is drawn repeatedly to riverbanks, ruminating on their symbolism and the memories they bring to the surface. The chapters are organized like quatrains with ABCD rhyme, where each "rhyme" continues the theme—though not necessarily the narrative—from the previous rhyming chapter. The first two chapters of each four-chapter group document scenes from the narrator's life in north-east London over a short period in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Of these chapters, the first is based around her experiences in the ethnically diverse streets of Stamford Hill and Clapton, while the second progressively follows her path as she walks along the River Lea from Springfield Park in Clapton to the Thames. The third chapter in each group is set by a river in other parts of the world, from the Rhine of the narrator's childhood, through Nahal Ha Yarkon in Tel Aviv, the Neretva in Croatia and Bosnia, and to the Hooghly in Kolkata, among others. The final chapter in each group of four is also set in London, but during an earlier, longer stay, seemingly in the 1980s. The structure is maintained for eight groups of four alternating chapters, before accelerating at the end with one group of three (ABD), and finally two chapters comprising the narrator's farewell to north-east London. The novel's final six chapters are London-based, and four of these set in the main narrative strand. The locations thus achieve wholeness at the conclusion, like a self-individuating novel. The regularity of the structure may not be apparent on first reading, as dates are usually only ascertained by inference from minor details (e.g. an Internet café) or local knowledge (e.g. recognizing Hackney Wick before the Olympic development). As a result of this lack of emphasis, the structure feels unforced, with the setting of the chapters recurring like the natural rhythm of walking. Before this structure is understood, the novel can seem more palimpsestic or fantasized, as depictions of London mix the regular threat of IRA bombs in the 1970s or 1980s with a turn-of-the-century Internet café and refugees from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Moreover, events from different chapters may be overlaid in the reader's memory to maintain the sense of confusion of time periods.

Allusions to myth, folklore, religion, alchemy, and magic are liberally spread, but the narrator never embraces the transcendental, remaining grounded in material reality. This is made apparent in a scene with a young woman whom the narrator names Sonja ("weil sie mich an eine Figur bei Tschechow erinnerte" (48)

[4] Cf. Robert Macfarlane on the language of re-enchantment in "A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook."

‘because she reminded me of a character in Chekhov’ (48)). Sonja gives the narrator some pinhole camera photographs, and remarks of one:

> Ein Engel! sagte [Sonja] und zeigte auf einen dünnen, scheinbar schwebenden weißen Umriß in der unteren Ecke des Bildes von der Lichtung. Es war ein Fleck, wie sie auch gelegentlich auf den Fotos aus meiner alten Sofortbildkamera erschienen, weiße Schatten, wo Licht in das primitive Gehäuse eingedrungen war. (51)
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> An angel! [Sonja] said, pointing to a thin, apparently hovering white shape in the bottom corner of the picture of the clearing. It was a blot of the kind that had occasionally appeared in the photos I took with my old instant camera: white shadows, caused by light penetrating the primitive casing. (50-51)

The narrator’s response emphasizes the novel’s setting resolutely within the material world: an angel is merely an artefact of the photographic process. On the other hand, it maintains a strong theme in the novel of photography and memory being stages for haunting by inexplicable events. The magical is available in the picture, or in the memory.

The main narrative begins with the narrator in a metaphorical self-imposed exile in north-east London in the early 2000s. She has laid her life aside, without saying goodbye and not knowing where to go next (*Am Fluß* 12-13 *River* 18). In her solitary walks from the green slope of Springfield Park to the River Lea, she rediscovered “Stücke meiner Kindheit wieder, andere aus Landschafts- und Gruppenfotos herausgeschnipselte Teile, die sich zu meiner Überraschung hier niedergelassen hatten” (18) ‘bits and pieces of my childhood, found snippets cut from other landscapes and group photographs, unexpectedly come here to roost’ (22). The early pages, then, indicate an unspecified rupture: she is transplanted, as if cut out of a photograph, and “Betreten über den angerichteten Schaden an dem Bild, das ich hinterlassen hatte” (12) ‘[a]bashed by the harm I had wreaked on the picture I left behind’ (18). The rupture and exile mark the beginning of a process leading, if not to recovery, then to the ability to move to a new phase of life. The process is akin to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s definition of the function of myth as “to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (Lévi-Strauss 229). The mysteries and paradoxes of myth create an ideal space for performing (if not resolving) contradictions and negotiating the ineffable. *Am Fluß* performs the working through of an unspecified rupture, but—like myth—does not necessarily find a solution. Its value is in the exemplary process itself.

