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W. G. Sebald's Emblematics: Opaque Images of Broken Rebellion

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Abstract

This thesis represents perhaps the first extensive study of allegorical imagery—more specifically, emblematics—across the œuvre of W. G. Sebald (1944-2001). In so doing, it seeks to place Sebald in a long, notably germanophone lineage which can be traced back to the early modern period, though one significantly mediated by the revival of interest in allegorical imagery during the first half of the twentieth century (that of Karl Giehlow, the Warburg school, and Walter Benjamin's idiosyncratic labours thereafter, chiefly in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and *The Arcades Project*). This thesis apportions equal weight to Sebald's long and short works, the latter of which have often been marginalised or neglected by anglophone critics. In keeping with its dialectic of word and image, the emblem has, from its very inception, fulfilled a dual function: representation and exposition. In addition to the oft-remarked interposition of word and image in his later works, Sebald's writing dating back to the early 1980s betrays a tendency to combine these functions in peculiar ways, a tendency which only intensified over the course of the subsequent decade. In Sebald's later, longer works, the narrator plays a central role in the emblematic staging, so to speak, then in the exposition of such enigmatic images as are made to appear. In that emblematics is constitutionally a reiterative form of expression, a long contextual and theoretical introductory chapter is followed by chapters concentrated on certain of Sebald's most significant emblems: dogs, corpses, and moths and butterflies.

Lay summary

W. G. Sebald is known above all as a writer of narrative works—unusual hybrids of travelogue, history and biography (amongst others). He grew up in the southwest of Germany, but spent most of his adult life working as teacher and critic of Austrian and German literature at the University of East Anglia. What has often struck English language readers most is the appearance of photographs in his major works. This thesis concentrates on Sebald's apparent invocation of visual imagery of a different sort, namely the emblem. This is a form of symbolic expression which emerged at the start of the sixteenth century – in countless emblem books – and soon came to dominate the stage. It depends on a productive and often mysterious pairing of word and image. The present thesis describes the numerous ways in which Sebald's work appears emblematic, from its obvious interplay of text and images, to its less obvious staging of emblematic motifs, above all: dogs, corpses, moths and butterflies.

“The primary interest of allegory is not linguistic but optical.”

Walter Benjamin

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I. Introduction

In an early essay on Kafka, as revealing as it is critically neglected, W. G. Sebald gazed in mock horror at the “great hordes of critics and commentators who had already worked on the exhumation and reconstruction of Kafka’s writing,” whilst beneath them “philologists busied themselves in securing the fundamentals.” So voluminous and abstruse has this body of critical work grown, he went on, it is a wonder that Kafka’s work, “already suffering from an exhaustion all its own, is not felled by this parasitic invasion.”¹ Reading these words now, it is tempting to carry out an effort of extrapolation, connecting them with Sebald’s own narrative works, which have been practically assailed by criticism and commentary—not to mention ill-judged tributes—since they began appearing in English translation in the middle part of the 1990s.² And if the present study is anything to go by, to quote the same essay once more, “nowhere is an end in sight.”³ At the very least, as the tenor of this by no means exceptional piece of his writing shows, Sebald’s œuvre is less exhausted and better armed than Kafka’s in standing up to the assaillment.

From the very beginning, a considerable portion of Sebald criticism has concentrated on the image, broadly conceived. This is especially pronounced in respect to English letters, which was more inclined than its German counterpart to view Sebald’s practice of interspersing prose

¹ W. G. Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen: Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten,” *Literatur und Kritik* 21 (July-August, 1986), 194.

² Sebald’s first narrative work to be published as a monograph was *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht* (Nördlingen: Franz Greno, 1988), a poem in three parts. His first major prose work was *Schwindel. Gefühle.* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1990). *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1992) soon followed, which was the first of his major narrative works to appear in English translation, published as *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1996). Of those tributes, see *Patience (After Sebald)*, directed by Grant Gee (Illuminations, 2011), and the tribute concert headlined by Patti Smith and given a decade after Sebald’s death (see Richard Sheppard, “W. G. Sebald: A Chronology,” in SM, 658). For a helpful and much fuller overview of Sebald’s uneven emergence and reception in English and German speaking realms, see Mark R. McCulloh, “Two Languages, Two Audiences: The Tandem Literary Œuvres of W. G. Sebald,” in *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 7-20.

³ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 194.

with images as a novelty.⁴ For the most part, this line of inquiry has been directed at the photographic image. Essays on photography and Sebald have from the very beginning been well represented in English language handbooks and special editions,⁵ though also in German ones.⁶ J. J. Long's *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Memory* (2007) can be considered the early culmination of these efforts, in which he determines that two mnemonic apparatuses—the photographic image and the archive—undergird Sebald's works, which leads him to group the latter under the 'meta-phenomenon' of 'modernity,' understood as extending from "the seismic social, economic, political and cultural transformations that took place in European societies from the eighteenth century onwards" to the devastations of the Second World War, Auschwitz, and their immediate aftermath.⁷

A relatively meagre amount of work has been done in regards to Sebald's writing about and with the non-photographic visual arts, albeit with notable exceptions.⁸ In purely quantitative

⁴ See Peter Weiss's *Abschied von den Eltern* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961), to name one pertinent example, which contains pictures by the author himself. It was, by Sebald's account, one of the books "which opened certain doors," ethical and aesthetic, and especially in regards to literary engagement with the NS-Zeit. "I could see things much more clearly in the black-and-white structure which Peter Weiss gave his prose than in any other books read previously." He also cited *Die Ermittlung* (1965), Weiss's documentary stage play concerning the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of the 1960s, as particularly important in this regard (UDE 256). Sebald later said that he daily followed accounts of the trials in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (W. G. Sebald, *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby*, vol. 2 (Norwich: Arthur Miller Centre, 2001), 146-7).

⁵ See, for example: Carolin Duttlinger, "Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 155-71; Maya Barzilai, "On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," in *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 205-18; and Clive Scott, "W. G. Sebald: Enumeration, Photography and the Hermeneutics of History," in *After Sebald: Essays and Illuminations*, ed. Jon Cook (Woodbridge: Full Circle Editions, 2014), 125-40.

⁶ See, amongst others: Alexandra Tischel, "Aus der Dunkelkammer der Geschichte. Zum Zusammenhang von Photographie und Erinnerung in W. G. Sebalds *Austerlitz*," in *W. G. Sebald. Politische Archäologie und Melancholische Bastellei*, ed. Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschäger (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006), 31-45; and Markus R. Weber, "Die Fantastische Befragt die Pedantische Genauigkeit. Zu den Abbildungen in W. G. Sebalds Werken," *Text+Kritik* 158 (April 2003): 63-74. The latter is unusual for treating non-photographic images in the same breath as photographic ones. Tellingly, two collections produced under German editorship eschew the question of photography almost altogether, namely: *Sebald. Lektüren*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Isele, 2005); and *Über W. G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem Anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).

⁷ J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1. Such a sweeping claim is not without its irony, given that later in the same work Long dismisses tranches of Sebald research as "increasingly congested and predictable," and as "seemingly endless variations on [a] theme" (Ibid, 67 n. 4).

⁸ See especially: Anne Fuchs, "W.G. Sebald's Painters: The Function of Fine Art in his Prose Works," *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006): 167-83; and Claudia Öhlschläger, "Medialität und Poetik des trompe l'oeil. W.G.

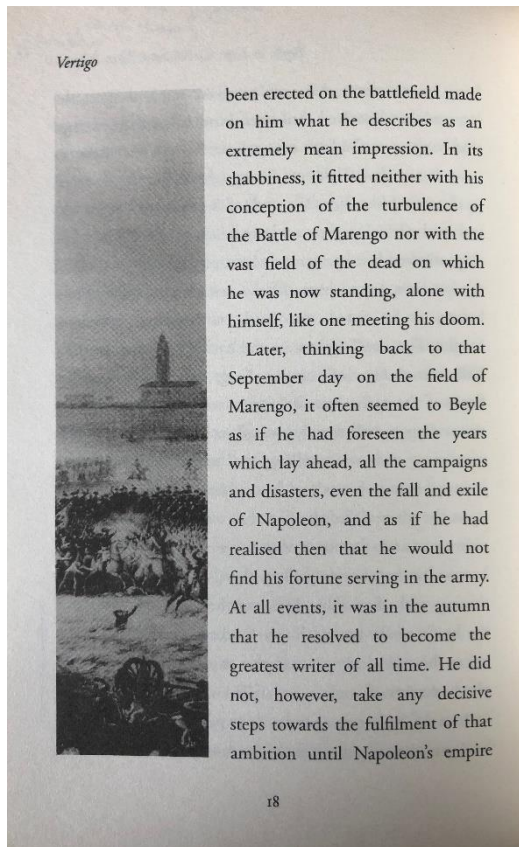
terms, this is largely justified in regards to a work like *Austerlitz* (2001), Sebald's last major narrative prose work, in which the bulk of the images are photographs (and, indeed, photographs of archival spaces, broadly considered). It is not in regards to a work like *Schwindel. Gefühle.* (1990), where paintings, drawings, and sculptures (all admittedly in reproduction) make up over a third of all images appearing among the script, outnumbering strictly photographic images and comprising masterworks by Giotto and Pisanello and sketches by Stendhal and Sebald himself.

