

The Angel over Alabama: A Case of 'Psychotopography' and Locality

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Abstract

This paper critically explores selected motifs and figures in Allen Shelton's poetic and painful collection of essays *Dreamworlds of Alabama*, complex and convoluted texts which explore his native locality of Jacksonville through the lenses of (European) cultural theory, literary studies, and individual experience, affect and memory. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' and 'Berlin Childhood Around 1900', these writings intertwine to present a ruinous landscape haunted by catastrophic histories, personal misfortunes, and collective / individual grief, all set in the deep shadow of Crooked Mountain. Shelton excavates this terrain literally and metaphorically to discover how the commodity form and creaturely life are inextricably interwoven in dense networks of 'first' and 'second' nature, spatial-temporal configurations of bodies, objects, flora and fauna which reach beyond the here-and-now to recall enduring and disturbing myths and legacies of the South. The paper seeks to trace such figures with respect to Benjaminian themes such as 'natural history' and mourning/melancholy, and in relation to what is termed, following Guy Debord, 'psychotopography.' In so doing, it is argued that Shelton's essays offer us powerful and visceral accounts of localities as topoi of trauma and Trauer (sorrow).

Keywords: Allen Shelton, Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, Psychotopography, Locality

1. Introduction: the exoskeleton of a text

To introduce is ‘to lead into’ ... but from where, or rather, whence? From the outside one presumes. So let us begin then with the outside.

It is wise, we are told, ‘never to judge a book by its cover’ but it is wiser still to learn what we can from it. And there is much, perhaps, that the reader of Allen Shelton’s poetic and painful *Dreamworlds of Alabama* (2007) might glean from perusing its curious green-grey dust-jacket.¹⁾

The five essays — six if you include the ‘Preface’ — are literally, bookended by images of family and locality.

On the back, a map of the area around Jacksonville, Alabama, where the Shelton family put down its roots, or, more accurately, dug itself into the soil to lay the foundations for their farmhouses, outbuildings, barns, fence-posts. But only the margins, the fringes of this map, are visible. Its centre is overlain by the publisher’s ‘blurb’. However unintentional, the effect is suggestive. The cover is covered, so to speak, such that the town of Jacksonville itself is wholly obliterated. ‘Centreville’ is legible though curiously off centre, but most of the other place names are either blotted out altogether or truncated, their beginnings and ends sawn off. And so one finds ‘uskaloosa’ curling in from west-southwest; ECATUR jutting out up north; ‘Turkeyto’ disappears off into the east, LO and FEI head west into the sunset; PERR bends southward. Letters are lopped off in their prime like so many mutilated limbs or branches so that only a few syllabic stumps remain. Or perhaps they are tenderly clipped

1) My inspiration here is Benjamin’s provocative comment in his unpublished fragment ‘The Task of the Critic’ (c. 1931): “Reading is only one of a hundred ways of gaining access to a book” (1999a, p. 548). Hence, my essay opens with a tentative experiment in what Benjamin intriguingly refers to as “Physiognomic criticism” (1999a, p. 549).

tendrils, cuttings which, shipped in from elsewhere like the wisteria bouquets atop the coffin of the local Civil War hero John Pelham, might yet take root and flourish amid the landscape of Alabama. In any case, one is left with a strange fragmentary local nomenclature of half uttered, half swallowed toponyms. It is as if the whole area has suffered a stroke, and not just Mary Pullen, the author's paternal grandmother who lost her powers of speech and faded away little by little in what he describes as a painfully drawn out disappearing act. Perhaps this fragment of rural Alabama is also slowly absenting itself as part of a mournful "geography of vanishing points" (DoA: 17).

Is it, one wonders, Mary Pullen on the front cover? It is, to be sure, an extraordinary photograph, a seemingly ancient image of a baby either emerging from or being swallowed whole by some kind of monstrous textile covering. But even Shelton himself is uncertain as to the subject's identity. Indeed, it is the one unknown, unnamed ancestor pictured in a book which, though devoted to Shelton's closest relations and most intimate relationships, forms anything but some simple family narrative or genealogical tree — instead, in these texts one finds oneself snared in something more subterranean, entangled, knotted, something more rhizomic, with family members ensconced in an old house here, settling in a new one there, moving in, moving out, distributing themselves hither and thither across the landscape, connected by intricate, invisible kinship systems. The Sheltons are indeed a Deleuzian clan. But back to the question: who is this baby so close to tears, pictured for a cry? Certainly not Mary Janie, the author's mother whose death in 1996 from a brain aneurism is the subject of 'The Abduction of Mary Janie' — no, the picture is far too old. Perhaps it is her own mother, Pearl Landers, whose grave Shelton laboriously, lovingly digs at the start of the final essay, 'Assembling Mary Pullen for A Cry'. Or maybe it is Mary Pullen's husband, AC, the cattle farmer whose

favourite spade is so worn as to bear the imprint of his thumb upon it, and whose active life of physical toil ill-prepared him for the institutional torpor of the nursing home, the institution where, after the tragicomedy of a failed escape attempt, he quietly but resolutely starved himself to death. In these essays, Shelton's father only has a walk-on part, but he moves out of the family house when Mary Janie dies and finds a new home atop Crooked Mountain. We shall come back to him. Shelton's wife, or rather ex-wife, goes unnamed. She has only a walk-off part. And his young son, Tyree, succeeds in unlocking the tears which would not flow at Mary Pullen's funeral. All these figures, and many others — neighbours, vicious grasping distant relatives, former owners, cowhands, local characters and eccentrics — are assembled here, remembered here. And so the book is a gathering of ghosts that haunt the landscapes and localities of Jacksonville.