Rivers and Borders

The reader never learns the cause of the narrator's exile, and in a novel which repeatedly calls back to similar symbols or themes (such as refugees, war, gold, borders, Neil Young), there is a remarkable absence: the narrator's son is mentioned only in one chapter. The narrator, "noch fast ein Kind" (94) '[a]lmost still a child' (90) herself, has travelled with her "wenige Wochen alten Kind" (94) 'son of a few weeks' (90) to Toronto. The baby is not named. During this time, there are echoes and foreshadowings of repeated motifs in the book—the narrator works for a porcelain business and hears Neil Young songs. Yet when porcelain and Neil Young reappear in the book, no conscious connection is made to this time. Plot elements of each chapter are often isolated; the narrative thread is, rather, symbolic. When the narrator visits the St. Lawrence River, the interjection of an image of commerce turns the river into a site of chaos:

> Ein Dampfer schaukelte vorbei, der an der Reling ein Werbeschild trug: St Lawrence River Gateway to North America. Einen Augenblick war ich verwirrt und bestürzt. Wohin führte dieser Fluß? Hinaus ins Meer oder hinein ins Land? Ich blickte aufs Wasser, konnte keine Flußrichtung erkennen . . . . mich überfiel eine plötzliche, alle Vernunft überrumpelnde Angst, mein Kind und mich einer Gegend ausgeliefert zu haben, in der wir uns nie auf etwas würden verlassen können, nicht einmal darauf, daß ein Fluß dem Meer zufließt. (112)

> A steamer pitched and rolled past, a sign on its railing advertising: *St Lawrence River Gateway to North America*. For a moment I was confused and dismayed. Where did this river lead? Out to sea, or into the land? I looked at the water and couldn't make out which way it was flowing. . . . I was overcome by a sudden fear, catching all reason unawares, that my child and I were at the mercy of a region in which we would never be able to rely on anything, not even that a river flowed to the sea. (106)

The St. Lawrence River in part marks the boundary between Ontario, Canada, and New York State, USA, before proceeding through Quebec. The advertisement could be taken to refer to the early European mariners who entered the continent via the Gulf of St. Lawrence. But, decontextualized, the sign's meaning becomes chaotic. The sign destabilizes the narrator's sense of the river as border rather than gateway—as boundary or liminal mark rather than a portal. During a childhood reminiscence, she notes, "Der Rhein war die erste und stets gegenwärtige Grenze, die ich erlebte. Er lehrte das Hier und das Dort" (36) '[t]he Rhine was the first border I ever knew, and it was constantly present. It taught us what was here and what was there' (37). The advertisement troubles that certainty, and seemingly

contributes to her decision to return to Europe shortly afterwards. If allusions to Styx or Lethe are ever intended, they are buried, in preference for other traditions. When the narrator and her son leave Canada, "bevor ich das Flughafengebäude betrat, warf ich uns beiden drei Handvoll staubigen Dämmer über die linke Schulter nach hintern. Das, hatte Sandy einmal gesagt, machen die Indianer vor der Überquerung eines Flusses" (113) 'before I entered the terminal building [I] threw three handfuls of dusty dusk over my left shoulder for both of us. That, Sandy had once said, is what the Indians do before crossing a river' (107). The chapter ends, and we read nothing more of the son in *Am Fluß*. His absence from the rest of the novel need not result from repressed trauma: considering the time scale of the book, there may be a benign narrative explanation. Nevertheless, it strongly enforces the sense that, alongside the cultural traumas and dislocations that the narrator is encountering, recalling, or otherwise giving voice to, there is an intimate, personal need to be repeatedly immersed in the riparian landscape.