The following pages, then, will make some effort to redress that imbalance, concentrating on just a small number of the many passages of Sebald's work which write up to and out of—to paraphrase the author himself—non-photographic images.⁹ In doing so, I am consciously at odds with that train of thought best expressed by Mark Anderson, namely that Sebald's images are “without captions” and serve “not as the illustration of the text.”¹⁰ The latter is undoubtedly true, to the extent that often precisely the opposite is the case, with the text seeming to provide illustration or exposition of the image. As to the former, whilst I do not mean to suggest that Sebald ever used so vulgar a device as a “caption,” it is worth stressing, at this early stage, that the text is often set very definitely in accordance with the image. That this has escaped the attentions of many anglophone critics is no surprise, given that English editions of Sebald's narratives, and especially those later ones issued by massive publishers, do away with these settings. This basic but unusual fact of composition strikes me as belonging—though not necessarily monogamously—to an emblematic tradition, as does that subservience of text to image mentioned moments ago. The next chapter will begin in earnest the business of establishing the basis for such notions.

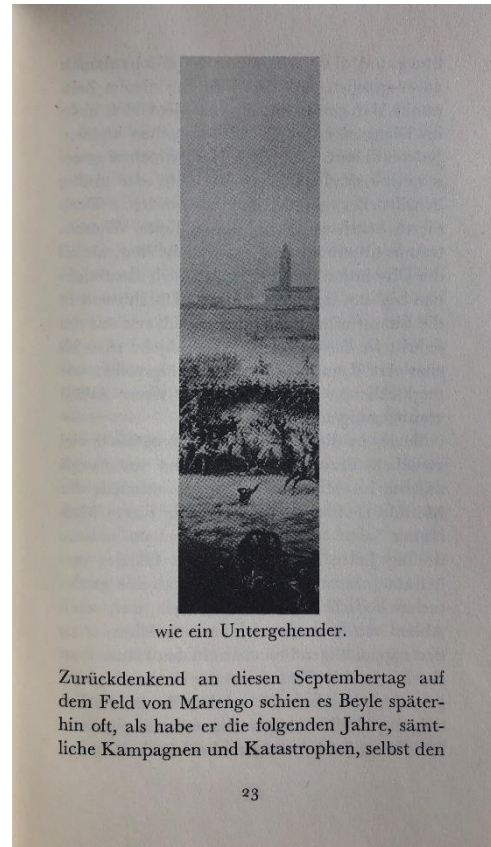
Sebald und Jan Peter Tripp,” in *Jahrbuch Gegenwartsliteratur. Heft 6/2007: W.G. Sebald*, ed. Paul Michel Lützeler and Stephan K. Schindler (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2007): 21-43.

⁹ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 155.

¹⁰ Mark M. Anderson, “The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald,” *October* 106 (Fall 2003): 109.



Vertigo (London: Vintage, 2002), 18.



Schwindel. Gefühle. (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1990), 23.

I will also labour over images of a more prosaic sort, namely *Schriftbilder*, to borrow a wilfully indeterminate German compound of ‘writing’ and ‘image’ used most often in regards to the appearance (or image) of handwriting or typescript. Sebald once wrote of how in writing the poet Ernst Herbeck “traverses his ruined life, making it comprehensible by way of a faithful mis-quotation [Verzeichnung] of accidental interferences in the written image [Schriftbild]” (UH 134). There will be more to say about Sebald and Herbeck in due course. For the moment it is necessary to stress the obscure and unresolved coincidence of fidelity and deviation, accident and confrontation, script and image. All of these have an important bearing on the present study, which is, to my knowledge, the first protracted effort to account for allegorical imagery in Sebald’s writing. More specifically, as the title suggests, I propose to account for Sebald’s idiosyncratic use of a form of expression properly belonging to the early modern period, namely, the emblematic. In doing so, I am working outside of the bounds set,

overzealously, by Long—those of modernity’s (rather short seeming) ‘longue durée.’¹¹ There have already been brief and important forays beyond that pale,¹² which attest to the conspicuous fact that Sebald’s texts—not to mention his library—are replete with early modern writers, painters, philosophers, theologians, inter alia, who are alternately cited, alluded to, or even made to appear in person.¹³ Still, considering the vast and unrelenting body of Sebald criticism and commentary from afar, the impression is that these instances are as isolated as they are minor, with little bearing on the fabric or the tenor of Sebald’s writing.¹⁴ It is hoped that the present study will do something to correct that impression.

Emerging at the beginning of the sixteenth century, emblematic expression can easily strike us as a phenomenon belonging exclusively to the early modern period, especially when one considers its near terminal decline in the eighteenth century. If the emblem continues to attract attention beyond the preserve of a small group of devotees, then that is in large part thanks to the work of German critics of the early twentieth century.¹⁵ Serious iconological study of allegorical imagery was at its height in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, and

¹¹ The phrase derives from that essay of Anderson’s just cited, in which the latter in fact insists that “most of [Sebald’s] books are about existential exile, not mass killing. And their cultural memory emerges from the long *durée* of European history from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the present, not just from the twelve years of the Hitler regime” (Anderson, “Edge of Darkness,” 104). Sharing Anderson’s well justified desire to undo a quickly calcifying sense of Sebald as a ‘Holocaust writer,’ Long makes of him a writer of modernity, at the same time as he quietly excises the first two and a half centuries of that period, properly conceived. Anne Fuchs has also done important revisionist work along these lines, i.e., in Anne Fuchs, “*Die Schmerzsspuren der Geschichte*”: *Zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W. G. Sebalds Prosa* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), especially 12-7.

¹² Especially the following: Bianca Theisen, “A Natural History of Destruction: W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*,” *MLN* 121, no. 3 (April 2006): 563-581; and Verena Olejniczak Lobsien, “Transformations of Early Modernity in the work of W. G. Sebald,” *Journal of European Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (2011): 431-48.

¹³ Lobsien produces an admirable catalogue of the more important of these, which I will respectfully and selectively plunder as follows: Matthias Grünewald (c. 1470-1528), Georg Wilhelm Steller (1709-46), John Aubrey (1626-97), Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), and the likes of Milton and Shakespeare (Lobsien, “Early Modernity,” 431-3). These can be ably supplemented by Claudia Öhlschläger’s catalogue of Sebald’s early modern visual artists, which includes: Giotto, Pisanello, Vischer, Dürer, Altdorfer, Brueghel, Valckenborch, Rembrandt, Paolini, Van Ruisdael, and Tiepolo (Claudia Öhlschläger, “Malerei,” in *W. G. Sebald-Handbuch*, ed. Claudia Öhlschläger and Michael Niehaus (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 186).

¹⁴ The notable exception is Thomas Browne, whose influence is discussed in chapter IV.ii.

¹⁵ That there is still something esoteric, not to say gauche, about the form is attested by John Manning’s wry description of a colleague and fellow enthusiast as “the most tireless modern apologist for the emblem” (John Manning, *The Emblem* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 9).

was largely carried out by Austrians and Germans.¹⁶ That emblems retain any sort of currency in the present is thanks to those efforts of retrieval and collection conducted by Karl Giehlow—who first uncovered the hieroglyphic basis of the emblem—as well as by Aby Warburg and his followers, Mario Praz and Erwin Panofsky among them.¹⁷ And it is to Giehlow and the Warburg school that Walter Benjamin owes a great part of the material basis for his elaboration of emblematics and allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*) (1928) and his labours on the posthumously published *Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) (1982). Sebald’s allegorical imagery is borne of a diverse, even confused confluence of currents, which the present study can do only so much to parse, though undoubtedly, as Lobsien has suggested, the strongest among them belongs to Benjamin, and in particular his *Trauerspiel* book, a copy of which Sebald acquired in 1964, and, to a lesser extent, the *Passagen-Werk*.¹⁸ Both are cited frequently throughout Sebald’s critical writing, beginning with his postgraduate work on Carl Sternheim (1878-1942) and Alfred Döblin (1878-1957) in the 1960s and ‘70s, and continuing through numerous essays on Austrian, German and English literature published in the following decades.¹⁹ In the chapters to follow I have identified and elaborated some of the most pertinent of these citations.