And then there is another spectral presence: the author himself. There is a photographic portrait of him, too, hiding just inside the back cover, looking intently at the camera. But he is so steeped in shadow as to be unrecognisable, less a discernible figure than a chiaroscuro of clouds, fogs and mists, an assemblage of steely shades. No, this is not a 'bad photograph' as one myopic reviewer apparently remarked. Writing in 'Central Park' of the poet Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin once distinguished between confused representation and the representation of confusion.²⁾ And so it is with Shelton's photograph — not an obscured image but a perfect image of obscurity itself.

I could go on. There are the conventional tell-tale marks and codings: an ISBN is printed next to a price (\$22.95 my copy) to remind the reader that she holds in her hands an artefact that circulates in at least two interwoven global systems of organisation and dissemination — the institutions, classifications

2) See Benjamin (2003), p. 169.

and catalogues of knowledge, and the capitalist exchange relations of the commodity-form. But I will stop. It is, after all, only a simple dust-jacket of a book. Nevertheless, all this interpretive elaboration seems appropriate for a work devoted to a profusion and confusion of coverings and casings, to housings and exoskeletons — of humans, of objects, of insects, of humans who, like Kafka's Gregor, have turned into insects; of strata of sediments and layers of soil protecting graves and the boxed-in dead; of all sorts of wrappings; of things and people swaddled like the baby in a cocoon of textiles.³⁾ And, at the same time of course, is preoccupied with what is thereby enclosed, encased, overlain, entombed, hidden: of texts slipped into pockets, of bodies buried, of half-forgotten objects stowed away in cupboards and sheds, of secrets folded into things.

Apropos folding and unfolding: A book jacket constitutes a beginning and an end, but it is all of a piece, all can be unfolded to form a single side. The locality, the family, the professor, the text are all laid out next to each other like the graves of the fallen. But in between them, different folds, like the folds of a fan, like the Proustian fan of memory imagined by Benjamin in his 1932 essay 'Berlin Chronicle'.⁴⁾ And, as Benjamin reminds us there, it is precisely within or between these very folds that the truth resides: here, then, secreted in these folds, lie the dreamworlds of Alabama.⁵⁾

Yes, there is much to be learned from this cover before one is led into the

3) Shelton notes: "Plants, object and bodies are not separate, but are wrapped systems with stories originating as much out of the actant as out of the actor" (DoA: 25).

4) See Benjamin (1999a), p. 597.

5) In his doctoral dissertation 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1919), Benjamin elaborates the notion of 'immanent criticism' as the exposure of the 'inner nature' of the work of art, that is to say, its 'truth-content,' as it appears in the present historical moment. The artwork "is brought to consciousness and self-knowledge of itself" (1996, p. 151) through the process of unfolding that is its critical afterlife. Guided by this notion, I seek here to unfold Shelton's book.

labyrinth of its texts.

2. Ariadne in Alabama, or a small history of wisteria

Shelton's theoretical references and sources are many (Marx, Freud, Foucault, Deleuze) but Walter Benjamin is without doubt his most profound inspiration and theoretical treasure trove. Benjamin is the guiding spirit, the guardian angel, who leads Shelton into, and watches over, his dreamscape of Alabama. It is Benjamin who provides the profound insight that while the account of the foreigner, the outsider, the tourist, must often of necessity content itself with capturing the exotic and picturesque aspects of a locality, that of the native, the resident, of the local him/herself, must have deeper motives, must partake of and give expression to memories and reminiscences.⁶⁾ Assuredly, Shelton has not spent his time in Jacksonville in vain. And it is, of course, in the Arcades Project (1999b), Benjamin's ill-fated fragmentary study of the nineteenth-century Parisian shopping arcade as dazzling home to the fetishized forms of commodities and fashions spawned by capitalist industry and imperial expansion, that Shelton finds his nomenclature and purpose: unravelling the myths and unearthing the phantasmagoria of modernity as a critical rediscovery of the recent past for the sake of the present. Indebted above all to Benjamin's own surrealist-inspired transubstantiations of 'first' and 'second' nature, in which commodities become strange species preserved for display in the aquaria of shop windows⁷⁾ and arcadian menageries,⁸⁾ Shelton audaciously and astonishingly transplants the conception of a 'dreamworld' [Traumwelt] from the metropolitan capital of the mid nineteenth century to a Southern rural

6) See Benjamin's 1929 review 'The Return of the Flaneur' (1999a), p. 262.

7) See, for example, Benjamin's original 'Arcades' article (1999b), p. 872.