Rebecca Solnit writes of the expression "coming in off the streets" as emphasizing the distinct worlds of street and house (Solnit 193). The threshold is a boundary between worlds. For Kinsky's protagonist, to walk by the river is to walk on the border. She rarely boards a boat, remaining on the bank, at the limit: by the river, not on the river. Keeping on one side emphasizes the idea of the opposite bank. But, at the Oder in Poland, she queries the idea of a river as border between countries. "Ist das Fließen, die unaufhaltsame Mündungswärtigkeit des Wassers stärker als die Bedeutung einer starren Linie, die über Zugehörigkeiten verfügt? . . . bestimmt es die wahre Zugehörigkeit als die zu einem Blick auf die jeweils andere Seite?" (185) 'Could its flow, the incessant press of its water towards an estuary, be more powerful than its significance as a line fixed to determine belonging? . . . Isn't it saying that what we really belong to is the gaze toward the other side?' (171.) This is political myth-making of a different order: it denies the petty nationalisms of state boundaries, while retaining a strong sense of location. This sense of place is linked with yearning, with the gaze at the other side; as she enigmatically ponders in the Oder chapter, "Wir tragen unser Herz umher am falschen Ort" (182) '[w]e carry our hearts around with us in the wrong place' (169). The opposite side, even of a small river like the Lea, is often seen as being like another country, but it is not the home of an antagonist. The border defines the "we" and the "they," but not in hostility. There is a benign mystery to the opposite side, like the southern side of the Thames, "wo man den Kopf nach rechts drehte, um flußabwärts zu schauen, und die Züge nach ihren südstädtichen Regeln und Ordnungen fuhren" (341) 'where people turned their heads to the right when they looked downstream and trains were operated according to southern-side rules and regulations' (315). The desire is not so much to transgress national boundaries, but to exist on a separate plane of reality. This desire is doubtless fed by the post-war experience of the narrator's childhood.

The narrator's experiences are haunted by war and its aftereffects: urban reconstruction, migration, and marginalization, from the Rhine of her childhood, to the refugees in twenty-first century London, and taking in postcolonial fallout in Canada and India. The novel's subtle but persistent evocations of Holocaust memory are elucidated by Helga Druxes. For Druxes, *Am Fluß* is among a trend in German literature of "transgenerational memory works" by those born after 1945 (Druxes 125). Druxes deftly illuminates the allusions and subtexts throughout the novel which are in dialogue with Holocaust memory, exile, and other displaced people of twentieth and twenty-first century Europe.

Accepting Lévi-Strauss's function of myth as overcoming, if not completely eliminating, insoluble contradictions (quoted above), myth can be an apt medium for addressing "limit events" such as the Holocaust.[5] As Peter Arnds notes, Primo Levi had recourse to myth in order to communicate his experience of Auschwitz in a way that could be understood rather than ignored as something unintelligible in its unconscionability. Mythologemes, Arnds argues, "seem to offer possibilities of translating, that is, bringing across to an audience that which transcends commonly understood reality and defies such reality's representation" (164). *Am Fluß*, of course, has a vastly different relationship to the Second World War and the Holocaust, in that it does not deal with primary personal experience, but with a more generalized struggle with the "Nachkrieglichkeit" (*Am Fluß* 224) 'post-war condition' (*River* 207). The definitions of myth advanced above are thrown into sharp relief by Primo Levi's use of myth, which is not of the sacred, but as a tool to communicate the inescapably present. The transcendental has been traduced by or subsumed into the limit event of the Holocaust. For the narrator of *Am Fluß*, the traumatic past is constructed from reports and from personal experience of the aftermath rather than the event itself. So the role of Kinsky's generation, as Druxes suggests, is to bear witness to "[e]videntiary objects" which have survived atrocities (Druxes 143). If Levi's need was to translate and make intelligible, Kinsky's is to listen and understand. This necessity is met by the narrator's seemingly detached mode of observation without comment. The accumulation of evidence of twentieth-century Europe's violence from gold teeth to bomb craters mounts like an unanswerable witness to endorse a new political myth of river as contra-nationalist border. As the next section shows, *Am Fluß* augments this by sketching a mythical landscape familiar to readers of new nature writing or psychogeography.

The Walker's Magic Against Capitalist Magic

[5] I follow the definition of limit event as "an event or practice of such profound violence that its effects rupture the otherwise normative foundations that underlie the constitution of political and moral community" (Arnds 164, n. 4).