¹⁶ There was a concurrent popular revival of interest. As Peter Daly (that tireless apologist) notes, Jeremias Drexel’s (1581-1638) emblematic book on the heliotrope, dating back to 1627, saw a major revival of interest “at the end of the First World War and the years immediately thereafter. The heliotrope or sunflower follows the sun and it becomes for Drexel and his translators a natural image for the conformity of the human and divine will” (Peter M. Daly, *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 214).

¹⁷ Georges Didi-Hubermann writes that ‘survival’ is “the *Hauptproblem* of Aby Warburg and the Warburgian school of art history. In Warburg’s work, the term *Nachleben* refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs, as opposed to their renascence after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motif.” For Warburg, “paintings are incomprehensible until the *anachronistic* time of the survivals they embody or incorporate is elucidated” (Georges Didi-Hubermann, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time,” trans. by Vivian Rehberg and Boris Belay, *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 273-74).

¹⁸ Richard Sheppard, “The Sternheim Years: W. G. Sebald’s *Lehrjahre* and *Theatralische Sendung* 1963-75,” in *SM*, 96 n. 17.

¹⁹ See the first part of the bibliography below for full publication details of Sebald’s major critical works, all of which are considered, to one extent or another, in the present study.

These last considerations suggest another, less easily determined current of influence. Though insufficiently accounted for in the critical reception of his work, it is nevertheless well known that Sebald was, throughout his life, a prolific literary critic, and above all a Germanist, though no doubt an idiosyncratic one at that, as Uwe Schütte has done most to show.²⁰ That is to say that he was occupied in the study of German language literature throughout his life, though above all in the years leading up to the appearance of his major narrative works. This is significant because, as I have already suggested, the emblem has impressed itself on German letters more than any other. Schütte suggests that, in respect to his narrative works, Sebald's literary criticism should be given primacy, "not merely on quantitative or chronological grounds," but for the fact that it subsequently "unfolds into narrative literature with essayistic traits and poetic literary criticism."²¹ Such a remark helps to explain how Sebald's decades of work in Germanistik might have aided the surreptitious migration of an emblematic mode of expression into his writing, taken to include his critical and his narrative works. As Benjamin put it, "for centuries, threads can become lost, only to be picked up again by the present course of history in a disjointed and inconspicuous way."²²

To this no doubt disjointed picture it is worth adding that, although Sebald's critical writings largely coalesce on writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he demonstrated an abiding and committed 'extracurricular' interest in German and English literature of the early modern period, and especially that of its latter, baroque part.²³ If anything, this appears to have

²⁰ See, in particular: Uwe Schütte, "Against *Germanistik*: W. G. Sebald's Critical Essays," in SM, 161-90; Uwe Schütte, *W. G. Sebald* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 11-29; Uwe Schütte, "Von der Notwendigkeit, ein anderes Bild von W.G. Sebald zu zeichnen," in *Über W.G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 3-15; and, above all, Uwe Schütte *Interventionen: Literaturkritik als Widerspruch* (München: Edition Text und Kritik, 2014), 14-22 and passim.

²¹ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 22.

²² Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 269.

²³ See Jo Catling, "*Bibliotheca Abscondita*: On W. G. Sebald's Library," in SM, 265-98, for a useful review of Sebald's books (read and unread). Beyond affirming his interest in Shakespeare, Pepys and Aubrey, most revealing in the present context is Catling's note that Sebald's "two-volume Rowohlt paperback *Lyrik des Barock*" has been "heavily annotated," suggesting more than a passing interest in baroque poetics (Ibid, 286). Andreas Gryphius (1616-64) and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635-83), playwrights of the Second Silesian School who

been more pronounced during his so-called formative years. For instance, his sister recalls that he had already produced a German translation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* by the time he left secondary school.²⁴ Most intriguing of all, perhaps, is a passing remark made in a letter to Theodor W. Adorno dating to April of 1967. Sebald was then at Manchester University preparing his Masters dissertation, and in the course of his research was troubled to have found a broadly positive remark on Sternheim in a book of Adorno's which he greatly admired, *Minima Moralia* (1951). This was sufficient pretext for Sebald to initiate a correspondence with undoubted ulterior motives.²⁵ Sebald subsequently cited Adorno's cursory response three times over the course of his dissertation, and in the process contrived to overstate the extent of their exchange, dividing Adorno's one letter into two.²⁶ In Sebald's second, apparently

feature so prominently in Benjamin's Trauerspiel book, are well represented in these volumes (*Lyrik des Barock II*, ed. Marian Szyrocki (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1971), 46-76).

²⁴ Gertrud Th. Aebischer-Sebald, "Ein Fleckerlteppich," interview with Ruth Vogel-Klein, in *Mémoire, Transferts. Images.*, ed. Ruth Vogel-Klein (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005), 211.

²⁵ For the full exchange, see W. G. Sebald and Theodor W. Adorno, "W. G. Sebald – Theodor W. Adorno: Briefwechsel (1967/68)," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 12-16. For a commentary thereon, see Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai, "'Unsere Korrespondenz': Zum Briefwechsel zwischen W. G. Sebald und Theodor W. Adorno," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 17-38. Sebald began his study of Sternheim as an undergraduate. His Masters thesis would form the basis of his Sternheim book. As Schütte stresses, Sebald's polemic only sharpened as this extended period of work progressed (Uwe Schütte, "Carl Sternheim," *W. G. Sebald-Handbuch*, ed. Öhlschläger and Niehaus (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 101). Responding to a Soviet critic who dismissed the book as "utter nonsense" and the work of a "budding schoolteacher," Sebald's critique only grew more trenchant (Valerij Poljudow, "Eins mit seinen Gegnern? Sebalds Sternheim-Polemik," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 58). His response: "To an arch-positivist narrowmindedness it is inconceivable that someone like Sternheim, who had maligned the bourgeoisie and praised the revolution, could at the same time have been prey to symptoms of the fascist plague." He went on to insist: "Antisemitism was an overt ingredient of [Sternheim's] work." And concludes with an ad hominem swipe at the critic: "Near at hand is the suspicion that it is in the interests of unblemished socialist pen-pushing to ignore such syndromes as that of anti-Semitism" (W. G. Sebald, "Sternheims Narben," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 59). This work and these themes are discussed at greater length in chapter V below.

²⁶ We are dealing here not with "academic dishonesty," writes Sheppard, in a charitable mood, but with Sebald "the 'Schelm' [trickster] having a straight-faced laugh at his examiners' expense" ("Sternheim Years," SM, 102 n. 94). Of course, there is a sleight of hand involved, but Sebald surely was aware of the advantage of casting himself in a protracted correspondence with such a figure as Adorno, whose gravitas might rub off on an unfledged academic determined to make his mark. Sebald achieved a similar coup upon publication of his Sternheim book, whose vehemence succeeded in initiating a public debate with Hellmuth Karasek, a stalwart of German letters, and certain of his allies. This took place in the pages of *Die Zeit* and in a panel discussion on Swiss Radio, broadcast on the 17th February 1971 (Poljudow, "Sebalds Sternheim-Polemik," 56-58; Sebald, "Sternheims Narben," 59-60; UDE 13-36). That the critical response in his native tongue was predominately dismissive or even hostile seems not to have deterred Sebald, who, in his application for a permanent post at UEA, described his book as having received "various positive reviews in German newspapers and journals" (qtd. in Sheppard, "Sternheim Years," SM, 104 n. 124). This shrewdness rather belies assertions to the effect that Sebald's career "just happened to him" (Ralf Jeutter, "Some Memories and Reflections: W.G. 'Max' Sebald, Man and Writer,"

unanswered letter to Adorno, he outlined his (unfulfilled) hopes to pursue doctoral work on Döblin at Cambridge, and asked a reference from Adorno in support of his application. Towards the end of this unrequited letter, dated 14th December 1968, Sebald alludes to “a few other problems, independent of the PhD, which I would like to pursue at some point.” The only one given any substance, however slight, turns on the notion that “in many instances the ‘solace’ [Trost] of the classical Trauerspiel consists solely in that the longer the dénouements last, the longer the conclusion is concealed.”²⁷ Nothing appears to have come of this project. Sebald soon took up his work on Döblin and busied himself with teaching, first at Manchester, then at UEA.²⁸ At the very least, however, it suggests that he held an early and pronounced attraction to baroque poetics, and was alert to certain precepts of narrative structure which were peculiar to the baroque stage. The following pages will attempt to elaborate some of the ways in which these have been brought to bear on Sebald’s narrative work.