8) See Benjamin (1999b), p. 876.

backwater of the mid twentieth in order to untangle the “luxuriant ecosystem” (DoW: xv) the densely interwoven networks and convoluted configurations of bodies, objects, flora and fauna, and memories, that were his home, that are his past. And, as Benjamin himself once imagined but then abandoned, this takes the form of a highly personal quasi-autobiographical memoir. And although reversing Benjamin’s formulation such that here, in these ‘autobiographical’ reflections of Alabama, it is the people, and not the places, that take precedence,⁹⁾ Shelton nevertheless remains true to this erstwhile intention in composing an Alabama chronicle, a Southern childhood around 1960.

Jacksonville is not lacking its own phantasmagoria (literally: ghost in the marketplace). In the centre of this “town dedicated to remembering the dead from the Civil War” (DoA, p. 140), there stands the memorial statue of a Confederate soldier, a terrible reminder that a third of the enlisted men from this little town never returned from America’s bloodiest conflict. Far more troubling though than this lone sentinel, eyes forever gazing northwards, is the monument’s unrepentant inscription, a call to arms and self-sacrifice on behalf of an appalling ideology and catastrophic historical legacy: “men may die but values never do” (DoA, p. 140).¹⁰⁾ The unknown soldier now stands outnumbered and surrounded by mall outlets, hardware stores, fast food joints. If ‘A’ marks the spot on the Google map, then our soldier dutifully, resolutely

9) In ‘Berlin Chronicle’ Benjamin notes: “The more frequently I return to these memories, the less fortuitous it seems to me, how slight a role is played in them by people” (1999a), p. 614.

10) Here I am reminded of other grey-clad soldiers who haunt the childhood memories of others: the German writer W.G. Sebald’s (1999, p. 227) nightmarish encounter with the bizarre figure of the ‘grey chasseur’, no more than a crumbling uniform on a tailor’s dummy, the vestige of an ill-fated Tyrolean volunteer brigade now left disintegrating in the attic of a neighbour’s house; and the French anthropologist Marc Augé’s (2002, p. 3) recollection of seeing his ‘first’ German soldier at the entrance to the Maubert-Mutualité métro station in 1940. These are all figures of catastrophic defeat, ruination and death. And I am reminded of the grey-green book dust-jacket, a strange shade like a grass stain on the jacket of a fallen Southern soldier.

guards Roma's Pizza and Steak House a stone's throw away. He stands on the Pelham Road, the main route bisecting the town centre, dividing it into a west- and an eastside. Erected in 1905, the statue of the boyish 26 year old Major John Pelham, killed in action by shrapnel on 17th March 1863 at Kelly's Ford, Virginia, is half a mile away, keeping silent vigil at the Greenlawn Cemetery gates, right next to the Jacksonville State University campus. It was to this eternal resting place that Shelton came as a boy with his maternal grandmother Pearl Landers to tend the grave of her husband Eli. But it is in vegetative, not mineral form that Shelton recalls Pelham. To honour him, so the story goes, the ladies of Virginia adorned his coffin with wisteria cuttings and thus it was that the plant first found its way into the natural habitat of north-east Alabama where it flourished to become the overgrown undergrowth of this landscape. I am no natural historian and cannot judge the veracity of this tale, but an alien species of flora that comes by chance to take root and then ruthlessly colonise the locality with its knotted roots and all-embracing, strangling, parasitic tentacles and thickets certainly provides an apt metaphor for the entangled mesh of memory itself and the arabesque patternings and interlacings of these texts. It is as if the wisteria has proliferated not just amid the Alabama ecology, but has also infiltrated Shelton's imagination, weaving itself into the very form of his writings. Benjamin remarks at one point that there is no description of the urban crowd as such in Baudelaire since the poet's whole work is so imbued by the experiences it affords to render such an explicit account superfluous. It is the very stuff of Baudelaire's writing itself.¹¹ And so it is with Shelton and the wisteria wreaths: a floral crowding, a predatory profusion which so embraces, enfolds and engulfs the writer such that his texts take on its lush, living architecture.

11) See Benjamin in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (2003), p. 321.

The arrival of wisteria connects Jacksonville to the Civil War and to the home of the Confederacy, Virginia. But it is another plant, one that has now vanished due to changes in land use (AC is a cattle farmer), that connects the locality to still more distant destinations and global networks: cotton. Cotton connects Shelton's home in Alabama with mine in the city of Manchester, via the Atlantic seaboard and the once great port of Liverpool. One wonders if the cotton plucked from the plantations that Pelham died defending was ever spun on the looms in the mill of Friedrich Engels. This is idle speculation I know, but the point is a serious one: cotton is a thread which ties this small rural nowhere in networks of flows and exchanges of materials, textiles, and bodies between three continents, just as, Shelton observes, Marcel Proust's madeleine connects Europe with the West Indies (sugar) and with Asia (tea). This seemingly innocent Proustian scene is, to be sure, the threshold of childhood memories but it is also in the same moment an assemblage of materials whose own origins are steeped in imperialism, exploitation and alienation. This is not to be forgotten.