In paying attention to untrodden pathways, edgelands, and refugees, the narrator of *Am Fluß* walks in the shadow of a capitalist landscape, but rarely describes it directly. It comes as a shock, then, to read the names on containers in the docks in the Thames estuary. "[W]ährend hinter der Weide eine Wand aus Schiffscontainern auftauchte, Türme angerosteter Riesenkisten mit den Namen der großen Frachtfirmen, die man überall in der Nähe von Häfen sah, Hanjin, Mærsk, P&O" (372) 'A wall of shipping containers towered beyond the meadows, stacks of gigantic rusting crates displaying the names of the big haulage companies, the same names that turned up wherever there were docks and harbours, like Hanjin, Maersk and P&O' (343). Suddenly, globalized commercial industry is made visible, like the conjuring of a demon. There had previously been hints of this over-layering of two incommensurate realities, but only in passing, such as the narrator's remarks that the Springfield Park Erl King would be kept at bay by forestry management (23 / 25). In these moments, *Am Fluß* comes closest to bearing comparison with Sinclair's writing. When Kinsky's narrator contrasts a world at the Old River Lea which is "wunderbereit" 'open to miracles' with the nearby road flyover (*Am Fluß* 176-77 *River* 164-65), it recalls the realignments of lines of force caused by the development of Canary Wharf, or the relocation of the London Mithraeum, that agitates the Sinclair of *Lights Out for the Territory* (116). Though lacking the occultism of Sinclair's early/mid-period work, *Am Fluß* lets in a few images which contribute to this mythopoeia of London.[6]

Simon Perril finds Sinclair's occultism agrees with Jane Harrison's sense of myth as "a story of magical intent or potency" spoken with "collective sanction" (Harrison 330). Perril adds that Sinclair is also aware of myth's sinister potential: "Myth as emotive focus and collective sanction to a solemn purpose lead it to be associated with oppression" (Perril 326). This echoes Barthes's critique of myth as hegemonic ideology: that in myth, "[w]hat is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a 'matter of course'" (Barthes 165). It is true that Sinclair expresses a similar sentiment in *Suicide Bridge*: myth emerges "in the hands of men wanting to maintain a contact with the previous, with the era of power and high function" (148). Nevertheless it is also clear that Sinclair's early and late work admits the joy of the dangerous attractions of myth. "It spreads a seductive field of pits & snares. You go mad if you try to pursue place through myth: your path will disappear over the nearest cliff" (153). The young Sinclair of *Suicide Bridge* offers a poet's definition of myth, one that simply conflates the meanings of myth as ideology and as secret history, which seems fitting for the productive results of

[6] A line from Sinclair's *Ghost Milk* ("The ultimate condition of everything is *river*") provides the epigraph to the German edition of *Am Fluß* (4). This has been removed from the English translation, substituted by a line from Charles Olson. It is a decision that chimes with Kinsky's professed lack of interest in writing psychogeography (discussed from 17'40" in Batchan).

psychogeography's antagonistic relationship to "high capitalist black magic" (Sinclair, *Lights Out* 1). In recent years, discourse around myth and psychogeography has been augmented by Phil Smith's practice of "Mythogeography." Smith draws on a range of sources from literature, critical theory, and popular culture to inform a praxis-based concept which constitutes a post-Situationist critique of privatized space and the spectacular economy (Smith 136). The performative element of "Mythogeography" provides the possibility of transforming space, thereby opening the door to utopian possibilities. Here, then, it has attributes in common with the post-secular nature writing described above, but for Smith, the location is less important than the method. The natural world is not the only space of spiritual encounter, and the mythogeographer can construct situations or perform a mode of walking which is an implicit protest against the paths and speeds demanded by the free movement of capital, and which revivifies place.

Despite her unselfconscious replication of comparable methods, Kinsky's narrator does not share the occult language of Sinclair's mythic worldview, and the rationales of Smith's mythogeography, informed by the theory of myth. *Am Fluß* includes numerous gestures towards myth, such as the Thames Barrier as mythical beast (*Am Fluß* 341 *River* 314), a beggar's supplication likened to a purification ritual (287 / 265), or stall-holders contributing to the city's "Verunsterblichung" (343-44) 'immortalization' (316-17), but these are disconnected images. The narrator herself is an observer. She witnesses religious festivals—Purim in Stamford Hill (294-95 / 273), Saraswati in Kolkata (316 / 290)—but remains an outsider, or tourist. In the chapter titled "Folklore," she describes the shops serving observant Jews, the new Eastern European shop, the mysterious "King" in Springfield Park at twilight, and a dance—witnessed from the pavement—inside the new shop. The dance is one of the more mysterious episodes in *Am Fluß*. The Croat shopkeeper and the Kurdish taxi drivers stand on the pavement watching the Eastern European shop girls dancing inside the closed shop (207 / 193). "Sie . . . tanzten wie um ihr Leben zu einer Musik, die draußen unhörbar blieb" (208) 'They . . . danced as if for dear life to music that was inaudible outside' (194). It is an entrancing spectacle to the spectators, but any sense of objectification by the almost exclusively male audience is ignored in favor of the narrator's own focus on the dancers' careful, uniform choreography and easy-going intimacy. They apparently comprise a hermetic unit, dancing to their intended audience of Black Sea resort posters—images of the homeland: the household gods. The chapter summarizes the diversity of folk or religious traditions of the area, and, significantly, the narrator never reports on the gentrified region of Stoke Newington Church Street, a mere two-minute walk from the area she describes. She completely ignores the dominant, wealthy milieu in favor of the diverse multiplicity. Ignoring the major financial and political power of the region consequently diminishes its power in the novel, as