The subtitle of the present study is taken from an essay of Sebald’s on Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar* (1968), first published in 1975, which has much to say for Sebald’s idiosyncratic views of imagery, of staging and spectacle, and of natural-historical development. For the moment, it is worth recalling that essay’s final lines, in which he describes how Handke’s language (such as it is given to *Kaspar*) seeks to transcend the irremediable shock of socialisation, that “long process of ... training to become an articulate, moral human being” (CS 62).²⁹ It is a question of giving voice to the constraints and the torments of language itself. “Literature can transcend this dilemma,” concludes Sebald, “only by keeping faith with unsocial, banned language, and by learning to use the opaque images of broken rebellion as a means of communication” (CS 67). The following pages have much to say for such opaque images as are made to appear in

in *Über W.G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem Anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 306).

²⁷ Sebald, “Briefwechsel (1967/68),” 16.

²⁸ See Sheppard, “A Chronology,” 625.

²⁹ Though there are undoubted allusions to bourgeois society, subjectivity and language, this is one of many Sebald essays in which such historical distinctions are effaced almost to the point of disappearance.

Sebald's works. They also have much to say for language which can readily be described as confrontational, if not always precisely rebellious, and which in fact I consider an irrevocable counterpart of those images. I have already stressed that Sebald's critical labours coincided with his narrative ones and that, in fact, following Schütte, these are not so easily parsed. That is, the expository, didactic, and even the polemical functions belonging to the critical field can be seen to determine those narrative works which are often held at arm's length by critics. The sense of Sebald as having been a writer of separate parts is a prominent stumbling block, materially determining the presentation, hence the reception of his work. For instance, in an editorial note in *Campo Santo* (2003), the volume in which Sebald's essay on Handke appears, Sven Meyer describes the first part of that volume as containing works by Sebald the "writer," whereas the second "illustrates Sebald's other side, as essayist and critic." It was in the early 1990s, according to Meyer, that Sebald was able "finally [to] dispense with footnotes, throw the ballast of scholarly references overboard and instead strike the typically Sebaldian note," which is almost to suggest that Sebald's work up to a certain inflexion point is that of an impostor.³⁰ This uneasy cordon sanitaire is all the more pronounced when it comes to Sebald's more polemical works of criticism, whose excesses are alternately treated as aberrations or ignored entirely. German language critics have tended to be more clear-sighted and candid in this regard.³¹ In addition to Schütte's aforementioned contributions, Ulrich Simon was one of

³⁰ Sven Meyer, "Foreword" in CS, x-xi.

³¹ Of course, this broad failing can partly be excused by the fact that many of Sebald's most important works of criticism are still to be read only in German (and sometimes in Castilian and Portuguese, too; see Richard Sheppard, "Primary Bibliography," SM, 449). Jo Catling's forthcoming, single-volume translation of his two collections of essays on Austrian literature, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (1985) and *Unheimliche Heimat* (1991), should serve as a corrective. Even those critics able to read Sebald's untranslated works are apt to make some extraordinary allowances. To cite just one of the more striking examples, Sheppard—a Germanist of some standing and hardly inclined to myopic fawning—writes of Sebald's BA dissertation that "its presentation can, at times, be less than meticulous, with its non-standard punctuation and orthography, misspellings, even of the names of critics and the title of one of Sternheim's plays (*Die Kassetten*), careless citation, deliberate (and unacknowledged) misquotation of sources, omission of footnote numbers within the text and of one complete footnote, wrong or incomplete bibliographical data and the probable invention of an American writer of popular fiction." This litany of errors, somewhat characteristic of undergraduate work, it must be said, prompts the altogether charitable conclusion that "these presentational shortcomings should be seen less as flaws on the part of a temperamentally slapdash young academic and more as early signs of an oppositional stance" (Richard Sheppard, "Sebald's dissertation, University of Fribourg," *Journal of European Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (2011): 209-

the first to diagnose polemic as a persistent theme in Sebald's work, and in particular his "extreme position of biographical interpretation of texts."³² Torsten Hoffmann has, productively though all too briefly, suggested continuities between Sebald's critical and narrative works.³³

Though Sebald would often describe narrative as a reprieve from an academy he felt was growing ever less hospitable—more of which below—we must not lose sight of the fact that he always kept with him the tools (one might even say weapons) which he forged in his critical writing. On 8th May 1968, days after the first demonstrations in Paris, Sebald wrote a strange, not to say confused letter to his housemate, Reinbert Tabbert, in which he cast about for a response to the unrest. "Where should one begin? Perhaps with a broadside against literary historians such as K. K. [likely Karl Kraus], full of bloodlust, had planned? With a box on the ear [Maulschelle] of liberalism?" Notwithstanding the allure of the role of satirist—"a one-sided but nevertheless amusing enterprise"—and the contemptuous position of "the ad hoc academic lackey"—an apt name for what is now referred to as an "early career academic"—Sebald relayed his plans to "write to a few universities and shop around for doctoral supervisors; then I'll set about drafting the sort of thesis that knows only one vehicle: lies. Opportune in style & in posture, I'll gnaw at the home of the university spirit from the inside out."³⁴ As Tabbert concludes, laconically, "Max Sebald was and remained a melancholic,

10). In fact, they should be seen as both; the one tendency nourishes the other. Or, to be more exact, the oppositional stance comprises an approach to those realia out of which the text is composed that might best be described, at least provisionally, as high-handed.

³² Torsten Hoffmann, "Polemik," in *W. G. Sebald-Handbuch*, ed. Claudia Öhlschläger and Michael Niehaus (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 155-158. Unusually for a German language critic, Franz Loquai treated Sebald's critical method (at least insofar as it appeared in one of his collections) in altogether favourable terms, writing that he "always succeeds in penetrating those social conditions which determine the worldview of those authors" in question. "In such a way Sebald foregoes tedious literary-sociological explanations, and instead comes to an understanding of the individual destinies of his predecessors and contemporaries" (Franz Loquai, "Von Gesinnungsbrüdern und Geistesverwandten: W. G. Sebalds Essays *Unheimliche Heimat*," in *W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 1997), 78).

³³ Torsten Hoffmann, "Der Provokateur als Literaturhistoriker: Anmerkungen zu Literaturbegriff und Argumentationsverfahren in W. G. Sebalds essayistischen Schriften," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 80 and passim.

³⁴ Qtd. in Reinbert Tabbert, "Tanti saluti cordiali. Max," *Literaturen* 5 (2004): 48.

remote from all political action.”³⁵ That is, even in the midst of the upheavals and as coeval of the students behind them, Sebald never could envisage an extra-literary response (or even a truly extra-institutional one).

After an unhappy, somewhat Wittgensteinian stint as a schoolteacher in Switzerland at the end of the 1960s, Sebald joined the academy in earnest—irrevocably, one might say—taking up a position as Assistant Lecturer at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the summer of 1970, before registering there as a PhD student in the autumn.³⁶ The university experienced its own, belated period of student unrest early the following year. Finding himself in an ambiguous position, Sebald appears to have lent his passive support to the students.³⁷ Sebald’s early years at UEA were characterised by him in retrospect as ones of intellectual freedom and general congeniality. “Conditions in British universities were absolutely ideal in the Sixties and Seventies,” he said.³⁸ Yet, in an interview given for British television in the summer of 1998, he described how the eccentricity which had been a mainstay of the British university was “rapidly being ground down. ... People are being terrorised at their place of work. Politeness disappears. People pursue idiotic targets with a great degree of zeal—and that is something I recognise from my own country.”³⁹ As Schütte, his former student at UEA, puts it, “in the face of the progressive bureaucratisation and intellectual degeneration of the British university system from the neo-liberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher and her conservative and pseudo-social-democratic successors, the writing of literature became [for Sebald] ever more important

³⁵ Tabbert, “Tanti saluti,” 48.

³⁶ There was an interlude of sorts in 1976, when Sebald trained as German language teacher with the Goethe-Institut, though that, too, was abortive (Sheppard, “A Chronology,” 627).

³⁷ Sheppard describes how he and Sebald watched “the first occupation of UEA’s Arts Block ... with considerable interest ... We were allowed back inside briefly to fetch research materials on condition that we did no administration while we were in the building—a condition to which we readily assented in the name of revolution” (“Sternheim Years,” 106 n. 135). See also Uwe Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 15-7. There is a certain irony in that stance, given Sebald’s frequent broadsides against passive resistance, fellow travellers, inner emigrants, etc. See chapter V.iii below.