The cotton has gone, just as the cattle have now gone, replaced by a few chickens as the local farms are turned one by one into weekend rural retreats for the prosperous business types of Birmingham and Atlanta. But the traces, the legacies of cotton remain deeply inscribed in the demographics and divisions of this locality. Just as, for a child named Walter Benjamin, the poor of turn of the century Berlin existed "at the back of beyond" (1999a, p. 600) so the slaves who toiled in those cotton fields and their African American descendents today have only an indistinct, but haunting, presence in Shelton's book: a brick outhouse might once have been used as slave quarters, a suspicion increased by the overly dismissive response of the handyman John Parker ("Shit naw, kitchen." DoA, pp. 10-11); and, the Black population

seemingly remains ghettoised on the ‘wrong’ side of the tracks in Eastside, a part of town once known as ‘Needmore’, still known as ‘Needmore’.¹²⁾

3. Tableaux alabamiens, or unpacking my refrigerator

In ‘The Mark on the Spade’, Shelton writes:

History is a set of flows that sorts and cuts the ground under our feet. Like an enormous tableau the landscape around my small square farmhouse is etched and scratched in different languages by tools and animal assemblages. The swamps and the large leaf pines gave way to cotton fields and hoes, then to open pastures and grazing cows, and were finally overtaken by chicken houses and ranchettes with golden retrievers shitting in the concrete kennels in the back. (DoA, pp. 9-10)

This is an illuminating passage. Shelton’s dreamworld of Alabama is an assemblage, a collage or constellation of the most heterogeneous human and nonhuman forms, phenomena, practices, economies, patterns and technologies. These are to be understood not as mixtures but as compounds, fused by the heat and humidity of the Southern sun or as geological layers of sediment compressed under extreme pressure. Nevertheless, one may distinguish four main strata: firstly, there is the territorial or topographical, by this I mean the land itself although this is emphatically not to be understood as some pristine environment, ‘first nature’ in any untouched, untrammelled state, but rather as a landscape that has been worked upon, transformed, cultivated, constructed, contested, ruined, reclaimed, abandoned, vandalised, imagined; secondly, there is

12) “but it’s still Needmore to me” says the tenant farmer Luke Coppick, who as a child played out in the disputed ‘slave quarters’, and who now as a man “clings nostalgically to a world in which he was white trash but in which codes of whiteness still absolve him” (DoA, p. 20).

the ecological or creaturely level, by which I mean the flora and fauna that has come to occupy these territories, inhabit them, colonize their niches and infest them, whether vegetative (cotton, wisteria), animal (cattle, chickens, beavers, racoons, retrievers, roadkill), or entomological (the myriad insects and bugs that ceaseless swarm here in their intricate nests, stinging and biting the unwary); thirdly, there is the material or technological level (what one might term 'second nature' were one to erroneously posit something else as 'first nature'), namely, the accumulation, utilisation, destruction and deposition of human-made structures (houses, barns, outhouses, sheds, fences) and the manifold objects they contain (commodities, tools, implements and machinery of all kinds); and finally, there is that other creaturely element, the human, the passing generations of inhabitants of the area themselves and most obviously Shelton's own kith and kin, and Shelton himself of course. Landscape, habitat, technoscape, ghost-town — all this superabundance of life and death is then viewed in complex, contested and historically changing configurations, networks and matrices through the highly unstable and decidedly unreliable double optic of contemporary cultural thought (Critical Theory, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism) and the fine mesh of individual memory and affect. The writing is both emotionally charged and disarmingly frank. Imbued with love and preoccupied with death, these are texts inevitably pervaded by mourning (occasioned by the death of the loved one) and by melancholy (endlessly attending the impossible love object). The book comes to compose an elegy, a eulogy, an exorcism, a passionate confession, the messianic appeal of an exile. Alabama, what remains of it, is assembled here for a cry.

It is for all this that Shelton uses the term 'dreamworlds', plural, not singular. One might, following Guy Debord, also think of it as a pioneering 'psychotopography' — not *psycho geography*,¹³) this term is too closely associated with the

Situationist *city*, but rather a *psychotopography*, a representation of locality as experienced, imagined and remembered landscape, an entire spatial-temporal complex both composed through and constituting an aching “structure of feeling”¹⁴), a “memory palace” (DoA, p. 131): ‘home’. Shelton is all too aware of his own nostalgia, a “Janus-faced” (see DoA, p. 154) nostalgia understood here literally as ‘homesickness’, sick for home, sick of home — sickly sweet home Alabama.¹⁵)

What is it to read such a text? One might be tempted to describe the effect as kaleidoscopic, at times hallucinatory, but this would be to privilege the optical, the visual too much in a book dedicated to the tactile, the visceral, the corporal and material. And although Shelton’s writing is certainly often surreal, there is a certain resistance to, an antipathy for, the ecstatic, the esoteric, the occult, the supernatural. Shelton may communicate in a “strange accent” (DoA, p. xvii) but he resolutely refuses to ‘speak in tongues’. His work is prosaic in the best sense. True, there are occasional flights of fancy. No doubt Aragon and Breton would take great delight (as I do) in chancing upon a sentence like this: “Emotions are part of an assemblage of machines like a possum running down an ironing board onto the foot of a man holding an electric fan in a steel washtub” (DoA, p. 143). However, there are many more such juxtapositions of incongruous things, but their effect is far more ‘profane illumination’ of the ordinary, the everyday, the quotidian, than intoxication or

13) Debord presents this term in his ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geogrpahy’: “*Psychogeography* could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (1981, p. 5).