attention is shifted to a network of unofficial relations. The dream-like description of the dancers, moreover, injects a note of magic into the narrative, without going so far as fantasy. The city is shown to be a site where moments of mystery and enchantment emerge spontaneously, and without mediation or approval by established structures of power.

Aside from observing the festivals, customs, and everyday lives of others, the narrator also gives an insight into what stirs her own sense of spirituality: the twin borderlands of river and photograph. If Sonja's angel-vision in her pinhole photograph was too trite, the photograph can still be mystic portal.

> Die Bilder gehörten in eine Vergangenheit, von der ich allerdings nicht sicher war, ob es meine war, sie rührten an etwas, für das mir der Name abhanden gekommen sein mochte, vielleicht hatte ich ihn auch nie gekannt. . . . Und gleich daneben diese Welt im Negativ, nächtlich, fremdtuend, wieder in Frage stellend, was zu welcher Seite gehörte, hier oder dort, rechts oder links. (27)

> The images belonged to a past I could not even be sure was my own, touching on something whose name I must have forgotten, or possibly never knew. . . . And right beside it was the negative: nocturnal, putting a strange face on things, casting into doubt what belonged to which side, whether it was here or there, right or left. (28)

The camera is not an impartial witness and can reveal images in ways which do not agree with memory. The process of the instant camera, and its juxtaposition of photograph and negative, further disturbs the sense of reality: it is a liminal technology. In myth, according to Victor Turner, liminal figures are involved in acts in which "the elements of culture and society are released from their customary configurations and recombined in bizarre and terrifying imagery" (qtd. in Friedrich 132). In *Am Fluß*, photography presents a portal into a realm of bizarre recombinations, if only subtly. Before she leaves London, the narrator is given a new instant camera, and takes a photograph of a building:

> Hinter der weißen Gardine auf der rechten Seite des Eingangs erschien eine Hand, die ich beim Betrachten des Eingangs nicht bemerkt hatte, eine dünne, vermutlich alte Hand, eine unsichere Hand, die nach etwas tastete, das mir verborgen blieb. Es war ein Bild für meine ungewisse Zukunft, an dem ich mich würde festhalten können, das ich irgendwann würde zur Hand nehmen können, um zu sagen: Stamford Hill, London, soundso fühlten sich die Ziegel unter den Fingerkuppen an, die von Gras und Kraut durchsprossenen rissigen Gehwegplatten unter den Füßen, soundso saßen

> die Krähen in den Bäumen und soundso überdunkelten sie in zerstreuten großen Schwärmen das Blickfeld, diese und keine andere Schattenlosigkeit war dem dortigen Licht eigen, das da war mein Ort, und diese magere alte Hand hält ein Stück von meinem Leben für immer fest. (351)
>
> A hand, which I had not noticed through the viewfinder, appeared from behind the white curtain to the right of the entrance, a scrawny and presumably old hand, a hand that was unsure, reaching for something hidden to me. The picture was an image of my own uncertain future, one I would hold on to and one day pick up, saying: Yes, Stamford Hill, London: that's how the bricks felt under my fingertips, how the cracked paving stones with their sprouting grass and weeds felt under my feet, how the crows perched in the trees, and how their great scattered flocks darkened my field of vision, this and no other lack of shadow was typical of the light there, that was my place, and this scrawny old hand will hang on to a piece of my life forever. (324-25)

The passage condenses a brief moment of life into a photograph, describing it as a synecdoche for the operation of memory. Furthermore, it implies that the hand in the photograph merges with the narrator's hand which holds the photograph. It is an image of her future, a future which is uncertain, like the hand is unsure, yet the hand is reaching for something still hidden to the narrator. The "scrawny old hand" will hang on inside the photograph just as the slowly aging hand which holds the photograph will hang on to this ostensibly banal image. The close attention to small details—bricks and weeds, crows and shadows—adds emotional weight to a personal memory and binds the individual to the place.