³⁸ W. G. Sebald, “Characters, Plot, Dialogue, That’s Not Really My Style [interview],” *The Observer* (7th June 1998), 141.

³⁹ W. G. Sebald, “Living Among the English: An Interview with W.G. Sebald,” interview by Peter Morgan, *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 158 (April/May 2003): 16.

as a sort of sanctuary and compensation.”⁴⁰ As Sebald himself put it, “I was looking around for a way of re-establishing myself in a different form simply as a counterweight to the daily bother in the institution.”⁴¹ No doubt his despair at the deteriorated conditions was only heightened by the fact that he had once seen the British university system as an intellectually permissive counterpoint to its German equivalent, which he took to be compromised by its staff of unregenerate holdovers from the NS-Zeit.⁴²

About this local scene was a global political-economic environment which seems, at least in retrospect, to have been every bit as self-satisfied as it was calcified—“the new world of success,” as Sebald once described it (NHD 46). The abortion of the political upheavals of the 1960s and ‘70s soon gave way to the thoroughgoing re-imposition of a truly global capitalist system under the intellectual aegis of neo-liberalism, which of course only grew more zealous with the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴³ The appearance of Sebald’s major narrative works, beginning with *Nach der Natur* in 1988 and ending with *Austerlitz* in 2001, thus coincide with a period which seemed determined to affirm Thatcher’s dictum that “there’s no real alternative.”⁴⁴ This is not to mention the accelerating ecological crisis—“the so-called

⁴⁰ Schütte goes on to describe how in the mid-1990s the UEA installed “a London business consultant without any particular academic merit as rector. Under his aegis the number of languages offered was reduced by increments, the teaching of history ever more strenuously oppressed, and ultimately Sebald’s department was de facto liquidated. He was shut up, by compulsion, in the ‘School of English and American Studies,’ where he was named ‘Professor of Creative Writing and European Literature’” (Uwe Schütte, “Ein Lehrer. In memoriam W. G. Sebald,” *Akzente* 2003.1, February, 58).

⁴¹ Sebald, “Characters, Plot, Dialogue,” 141.

⁴² To a New York City audience in 1997, he described it in the following terms: “It is something that one doesn’t really understand very well now, but in the early 1960s the German departments in German universities were staffed, at the senior level at any rate, by people who had received their training in the 1930s, who had done their doctorates in the 1930s, who had very frequently not just toed the line but actively contributed, through their writing, to that culture of xenophobia which had developed from the early years of this century in that country. Of course, they had been reconstructed in the post-war years, but this past which was theirs was nevertheless present” (W. G. Sebald, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald,” interview by James Wood, *Brick* 59 (Spring 1998). <https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-w-g-sebald/>).

⁴³ For a very useful political-economic survey of the period, see: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), especially 5-38. For an instructive, if sweeping account of Thatcher’s neo-liberal reforms to British higher education, see: Ian F. Mcneely, “Research Excellence and the Origins of the Managerial University in Thatcher’s Britain,” *Contemporary British History* [ahead-of-print, 2022]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2022.2098720>.

⁴⁴ Margaret Thatcher, “Speech to Conservative Women’s Conference, 21st May 1980,” *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104368>.

biodiversity which is now being lost,” as Sebald put it.⁴⁵ Given this peculiar coincidence of disintegration and retrenchment, Sebald’s works provide renewed affirmation of Benjamin’s aphoristic remark that “allegory is most abidingly there where transience and eternity most nearly collide.”⁴⁶

It is in this context that Schütte notes Sebald’s repeated assertion in his essays that, “despite all his pessimism about humanity’s heedless business of destruction,” literature remained for him “a protective zone for a realm which proved itself resistant to all the colonial tendencies of reasoning discourse—the realm of metaphysics.”⁴⁷ Aptly, these words are taken from a magazine which might be said to guard the bounds of that Schutzzone, at least in so far as Sebald was concerned. In his search for respite from the academy, he turned in the first instance to two Austrian periodicals, the Vienna-based *Literatur und Kritik* and the Graz-based *Manuskripte*.⁴⁸ The latter was the more significant of the two, publishing five of his essays over the course of the first half of the 1980s, beginning with one on Alexander Herbrich/Ernst Herbeck in 1981.⁴⁹ Parts of Sebald’s first three narrative monographs (i.e., *Nach der Natur*, *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, and *Die Ausgewanderten*) were then published over the course of the second half of the decade. Sven Meyer describes it as “the place in which Sebald’s essayistic and narrative practice meet in the 1980s,” though it might be more accurate to state that it was here that their interdependence was first revealed in its true light. To say that “it was here that

⁴⁵ W. G. Sebald, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald,” interview by Sarah Kafatou, *Harvard Review* 15 (Fall 1998), 34-5.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 243.

⁴⁷ Uwe Schütte, “Der Hüter der Metaphysik: W. G. Sebalds Essays über die österreichische Literatur,” *Manuskripte* 155 (2002): 127.

⁴⁸ All the better to place himself at a definite remove from that main current of Germanistik which he felt to be so suspect. In this regard, see also Schütte’s early essay on Sebald’s determinedly peripheral criticism: Uwe Schütte, “Für eine ‘mindere’ Literaturwissenschaft: W. G. Sebald und die ‘kleine’ Literatur aus der österreichischen Peripherie, und von anderswo,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 40, no. 4 (2007): 93-107.

⁴⁹ The essay in *Manuskripte* uses the former name, his nom de plume, in the title, then ‘Alexander’ throughout (W. G. Sebald, “Kleine Traverse: Über das poetische Werk des Alexander Herbrich,” *Manuskripte* 74 (1981): 35-41). The version in BU prefers the latter, his given name. Given the remaining differences between both are insignificant, and for ease of reference, I cite the version in BU below and throughout.

the transition from Sebald's strictly academic endeavours to a coherent work of narrative and essayistic prose occurred" is a little nearer to the mark.⁵⁰

The following pages will draw liberally from the *Manuskripte* essays, in particular, though not only these. In fact, in determined opposition to previous currents of Sebald criticism, I have sought to place Sebald's critical work on an equal footing with his narratives, whose "moral fervency" they share.⁵¹ That may strike the reader as idiosyncratic in a study concentrated on the allegorical image, which might seem the exclusive preserve of poetics. In fact, as I will shortly explain, the emblem is a curious hybrid, not only suspended between image and text, but also between representation and exposition. The emblematicist, then, is a "fungible creature," to borrow a phrase of Sebald's, stranded between the demands of narrative and a morally charged didactic.⁵²

⁵⁰ Sven Meyer, "Im Medium der Prosa: Essay und Erzählung bei W. G. Sebald," in *Mémoire, Transferts. Images.*, ed. Ruth Vogel-Klein (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005), 181-4.

⁵¹ Susan Sontag, "A Mind in Mourning," *TLS* 5056 (25 February 2000): 4.

⁵² Sebald, "Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen," 201.

II. Sebald's emblematics

i. The emblem's origins and basic form

I write up to these pictures and I write out of them also, so they are really part of the text and not illustrations ... they must be the same leaden grain as the rest.⁵³

The German speaking lands have always taken an unusual interest in emblems, as I have already suggested. This applies as much to their production as their criticism. In fact, the two fields of activity are not so easily distinguished, as I will stress throughout. Though the uncontested pater et princeps of the emblem, Andrea Alciato, was an Italian jurist, the first editions of his *Emblemata liber*, “the book which unloosed the avalanche,” were published in Augsburg, without his consent, in 1531.⁵⁴ Despite its being a pan-European phenomenon, fully one third of the more than two thousand emblem books to emerge during the early modern period did so in German territories.⁵⁵ In this light, perhaps it is not so remarkable that they have impressed themselves on the works of Sebald, especially given his taste for neglected and marginal literature. John Manning describes the emblem book as one of a group of “bastard and uncanonical” forms which were “invented or rediscovered” at the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁵⁶ Alciato conceived a collection of epigrams in 1522, which he named ‘Emblemata.’ These are now assumed to have been ‘naked,’ that is, free of images. Thus, Alciato furnished only the text of that first emblem book of 1531, whose crude and incomplete woodcuts—six of the epigrams are left to fend for themselves—were commissioned by the Augsburg printer Heinrich Steyner. Such was the commercial success of the latter’s

⁵³ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 155.

⁵⁴ Albrecht Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama im Zeitalter des Barock*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1964), 18; Manning, *The Emblem*, 38-42.

⁵⁵ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 18.

⁵⁶ Manning, *The Emblem*, 16-7.