14) The term is derived, of course, from Raymond Williams. It is invoked by Shelton in the essay ‘Assembling Mary Pullen for a Cry’, see DoW, p. 144.

15) Shelton notes: “The problem is more complicated than being away from home. Even at home I was away.” (DoA, p. 96)

exoticism. His assemblages are remarkably mundane, mundane yet remarkable: rooms stuffed with the bric-a-brac accrued over an entire lifetime; a shed filled with bygone agricultural implements like some rural museum; vehicles so crammed with farm equipment there scarcely seems space for the driver, let alone passengers,¹⁶⁾ or loaded up with all one's personal effects ready for an itinerant intellectual existence.¹⁷⁾ Opening the book is an entry, an introduction, almost an introjection, an insertion, into such manifold realms of things, but Shelton is at pains to conceive this experience in the most banal terms:

What for Benjamin was an unnamed cabinet of curiosities was for me a Kenmore refrigerator from Sears, Roebuck, I picked up when an old woman in Gadsden died and her possessions were liquidated (DoW, p. 38).

The fridge is a super-cool arcade housing “a constellation of kindred objects” (DoA, p. 38), both another assortment of containers (Tupperware, packets, jars) and a veritable cornucopia of slowly decaying foodstuffs, consumables unopened or long past their ‘best before’ date, things half preserved in their afterlife — mayonnaise, herrings, yoghurt, chocolate in the shape of tulips. Were Benjamin’s ‘pilfering child’ to sneak here on his secretive, nocturnal search for strawberry jam,¹⁸⁾ he would be so disappointed: nothing seems to survive in this fridge. It is as if it were not for conservation or preservation at all, but merely away-station en route to the bin, a delaying tactic, a detour, a digression for the ultimately unwanted.

16) Shelton writes of his grandfather AC: “He treated the car like it was a shed. Baling twine was curled in long knots on the floorboards. A steel bucket sat in the backseat. Feed sacks lay on old newspapers. Cow medicine in plastic bottles, a tattoo kit in a plastic tackle box, and feedcorn scattered on the seat were all mixed in a Pentacost” (DoA, pp. 102-3)

17) See DoA, p. 96.

18) See Benjamin (1996), p. 464.

Here in the dark (we assume!) and the cold, the spatial-material-temporal-personal-historical-catastrophic involutions and convolutions of Shelton's texts are exemplified in one seemingly banal but utterly beguiling passage:

Next to the Heinz ketchup was a jar of pickles sealed up tight in a powerful garlic gas; my grandmother Shelton had given me the jar for never painting the barn roof before it burned down. The refrigerator nicely preserves the wreckage(DoA, p. 36).

What is remarkable amid the chronological leaps and loops here is that there is a kind of comedy of calamities. And although this is, as I have said, a book of mourning and melancholy, there is also much wit and humour — not scornful, but sorrowful. Shelton mentions, for example, his academic colleague who sends Christmas cards with her cat and thoughtfully signs for both of them (DoA, p. xx). The psychotopographer is neither blind nor indifferent to such tell-tale idiosyncrasies and inscriptions. One should add the cat to the fauna of Alabama. It cannot write, but Shelton has written it in as part his dreamworld. He has written it in for the both of them.

4. An angel over Alabama, or on some motifs in Shelton

One may sometimes lose the thread of Shelton's texts but there are a number of recurrent motifs which knot them together. I will briefly mention four, a quartet of Benjaminian figures:

1) *A man digging*. Shelton is true to Benjamin's injunction that one must approach one's own past like a person digging, returning again and again to till the same spots, sift and sort the same images. And this auto-archaeology must on no account be, he insists, simply for the purpose of cataloguing one's finds,

but rather must draw its energy and enthusiasm from the joy of digging itself and the thrill of discovery.¹⁹⁾ Yes, Shelton is certainly enthralled by such memorial excavations, and is drawn repeatedly to the same loci, the same figures; but there are also other kinds of digging going on here. He is an agriculturalist as well as an archaeologist (though strictly speaking, this is not agriculture since it is fence posts sprouting barbed wire, not crops, that are planted in this soil). The Sheltons are diggers of foundations, of ditches, of drainage channels, of graves. And such digging is more visceral, more violent than the wistful expectancy and careful tilling of Benjamin's archaeologist. Digging is an act of violence and violation, cutting into the ground, lacerating its surface, penetrating down into its layers. Digging is a mutilation, a marking of the landscape, of the labouring body, of the digger too. As Shelton digs, things dig into him: insects bite and sting, splinters, thorns and roots puncture, the barbed wire springs back unexpectedly and buries its steely knots into his soft body. The digger bears all these wounds and scars, traces of where the digger himself has been physically dug into as if nature itself were conspiring in retaliation. Such digging is a reciprocal process of mutual scarification and disfigurement. Yes, to be sure, this is digging — but as dissection; less archaeological excavation, more an autopsy.