The first and last chapters of *Am Fluß* are entitled "König" 'King,' after an enigmatic figure who has a rapport with the ravens of Springfield Park. He looks, to the narrator, like a dispossessed African king, and wears a gold-embroidered robe and "einen prächtigen Kopfputz aus starren brokatenen Tüchern mit einer federgeschmückten Spange, die den Stoff zusammenhielt" (9) 'a magnificent headdress of stiff brocaded cloths, held together by a clasp adorned with feathers' (15). The dominant associations are with an Egyptian Pharaoh, but the symbolism also evokes Odin (with his ravens), the Fisher King (in his apparent frailty and wavering power), and Brandigeidfran son of Llŷr (legendary British king whose name means Blessed Brân, or Blessed Raven (Davies 232)). For the narrator, he is also a gatekeeper, for he marks the transition between the city and "einer allen möglichen Wildnissen überlassenen Landschaft" (19) 'a landscape abandoned to all kinds of wildness' (23). Moreover, he is a liminal figure revivified by the twilight and dawn, when the ravens return to him (206 / 192). Away from this threshold he is powerless, unregal, but he awaits the moment of contact. He is the

book's archetype of liminal god-king: seemingly lost or deposed, perhaps psychologically deeply troubled. Sonja knows of him too: "Ja, das ist der König vom Nill, sagte das Mädchen. Meinte sie Nil? . . . nein, einfach Nill" (293) 'Yes, that's the King of the Nill, she said. Did she mean the Nile? . . . No, just Nill' (271-72). "Nill" is never explained. Is he the king of nothing? A mere false illusion, and the ultimate proof for the text that the true meaning of "myth" is "falsehood"? It is not quite so. The final sighting of the King does apparently conform to that sense of anti-climax, as if to endorse a reading of *Am Fluß* that sees the narrator as rootless and unable to connect with the various people around her and their customs—the disenchanted, Angel-denying side of the book. But the disruptive, mythical, liminal side of the novel is also apparent. The King leaps up to fly with his ravens, only to crash down and be pecked by the birds as dawn breaks. The King's folly is like a ritual out of place. Eric Dardel writes of the man-bird of New Guinea myth who occupies both states of being—man and bird—simultaneously, in an experience of "mythic time."

> By virtue of this mythic time, man feels united to all generations, to all the living: he feels himself in his grandparent as well as in his grandson, in the totemic lizard gliding across his path as well as in the ancestral tree where the past meditates on the present. Deprived of ontological ground, not knowing just 'where' his I is, the mythic man cannot distinguish what was from what will be and from what goes to make up the present. (Dardel 232)

The anticlimactic apotheosis of the King in Springfield Park is a pitiable reminder of the elusiveness of the mythic experience, and the dangers to mental health of pursuing it too passionately. The King has seemingly reached the desired point to access his liminal state, and, indeed, in his mind, he may have moved "on the affective and imaginative plane where the simultaneity of two 'moments' is translated into a rapid succession of images" (Dardel 232). But, in twenty-first century London, it can only look like failure. At this moment in *Am Fluß*, the narrative voice becomes especially mordant, remarking that the luminosity of dawn will "in Regendüsterkeit verdämmern" 'pass away in rainy gloom,' the radiance is "Katzengold" 'fool's gold,' and the sunburst a "Funkeltrug" 'delusion' (387 / 358). Such resolute pessimism strikes a bathetic note which belies the true emotion which cryptically creeps out in the closing lines as the Lea Valley appears to crumble into the sea—a visionary portrayal of the narrator's tears. While Kinsky herself has expressed curiosity (though not displeasure) at redemptive readings of the novel's conclusion,[7] it is not hard to agree with Druxes's summation that the "final experience of the sublime bring[s] together fragments of collective trauma,"

[7] Wachtel (discussed from 49'15"). In this interview, Kinsky clarifies that the watery vision of the conclusion is the narrator looking out through tears.

encouraging solidarity, sensitivity to historical trauma, and allowing the past to be "grievable" (Druxes 145-46). The narrator's apparent emotion at the conclusion offers hope that the unspoken anxieties or traumas in the novel will finally be articulated. As the book's structure draws together, the narrator leaves London and the region of her exile. Her walk along the Lea has reached the Thames. *Am Fluß* observes the area with a patient eye and a persistent tread which effortlessly transcend the paths of capital to emerge into unknowable edgelands and liminal lives.