“inspirational publishing *coup*” that his design “became the most usual form in which a publication of this kind would be issued for the entire history of the genre.”⁵⁷ That form dedicated a page to each emblem, and to each emblem three parts: a motto (*inscriptio*), then an image (*pictura*), then an epigram (*subscriptio*). Though the emblematic image has primacy, it is indivisible from the text accompanying it. Thus, it lacks the self-sufficiency of a symbol, which, as it were, speaks with an authority all its own and reveals itself with something like autonomy. Taken together, the *pictura* and its accompanying text portray “that which exists in fact or as possibility, which certainly need not confront our eyes constantly or in the present, but which might at any time broach a person’s circle of sight or of experience,” as Albrecht Schöne put it in another German work on emblematics whose significance is difficult to underrate. This is not to say that said materials need emerge *ex natura*, for they might equally confront the emblematicist *ex historia*, taken to mean literary sources of diverse stamp.⁵⁸ That they are taken *out of* these is crucial, though. That is to say that they are constitutionally dialectical, belonging to nature and to history, at the same time as they are brought into the present, there to express their meaning anew. One of Sebald’s essays on the artist Jan Peter Tripp—a schoolmate of Sebald’s in Oberstdorf and a belated collaborator—is instructive in this regard. There Sebald prizes the artist’s tendency to recuperate the “analogous object from a world long since past,” and of these objects’ abilities to traverse “the dark abysses of time” (LOG 173). That is in many ways an emblematic practice.

In an essay dating to the early 1980s, Sebald was wont to praise the poet Ernst Herbeck’s “lyric description of the world, whose art consists less in the decipherment [Entziffern] of reality and language as in their encipherment [Chiffrierung]” (BU 139). In an even earlier essay on Peter Handke, he described the latter’s symbolism in terms of “impenetrable ciphers ...

⁵⁷ Manning, *The Emblem*, 42.

⁵⁸ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 28-9.

retrieved and recreated” from an apparently naïve pre-existence (CS 65-7). Here, wittingly or otherwise, he touched on an antagonism fundamental to the emblem. The contents of the emblematic image are primary, as I have already stressed, both in the sense that they embody the essence of certain metaphysical ideas and initiate a process of “illumination, interpretation and exposition of reality.”⁵⁹ As Schöne puts it, “a meaning is posited which lies beyond that which is represented [Dargestellten], and a firm relationship is produced between the res significans and its significatio.”⁶⁰

The epigram has often been described as mere key (Schlüssel) to the image’s enigma (Rätsel), but this has been dismissed by Schöne, conclusively, one hopes, as “all too narrow.”⁶¹ Instead, the emblem’s “tripartite structural form corresponds to a dual function [Doppelfunktion] of representation [Abbildern] and exposition [Auslegen], or portrayal [Darstellung] and interpretation [Deuten].”⁶² In a sense, Anne Fuchs has already identified such a dual function in Sebald’s work, describing his practising “the kind of ekphrasis which translates the process of reception into the interplay between careful perception (description) and interpretation (narration),” though without noting an emblematic inheritance.⁶³ This deceptively simple formula is often productive of an extraordinary tension—one familiar to any reader of Sebald’s—to the extent that the image tends to chafe at the delimitation of the text, at the same time as the text continues in its efforts to circumscribe the image.

⁵⁹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 26. The emergence of the emblem is practically indissociable from the Neo-Platonism then ascendant. As Ernst Gombrich put it, “to the Neo-Platonic philosophers the conception of an inherent and essential symbolism pervading the whole order of things offered a key to the whole universe. If only they could unriddle the mysterious imagery used by the ‘ancient fathers’ they could unveil the secrets of the supra-sensible world” (E. H. Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948): 168).

⁶⁰ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 32.

⁶¹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 21. “Allegory recognises many enigmas, but it knows no mystery. An enigma is a fragment that, together with another, matching fragment, makes up a whole,” as Benjamin put it, well describing the emblem’s resistance to solution (even as it invites just that) (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 365).

⁶² Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 21.

⁶³ Fuchs, “Sebald’s Painters,” 181.

In Sebald's monograph on Carl Sternheim—his first book to reach print, in 1969—he singles out for special criticism the latter's persistent use of adjectives “without function according to aesthetic economy,” by which “content [Inhalt] is made slave to the dictates of expression [Ausdrucksbedürfnisse] and degraded to a mere pretext.” Sternheim's tendency, he goes on, is towards “an hypostatisation of language, whose dynamic, discursive principle is marginalised, only to be replaced by a static, gestic one” (KO 82).⁶⁴ It is with something of this “dynamic, discursive” quality in mind that I have elected to deviate from Peter Daly's translation of Schöne's double function, namely as “representation and interpretation, description and explanation.”⁶⁵ Aside from the closer etymological affinity of “exposition” and “Auslegen,” I have sought to convey some sense that this exegetical *procedure* is precisely that, i.e., one unfolding in time and therefore susceptible to narrative contortions, as it were.⁶⁶ Daly is of a mind that “to compare narrative structure with the structure of an emblem is to compare two constructs, two sets of perhaps irreconcilable abstractions,” and that “an emblem must be judged on its own terms, as a complete verbal-visual statement, and not set in a context of all the possible uses and interpretations of the motif.”⁶⁷ These charges are difficult to countenance, given that the emblem has always been a citational form of expression, which is to say that it is elaborated at intervals, over time. Even if we set aside the exegetical component, individual emblems are known to repeat themselves, sometimes incessantly, in the course of narrative works (whether poems, stage plays, novels). Considering how one “construct” exists within, and works upon, another is one of the chief duties of any critic interested in the emblem's afterlives beyond the confines of the emblem book proper.

⁶⁴ I discuss this book in more detail in the final chapter of the present study.

⁶⁵ Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem: Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth Seventeenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 43.

⁶⁶ That procedure is discussed in greater detail in the following part.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-7.

Considered individually, there is always something tenuous and fleeting about emblems. Indeed, that is what provides them with such expressive charge. They are profoundly dialectical, in the sense of existing between the past from which they are plucked and the present in which they find themselves. So too do they exist somewhere between physics and metaphysics, deriving from the former and expressing the latter, though belonging firmly to neither.⁶⁸ Schöne's "dual function" corresponds to this dialectic, rendered in formal terms.⁶⁹ It is worth referring to Benjamin's distinction between symbol and emblem here. Whereas the classicist's symbol figures as an unassailable, even self-satisfied preserve, allegory is shot through with tension:

The temporal measure for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol receives the meaning into its hidden and, as it were, wooded interior. On the other hand, allegory is not exempt from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative repose with which it immerses itself in the abyss between image-being and meaning has nothing of the disinterested sufficiency that is found in the seemingly related intention of the sign.⁷⁰

This fleeting, mobile character is intensified with each new emblematic iteration. Indeed, in regards to motifs, the emblemist is nothing if not repetitive—again, an experience familiar to readers of Sebald.⁷¹ "It is ... repetition on which the law of the mourning play is founded," as Benjamin wrote in a fragment dating to 1916, to the extent that it "exhausts the historical idea of repetition." He adds that "its events are allegorical schemata, symbolic mirror-images of a

⁶⁸ Rendered in Adorno's materialist terms, we can better appreciate how that precarity becomes a susceptibility to meaning: "With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out, and as ciphers they draw in meanings. ... Dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning. While things in appearance are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings to what is most ancient" (Theodor W. Adorno, "Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 63).

⁶⁹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 21.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, 173.

⁷¹ Benjamin described this compulsive quality as belonging "a complex of symptoms associated with melancholy," more of which below (Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 328).

different game. We are transported into that game by death.”⁷² Manning, for his part, describes the emblem as fugue-like. “A simple theme could be twisted and restated in different keys and registers.”⁷³ He might have taken the analogy further, for there is something very contrapuntal about the play of image and text, of representation and exposition. No sooner do they seem on the point of synchronicity, than they begin again to drift apart, remaining, as Benjamin has it, unclosed. Sebald’s works are shot through with these fugues. “This ability to make of one natural phenomenon a thread that runs through a whole text and then kind of upholds this extended metaphor is something that I find very, very attractive in a writer,” as he put it in a late interview.⁷⁴ More interesting than reiteration within a work is the extent to which Sebald resumes allegorical themes across works, even where these seem to bear little material or formal relation to one another. As Sebald said of Achternbusch’s œuvre, “one text grows out of another, or alternatively, into another, and no sooner has a thing been more or less knocked into shape and put up for publication than it is already being cannibalised all over again for the next project.”⁷⁵ More than most writers, Sebald was fond of cannibalising his own work for materials with which to fashion new images, schemes, situations and displays. Hence, the chapters to follow are concentrated on three of his most persistent emblematic motifs.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), I:57.