As one digs, so one's body digs into the tools of digger. AC's favourite spade is so worn as to bear the man's thumb print at the top of the handle, a meeting of human and material that Shelton terms, following another Marcel, Marcel Duchamps, the "infra-thin" (DoA, p. 148). The spade marks the ground; the man marks the spade. But these marks are of an absence: AC, the cattle man, is dead; the farm has been sold off; Shelton, the author, is in Buffalo writing his book. Only these incisions and indentations remain. These traces are

19) See Benjamin (1999a), p. 611.

an assemblage of absences ready for a cry.

2) *Melancholia I*: What is left when the digging is done? Let me put this another way: what is the afterlife of the digger and the dug? For AC and his wife it was mercifully short and institutional. After years of activity and physical labour, neither of them it seems could adjust to inactivity of the comfy chairs encircling the non-stop daytime TV of the nursing home. AC sits still and starves. Mary Pullen suffers a stroke and perishes little by little. But first they must endure the incapacity, the stillness. All this activity has ceased, inescapable passivity has set in — the reader of Benjamin cannot help but recall, here, the passage in the *Trauerspiel* study where Albrecht Dürer's series of engravings of the figure of Melancholia are invoked. It is a seated figure, head resting on hand, seemingly lost in thought, unable to stir himself, utterly surrendered to his own musings and memories, apathetic, bereft of purpose. Around him, Benjamin says, scattered at his feet, lie the gradually discarded objects and implements of everyday life, the tools and utensils of active existence.²⁰ These have become useless, meaningless, futile, mute. For AC and Mary Pullen, the *viva activa* was transformed into the *viva contemplativa* but it was worse for them, even more sorrowful because it was not of their volition. The figure of Melancholia has slowly renounced these things, he has abdicated from action and quietly withdrawn into himself; he has actively embraced inactivity. How much more melancholy to have these things taken away, indeed, to be taken away oneself.

As the farm is wound up and sold off, and as he prepares to take his leave of his house and lands, I imagine Shelton the author, too, like Dürer's figure of Melancholia, sadly surveying the ruinous material landscape that has grown up around him and he has, in turn, grown up within: the contents of so many

20) See Benjamin (1985), p. 140.

containers — not just the Kenmore fridge, but also cupboards, old wardrobes and trunks, rooms, buildings, farms, so many sets of things found within yet other sets. So many old and obsolete tools and implements, all that beekeeping equipment, now the bees themselves have long gone. It is a material jumble, an ecosystem of second nature, made up of hollowed out things, of wooden structures honeycombed by worms and beetles complete with fantastical labyrinthine passageways and channels, of objects worn out, broken, fragmented, rotten and disintegrated, of items casually abandoned to the mandibles of countless termites and ants and yellow-jackets. This is the afterlife of the artefact, its natural history as decay and decomposition. Of course, some implements outlive not only the rest of their kind but also their own names too. One is left to puzzle not only ‘What was this for?’ but also ‘What is this called?’ Their fate is sometimes different. They become souvenirs. In any case, of all such things, dreamworlds are made.

3) *the collector*: collectors are, Benjamin observes, “physiognomists” of the object world, readers and decipherers of the traces upon objects so that, now freed from the drudgery of quotidian utility, these things can take their rightful place in a “magic circle” of fragments and tell their tale.²¹⁾ Like the child, the collector is indifferent to the monetary value of things. Like the surrealist, s/he is sensitive to and intrigued by the histories and energies borne by outmoded and derided things. Shelton is such a “true collector,”²²⁾ even though he has assembled only the most meagre collection: a shovel bearing the imprint of his grandfather AC; a syrup jug which belonged to Mary Pullen, the one thing rescued from her house after her death as other relatives descended upon it like

21) See Benjamin (1999b), p. 207; H2, p. 7; H2a, p. 1 and also p. 205: H1a, p. 2.

22) Benjamin writes: “for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes” (1999b, p. 205: H1a, p. 2).

a swarm of locusts; and a strange, clawed and hooked fencing tool, “a prehistoric bird of prey” (DoA, p. xvi) that now sits menacingly atop piles of books and papers as the most vicious looking paperweight, “like Cerberus” (DoA, p. xvii). True, it doesn’t seem much of a collection, but it is enough — enough to recall AC the digger, enough to remember his grandmother for a cry:

I got a syrup pitcher, a clear glass, fist-sized container with a thumb slide on the pour that had sat on the table for years. My wife secured this for me. For me it was the equivalent of having Marcel’s tea set and a reminder that Mary Pullen loved me(DoA, p. 148).

Of whom does the fencing tool remind him? Of himself, of course, of the 21 years he worked on the farm, of who he was before he became a professor. It is a continuing reminder that he is different from his academic colleagues. Doubtless at a loss to know what it is, they ask politely, if they ask at all, whether or not he picked it up in a yard sale (DoA, p. xvii). So much for sociologists. They probably also have no idea that the fragment of map on the dust-jacket is really a treasure map even though there is no x to mark the spot.