Conclusion: Mythical Walks

The ancient Greeks regarded exiled wandering as an important stage in a process of purification. For Orestes, travelling on land and sea away from sacred spaces was a formal component of his purification after he killed Clytemnestra, his mother (Aeschylus ll. 235-44). Robert Parker explains that, in Ancient Greek religion, "for the involuntary killer temporary exile was itself a kind of cleansing, during which his pollution 'was rubbed off' or 'fell asleep' (since 'time purifies all things'), ready to be finally removed by purification when he came back to his native soil."[8] Orestes pleads at Athena's shrine for the goddess to receive him as one "with guilt blunted and worn away at / other shrines and through dealings with men" (Aeschylus ll. 238-39). Yet, like the Furies at the start of the *Eumenides*, the polluting stain is only drowsy, not eradicated. A final stage of (juridical) reconciliation is required to release him from the Furies' maddening pursuit. The wandering is not purifying in itself, but preparatory to the final ritual. Jean-Pierre Vernant proposes that it is Orestes himself who has been worn away "in his contact with so many houses and paths" (Vernant 125). The wearing away thus functions as a punishment and a self-effacement: a humble preparation for return to society.

The essential idea of wandering abroad, over time and in safe contact with new people, in order to wear away a clinging pollution, is a motif that has a life beyond the specific practice of Greek religion. A striking example of such literal and metaphorical wearing away and transformation is Werner Herzog's famous walk from Munich to Paris. Herzog declared that Lotte Eisner would not succumb to her illness if he travelled to her on foot. In the process, he finds himself exiled from human community, but, like Kinsky's narrator, he rediscovers it in new, unexpected company. Herzog's text is replete with quietly magical moments, so that it reads at times like a folktale. Exchanged glances with animals are more meaningful than those with people; an elderly woman tells him about her children, all of whom have died; and, later, a young girl "made me tell her about the jungle, about snakes and elephants. She would probe me with trick questions to see whether

[8] Parker 118, quoting Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 238, 280, 286.

or not I was telling the truth" (Herzog 29). He frequently uses metamorphic imagery to describe himself. On the first day of the walk, his powers are godlike: "When I move, a buffalo moves. When I rest, a mountain reposes" (1). After eighteen days of walking, however, his identification with the numinous animals has been shaken: no longer moving as a mighty buffalo, he must raise a mammoth (62). He loses both his humanity and his animal power, describing himself as "disfigured" (59) to the point where his face "wasn't altogether known to me anymore" (62). He slips into a world of mythological symbolism which is at the same time entirely present in his all-too-real experience of persistent rain and quotidian pain in the thigh and groin from walking. Though not consciously following in the pollution-blunting footsteps of Orestes, he symbolically mirrors the ritual journeys of Greek myth in his fantastic walk of faith healing. Through time and contact, stains wear away; through travels, the body wearies and changes. *Am Fluß* follows a similar path: the edgeland walks and convivial transactions in marginal economies create another informal mirror of Orestes' ritualized wanderings.

In *Am Fluß*, we do not know the nature of the rupture which impels the walk, and nor does the conclusion affirm that the rupture is healed. Only the structural unity of the chapter themes coming together at the end suggests healing, but the narrator would never presume to advocate a psychological cure. It recalls again Lévi-Strauss: the contradiction or problem (unstated in this case) is not solved as such, but the narrative performs it, bringing the ineffable situation within the bounds of thought and comprehension. What it performs is a productive relationship with the environment: *Am Fluß* is contra-nationalist in describing borders defined by longing rather than by aggressive statehood, and it contains an implicit critique of capital in its refusal to acknowledge not only the shops and culture of the capitalist class, but also the roads, pathways, and fences which keep people and their imaginations on narrow lines. The world of *Am Fluß* is open to multiple viewpoints, time zones, and locations, all interacting with the meandering and discursive route along the wilder branches of the River Lea. In this way, it deploys a mythic method in common with the magical psychogeographic writing, or the post-secular nature writing outlined at this article's outset. Moreover, it conforms to the concept of modern myth in depicting transcendent images and symbols that flourish in the text but collapse on contact with materiality. If anything is held sacred by the narrator, it is the liminal natural and built environment of a river's edge, and the text opens the possibility of transcendent experience through memory and photography, where the various times of her life are lived on top of each other. The river walk becomes a branch of magic, as time becomes akin to mythic time: past, present, and future collapsing into a single moment.

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