⁷³ Manning, *The Emblem*, 31.

⁷⁴ W. G. Sebald, “A Poem of an Invisible Subject,” interview by Michael Silverblatt, in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 77.

⁷⁵ W. G. Sebald, “The Art of Transformation: Herbert Achternbusch’s Theatrical Mission,” in *A Radical Stage: Theatre in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s*, ed. W. G. Sebald (Oxford: Berg, 1988), 174.

ii. Brooding, exegesis, didactic

The brooder is at home among allegories.⁷⁶

Emblematics has always implied a certain form of perception and of apperception. Indeed, there is something especially circular and insular about this form of expression, in that numerous emblems seem bent on instructing the spectator in the appropriate posture by which to spectate.⁷⁷ The occasion of an emblematic encounter is described by Schöne as a “propitious and fruitful moment, in which the beholder of reality is confronted with the powers of instruction belonging to that which is regarded, the hidden meaning, the emblematic sense which God has lent to his work of creation.”⁷⁸ Perhaps it is needless to say that Sebald’s is a secular metaphysics. He once described Gerhard Roth’s *Der Landläufiger Tod* (1984) as “an absolutely passionate work of crafting which takes its instructions from the hieroglyphs of lost histories.”⁷⁹ As Giehlow wrote of Alciato, “the manner in which this jurist somehow came to fasten upon hieroglyphs, to name his verses ‘Emblemata’ and to recommend their notional content to artists as models—thus becoming the creator of emblematic poetics—represents one of the most interesting chapters of a humanist history rich in novel phenomena.”⁸⁰ As Ernst Gombrich put it, the early humanists:

⁷⁶ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 328.

⁷⁷ This is to be expected, given its close association with Hermeticism. See Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), especially 182-3 & 302-5.

⁷⁸ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 26.

⁷⁹ Sebald, “Unknown Region,” 35.

⁸⁰ Karl Giehlow, “Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlung des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* XXXII, no. 1 (1915): 138. Alciato studied with the first translator of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* from Greek into Latin, a fifth-century text taken to be a reservoir of ancient, cryptic wisdom. It came to be worshipped by humanists after a copy was taken from Andros to the continent in the early fifteenth century. Giehlow was also instrumental in bringing to light Willibald Pirckheimer’s famed translation of the *Hieroglyphica* (1514), which Dürer furnished with illustrations, and which was presented to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (“Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus,” 172-229). As Volkmann writes, the Egyptians were thought to be “the most ancient of philosophers, feted as the teachers of even Plato” (Ludwig Volkmann, *Bilderschriften der Renaissance: Hieroglyphik und Emblematik in ihren Beziehungen und Fortwirkungen* (Leipzig: K. W. Hiersemann, 1923), 80). According to Manning, there was a lively contest to find the original emblem. Luca Contile got as far back as Noah. The divine image of the rainbow is supposed to have been adorned with the motto, ‘NEQVAQVAM VLTRA INTERFICIETUR OMNIS CARO AQUIS’ [Never again

... were convinced that the pagan lore rightly understood could only point towards the same truth which God had made manifest through the Scriptures. For God had not only spoken through the Prophets. The first men in the Golden Age had been so close to the act of creation that they had still known the secrets of the universe. But these sages of the mythical past ... had hidden the truth in mysterious tales and images to prevent it from being prematurely profaned.⁸¹

Sebald's essay on Gerhard Roth continues as follows:

This crafting is motivated by the natural-philosophical hope, which has long since and wrongly been discredited, that messages of vital importance can be deciphered from the fern-like image left behind by the feeding larvae of the bark beetle, from the branding of frost patterns or the distribution of filings in a magnetic field.⁸²

Often it is an almost irretrievably negative metaphysics. Worth citing here is his late essay on Tripp. There Sebald describes how “the longer I look at the pictures of Jan Peter Tripp, the more I realise that beneath the surface illusionism there lurks a terrifying abyss. It is, so to speak, the metaphysical underside [metaphysische Unterfutter] of reality” (LOG 181 / 166). Here we can discern a significant deviation from the allegorical imagery and experience of the early modern period, where the emphasis was on ascent. “God has revealed the truth about the supernatural world in the strange images taken from the sensible world—and the contemplation of the low will teach us to ascend to the high,” as Gombrich has it.⁸³ If Sebald's emblematic contemplation and expression do not carry with them the promise of similar revelation and transcendence, then at the least they promise something of a reprieve from the determined and terrible downward passage of history. It is, as Fuchs wrote in what remains one of the most perceptive pieces on Sebald and the (non-photographic) visual arts, a question of a “specific

will all be destroyed by water]. Athanasius Kirchner bested him, going “back beyond the Tower of Babel to the *lingua adamica*” (Manning, *The Emblem*, 24).

⁸¹ Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*,” 169.

⁸² *Ibid*, 35.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 167. This was developed, with some alacrity and grandiosity, but the Neo-Platonists who were contemporaries of the early part of the emblem craze. “To the Neo-Platonic philosophers the conception of an inherent and essential symbolism pervading the whole order of things offered a key to the whole universe. If only they could unriddle the mysterious imagery used by the ‘ancient fathers’ they could unveil the secrets of the supra-sensible world” (*Ibid*, 168).

type of cultural engagement,” though it is not quite accurate, I think, to say that this depends upon an “ability to bracket off the present,” even tentatively, as Fuchs suggests.⁸⁴ Rather, as I hope to show in due course, it entails the bringing of the stuff of the past into the present, sometimes with such desperate enthusiasm as to efface temporal distinctions. As Schütte puts it, for Sebald, “the intensive consideration of nature or a work of art make possible an effective shift in the form of an intensive metaphysical experience.”⁸⁵ The rendering of these works, not to mention the translation of that experience, in prose or in verse requires the maintenance of that attitude. In an essay on Gerhard Roth, Sebald describes a writer as retreating to “behind closed curtains, like a schoolteacher in complete devotion, since he knows that in the realm of nature there is no difference between the smallest and the largest secret.”⁸⁶ Indeed, very often it is a private encounter comprising one or two figures patiently engaged in their work of contemplation. Towards the end of his East Anglian pilgrimage, the narrator of *Saturn* visits Thomas Abrams at the latter’s remote farmhouse.⁸⁷ Abrams has spent years in isolation making a precise scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem, though the creation of this edifice has “nothing to do with divine revelation.” It is instead “just research really and work, endless hours of work” (RS 245). Nevertheless, the end of the pair’s encounter has something revelatory about it, or at least the suggestion of as much. Standing upon a small bridge over a moat outside Abrams’ house—it is one of many anachronistic scenes—they quietly pay heed to the ducks paddling below. “I have always kept ducks, [Abrams] said, even as a child, and the colours of their plumage, in particular the dark green and snow white, seemed to me the

⁸⁴ Fuchs, “Sebald’s Painters,” 175.

⁸⁵ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 28.

⁸⁶ W. G. Sebald, “In a Completely Unknown Region: On Gerhard Roth’s Novel *Landläufiger Tod*,” trans. Markus Zisselsberger, *Modern Austrian Literature* 40, no. 4 (2007): 35.

⁸⁷ These supposedly backwater places are often the most propitious. As Sebald said in one of his last interviews: “I suppose if there is such a thing as a revelation, if there can be a moment in a text which is surrounded by something like *claritas*, *veritas*, and the other facets that qualify epiphanies, then it can be achieved only by actually going to certain places, by looking, by expending great amounts of time in actually exposing oneself to places that no one else goes to” (“Invisible Subject,” 86). That he was referring to a former concentration camp only undergirds the notion that his was a constitutionally negative metaphysics.

only possible answer to the questions that are on my mind. That is how it has been for as long as I can remember” (RS 248).