4) the angel: Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 91) opens his essay ‘Walking in the City’ with the panoramic view of New York City from atop the World Trade Center, a passage we can hardly read today 30 years later without thinking of the catastrophe and death that will come to pass, without becoming ‘backwards looking prophets’ as Roland Barthes puts it in *Camera Lucida*. It was a single death that drove Shelton’s father to live in a house high up on top of Crooked Mountain, that of his wife Mary Janie in 1996, a bereavement that Shelton himself considers an “abduction”. And just as de Certeau looks

out over Manhattan and envisions the Concept City beloved of planners and architects spread out below, so the mountainside vantage point provides a panoramic vista of the entire valley between Jacksonville and Rabittown . This view is both spatial and temporal, into the distance and into the past: one sees the locality as it is now, one perceives how it has come to be, how it used to be. One sees the fissures where it has been worked and transformed, where and how jumbles of buildings have come and gone, where there is ongoing construction and destruction, where ditches have been dug, fences erected and broken, wetlands drained, channels carved and abandoned, indeed, above all, where the various ruins of the Shelton clan linger - former houses here and there, disused farm buildings, old cattle pastures, dried up water courses. It is a topographical representation, a three-dimensional mapping of familial dispersion, disintegration and dereliction.²³⁾ The former house of the author is plainly visible:

From his porch you can see the taillights of jets setting down in Atlanta 90 miles away. You can pick out my old farmhouse, the line of longleaf pines that followed my property line, the beaver swamp, and at the far end of the pecan orchard - my ex-wife's new home. Dad has a mountain clouded with views back into memories (DoA, p. 48).

The view from Crooked Mountain consists of an accumulation of skeletal structures and stigmata, a depository of debris and detritus, a locality in which

23) Of his own former house Shelton notes: "My past persists in the broken foundations in the middle of a pecan orchard slumped with dirt and overgrown with privet and daylilies, a pile of bricks where the chimney was, a broad slate hunk that was the stoop to the side door, a colony of rusty nails burrowed into the first six inches of dirt, deformed into a botanical and mineral skeleton of a house that was here" (DoA, p. 102).

even the new developments, perhaps *especially* the shiny new developments — metallic chicken farms, weekend getaways, air-conditioned malls — provoke memories only of what they have replaced, of what was there but is now gone, of absences. It is a valley of death and the dead. No wonder the mountain seems haunted.²⁴) One cannot help but become a backwards looking prophet from up there. Perhaps only a bereaved man would choose it as home. A crooked mountain is an apt abode for those whose lives have been broken.

The mountain dweller looks down into the valley as the rubbish, the ruins, the waste grows relentlessly. Shelton sees in this an incarnation of Benjamin's famous 'angel of history', the figure derived from Paul Klee's image *Angelus Novus*. In his 1940 'Theses on the Concept of History,' reflections conceived as the epistemological-historiographical prolegomena to his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes the angel as staring wide-eyed as the trash, the residues, the leavings produced by catastrophic history, things disregarded, disdained, disfigured, all pile up ceaselessly at his feet. A storm, 'progress', has caught his open wings and blows him backwards into the future, away from Paradise.²⁵) From the top of Crooked Mountain:

The angel sees not only the mounting wreckage of everyday life compressed into a rolling avalanche, but also the past stretched into a wide expanse in which everything is sinking, leaving historical structures like clapboard Baptist churches and even species, like an arm sticking out of quicksand(DoA, p. 49).

But there is more. It is as if the mountain were not merely a vantage point,

24) "Crooked Mountain is a zone where ghosts and trivial events combine into layers of haunting that reach back through the landscape and bite, then vanish back through the thin topsoil into the red clay." (DoA, p. 61).

25) See Benjamin (2003), p. 392.

an elevated observatory from which to survey the collapse and calamity below, but were itself made up of this blighted and broken historical material. Yes, fragments pile up before it; but perhaps it is itself the greatest scrapheap of all:

Crooked Mountain was like a big throbbing brain at the center of the landscape. It was the biggest ruin, the biggest grave, and the gravity that moved tool boxes, pine beetles, deer, sofas, hope chests and packs of wild dogs across the landscape (DoA, p. 63).

And it moves Shelton and his father, too. It sucks the latter into its orbit with its gravitational pull. But such forces can be centrifugal as well as centripetal. Shelton the son is propelled elsewhere, driven hither and thither as an academic nomad. He goes back, into the North, and into his own past, and the former finally provides the requisite distance, the necessary perspective, for him to contemplate the latter. He writes a book that is an even greater and more mournful assemblage of ruins and residues than the mountain; not a scrapheap, but a scrapbook. And it is Shelton who meticulously pieces all this abject, outcast material together. He embodies the writer as ragpicker: Shelton the *chiffonier*. His monument to, his memorial for, the ghosts of this territory is not mineral, like the statue of Pelham, but textual. It does not stand imposingly like a statue at the heart of this locality but painstakingly encompasses it, enfolds it within its pages. It is a recollection and redemption of times and places past, of loved ones lost. It is a chronicle of sorrows that dwarfs Crooked Mountain, overshadows it, even though it is only small. See here, it is so small I can hold it in one hand: *Dreamworlds of Alabama*.

5. Conclusion: A Few Last Sparrows

In *Civilisation and its Discontents*,²⁶⁾ Shelton reminds us, there is an astonishing passage in which Freud likens the unconscious to the city of Rome with its many layers and levels of construction and destruction, its incongruous interminglings and juxtaposings of the most modern and the ancient buildings and edifices, its memorials and blank spaces, its labyrinthine passages and alleyways. This image of the psyche as cityscape, cityscape as psyche, is Shelton's own abiding model for his dreamworlds. Rural Alabama has come to stand in for the Eternal City.²⁷⁾ Perhaps this is not so strange. After all, Rome is, as luck would have it, not that far away... Rome, Georgia is a few miles up the road to the north-east over the state-line (Shelton omits to mention this... I will do it for the both of us). Using the map on the back of the book, the line taken by JACKSON is pointing right at it. Going in the other direction, JACKSON curls into the very centre of the cover, in other words, it directs us to that part of the dust-jacket itself covered over by the blurb, the hidden focus of this landscape, the very heart of this dreamworld.

The point is that Shelton's dreamworld of Alabama is less a case-study of a locality, more itself a case file, a vast psychoanalytic case. Imagine, then, not a person but rather the whole terrain around Jacksonville, this whole tortured, tormented, mutilated, lacerated, ruined ecosystem, laid out mutely on the psychoanalyst's couch for a consultation. Ultimately, this is what is meant here by a 'psychotopography'. And one might ask what kind of case might this be exactly, what kind of pathology or disturbance? Nostalgia, perhaps? Alienation? Both, that is to say, of that puzzling hybrid of the homely and unhomely, the *Heimlich- unheimlich* that Freud understood as the uncanny? Bad dreams?

26) See Freud (2002), pp. 7-10.

27) Shelton writes: "Freud sees in Rome a multidimensional hologram of the mind in which all the pasts continue to persist and jut into the present like unruly obelisks" (DoA, p. 110).

Melancholia?

It is case of all of these of course. It is a complex case. The prognosis is not good. But of all these afflictions it is the last, melancholia, which seems most acute. Alabama may be a 'dreamworld' [*Traumwelt*], perhaps even a 'nightmare-world' [*Albtraumwelt*]. It is certainly a 'trauma-world'. But for me, more than any of these, it is a sorrowful world of mourning and melancholy, of sadness and lamentation, of natural history as catastrophe and ruination and of creaturely life as suffering and death. It is a *Trauernwelt*.

In the notoriously difficult epistemological preface to his *Trauerspiel* study, Walter Benjamin wrote that significant works of art are those which either initiate or terminate an aesthetic Idea. They are either the first words or the final say, they either start or finish a genre, a form. *Perfect* ones, he adds, do both at once.²⁸⁾ If this is true, then could it be that Allen Shelton's *Dreamworlds of Alabama* proves to be the only case, an open and shut case so to speak, of psychotopography?

Epilogue

For the inaugural issue of this journal, it would seem appropriate to conclude with some reflections on the significance of *Dreamworlds of Alabama* for the study of localities, for an intellectual enterprise that might bear the name 'localitology'.

- (i) Places and localities are inextricably bound up with individual and collective memories, histories and mythologies and it is the perhaps one of the many tasks of the localitologist to unearth these, to disentangle them and to use the one to dislodge and disturb the other.

28) See Freud (1985), p. 44.

- (ii) An attentiveness to the presence of absences, to that which was but is now no more. The study of localities must take account of the ghosts of former times, things, people as they continue to haunt the present. Localitology must enfold within it a 'hauntology' of place.
- (iii) The imperative for an understanding and foregrounding of embodiment and materiality: the body is conceived as one assemblage amid an entire ecosystem of other human and non-human assemblages, technologies and imaginaries.
- (iv) Localities are labyrinthine and/or wisteria-like, that is to say, complex webs which are themselves always interwoven with other networks and systems reaching far beyond the local. Localitology cannot treat its sites as isolates but must endeavour to discover and represent places in terms of relationships, configurations, constellations and patterns.
- (v) The importance of affect and emotion, essential elements of human experience meaning and place-making, yet aspects which have for so long been neglected and derided by 'serious' scholars in their quixotic quest for 'scientificity' and 'objectivity' undertaken beneath the banner of an instrumental reason.
- (vi) Shelton is both the producer and the product of his dreamworlds. Histories are not naive or neutral but are written from the perspective of the present as it is itself shaped by the past. Histories are complex intersections and correspondences of always contested socio-economic, cultural and political interests. For Benjamin, the 'dialectical image', his key historiographic category, is the fleeting instant of mutual recognition in which the critically endangered present urgently and desperately redeems an equally threatened moment from the past as it is about to vanish irrevocably. Localitology would do well to make

such a critical-redemptive practice its own.

- (vii) A final thought. Localitology must be the inspiration to explore fascinating and enchanting places, to read and write texts distinguished by their erudition and imagination, by their power of insight and illumination, by their daring experimentation, and above all perhaps, by the poetry of their expression.

Localitology must be memorial, critical, spectral, corporeal, material, labyrinthine, configurational, affectual, emotional, dialectical, redemptive, emancipatory, experimental and beautiful — that is its challenge, its promise, its *raison d'être*.

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