This attitude, that of the beholder, is not strictly passive. Bound up with it is a didactic intention. Though he makes little firm connection to allegory or emblematics, Santner has already identified this character in Sebald’s writing, at least insofar as it can be found in the narrative works: “Surely one of the things that make it so difficult to write about Sebald, to say anything genuinely new or revelatory about his work, is that he has done so much himself to frame the discourse of his own reception, to provide in advance the terms for critical engagement with the work; his fiction already practices a rather efficient sort of autoexegesis that leaves the critic feeling a certain irrelevance (the posture of awestruck adoration that one finds in so much of the critical literature is, I think, one of the guises such irrelevance assumes).”⁸⁸ As a contemporary of Schöne’s puts it, “emblematics is concerned not merely with the pictorial representation of a concept, but above all with teaching. Hence, emblems principally convey aphorisms and moral teachings.”⁸⁹ The complex, four-fold Christian exegesis of the Middle Ages was reduced to an abiding interest in the *sensus tropologicus*. “That is to say the meaning of realia for the individual person and his fate,” as Schöne puts it, “for his salvation and his comportment [Verhalten] in the world.”⁹⁰ Benjamin puts it in starker terms, which seem to bear more resemblance to Sebald’s often confrontational writing:

The function of Baroque image writing is not so much the unveiling of sensuous things as their denuding. The emblemist does not give the essence “behind the image.” As script, as caption, of the sort that appears intimately allied with the represented object in the emblem books, the essence of the object is dragged out in front of the image.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 45.

⁸⁹ Dietrich Walter Jöns, *Das »Sinnen-Bild«: Studien zur Allegorischen Bildlichkeit bei Andreas Gryphius* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1966), 25.

⁹⁰ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 48.

⁹¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 187.

Perhaps this goes some way to explaining the Jesuits' fervour for emblem books; Daly estimates that they were responsible for fully a quarter of the total output in the early modern period, amounting to the better part of two thousand editions.⁹² And if the books themselves were not sufficiently didactic, their contents soon impressed themselves upon the interiors of churches, where they could catch errant eyes and souls.⁹³

“Sebald’s first-person narrator and the first-person essayist are both at once intermediary and interpreter; the dual burden of responsibility is awesome,” wrote Arthur Williams in one of the earliest attempts to repair the critical divide between Sebald’s essays and his narrative works.⁹⁴ Whether it follows that Sebald “never forces his view on his reader” is worthy of more debate.⁹⁵ In a late interview given to an Austrian radio station, Sebald spoke admiringly of Thomas Bernhard, whom he cast in the role of a latter-day Lenten preacher. “Whenever I think of him,” said Sebald, “I see him somehow at a pulpit, bearing down, as it were, on the Sunday congregation until they’re no longer able to gasp” (UDE 230).⁹⁶ That this figure has any bearing on Sebald’s narrative works has little occurred to anglophone critics, who tend to will it out of existence. In keeping with the long history of that form of expression, Sebald persistently presses emblematic materials into didactic service. As significant as the moral content of that instruction are the spectacular devices militated in the process. It will be the work of the following pages to examine only a few of the more important instances.

⁹² Daly, *Early Modern Europe*, 185-9.

⁹³ Borinski writes of how the emblematic style “expresses its revelations above all and best as ‘concepts’ (‘conceptos, concetti’). These belong to the it ‘as the light to the sun, the twinkling to the stars.’ Thus, it can most easily be characterised by a term from the sphere of scholastic logic, which the Jesuits recalled to life in their schools” (Karl Borinski, *Die Antike in Poetik und Kunsttheorie: Von Ausgang des Klassischen Altertums bis auf Goethe und Wilhelm von Humboldt*, vol. I (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftlicher Gesellschaft, 1965), 183-184).

⁹⁴ Arthur Williams, “W. G. Sebald: A Holistic Approach to Borders, Texts and Perspectives,” in *German-Language Literature Today: International and Popular?* Ed. Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes and Julian Preece (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 109.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁶ In light of such remarks, perhaps it is no surprise that his *Sternheim* book met with such critical hostility, and not only in his native land. One English language review took issue with “his arrogant, aggressive tone, his many doubtful generalisations, and his doctrinaire, jargonistic style” (Donald G. Daviau, “Review,” *The Germanic Review* 47, no. 3 (1972), 236).

iii. Spectacle and display

Through the disorderly fund which is knowledge placed at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation between the two.⁹⁷

I can't afford to sit in the Munich War Archive for two years. ... So I have to rush in and sit there for a week or two and collect things like someone who knows he has to leave before too long. You gather things up like a person who leaves a burning house, which means very randomly.⁹⁸

Benjamin has described the collector's existence as dialectically suspended between the poles of order and disorder.⁹⁹ In similar terms, Franz Loquai has described Sebald's narrator as at one and the same time a "scrupulous archivist of history [Geschichte]" and a "fantastical imaginer and arranger of stories [Geschichten] which the past conveys to him in porous places."¹⁰⁰ J. J. Long, amongst others, has carried out a thoroughgoing accounting of the first of these poles, and whilst I do not mean to neglect it, the present study will concentrate more on the latter.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 368.

⁹⁸ W. G. Sebald, "Crossing Boundaries," interview by Arthur Lubow, in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 162.

⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 389.

¹⁰⁰ Franz Loquai, "Vom Beinhaus der Geschichte ins wiedergefundene Paradies: Zu Werk und Poetik W. G. Sebalds," in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 245. Perhaps in an effort to reconcile these poles, critics have been all too willing to cast the author, his narrators, or both, as bricoleurs. Sebald famously cast himself in the role (UDE 84). Like Claude Lévi-Strauss himself, he translated his observations—*ex natura et historia*, one might say—into a card index whose contents he would spread out before him on his desk as he wrote (Aebischer-Sebald, "Ein Fleckerlteppich," 211). Whilst it has a seductive simplicity about it, not to mention the imprimatur of the author himself, this theory does not account for the manipulation and spectacular display of parts, as I will demonstrate in due course.

¹⁰¹ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 72-86 and *passim*. "Collections of various kinds are everywhere in Sebald's work: zoos, menageries and aviaries; museums and exhibitions; archives and libraries; cabinets of curiosities, and a whole host of ad hoc, less formal modes of collection," writes Long, though his own emphasis is skewed towards institutional forms of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is a pity, for it results in a rather one-sided picture—centrifugal forces are allowed to obscure centripetal ones, as it were (Ibid, 27).

If, as Benjamin puts it, “the insight into the transience of things, and the concern to save them and render them eternal, is one of the strongest motives in the allegorical,” then their prevailing depends on a marked restlessness on the part of the collector and arranger.¹⁰² Benjamin’s conception of the emblem is much freer than that of a Schöne. Indeed, the impress of his unique theosophical vision—as profound as it is confounding—returns to them some of the mysterious vitality which was theirs in the early modern period. He conceives of emblems as the currency of an allegorical means of expression whose intensity peaks in the Trauerspiel. He stresses their numismatic quality—new emblems are minted with alacrity, though always after existing moulds, or dies, to use the properly numismatic term.¹⁰³ This being the case, it is not especially crass to suggest that this currency was beset by hyper-inflation over the course of the seventeenth century. Again and again, Benjamin sought to make a virtue of that allegorical “ostentation” which struck earlier critics as irredeemably crass.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, notwithstanding their apparent self-sufficiency in the early books belonging to Alciato et al.—to each page an emblem and to each emblem a page—these symbolic counters only discover their true value (not to mention ambiguity) when arranged into fleeting allegorical schemes. This was anticipated in the name given by Alciato to his new form, which he borrowed from the French humanist Guillaume de Budé, who took it to mean “mosaic work.”¹⁰⁵ Emblematics has been, from the very start, a combinatory poetics. “The realia at the basis of allegory can be interpreted ‘in bono et in malo’; only the coincidence in which they

¹⁰² Benjamin, *Origin*, 243.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 183. Volkmann notes how numismatic, hieroglyphic and emblematic interests were mutually reinforcing in the work of the circle of humanists gathered around Maximilian I, which included Pirckheimer and Konrad Peutinger, amongst others. “On the excavation of a silver coin bearing a depiction of a Hercules, which Maximilian took to be a coin belonging to the most wise Hercules Aegyptius, because the former ... very much wanted to trace his family tree back to Osiris and his son Hercules Aegyptius, he enjoined Peutinger to provide expert testimony on the coin such that he could see in it confirmation of that lineage.” Peutinger was also instrumental in introducing to Maximilian the first edition of Alciato’s *Emblemata*, in which both took great interest and pleasure (Volkmann, *Bilderschriften der Renaissance*, 81).

¹⁰⁴ See, for example: Benjamin, *Origin*, 78, 142, 190 & 198.

¹⁰⁵ Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964), 23.

are deployed decides the expounding of their content.”¹⁰⁶ However, the etymology of ‘emblem’—from ‘emballein,’ to throw in—suggests something of the provisional nature of the mosaics thus produced. Manning writes that the emblem books “collectively bear witness to a systematic programme of composing, compiling, transposing and recording allegorical imagery,”¹⁰⁷ but Schöne offers an important qualification to the effect that what resulted was avowedly unsystematic, “a wild conglomeration of the most diverse ingredients, a dark mix of Egyptian image-writing and Pythagorean symbolism, kabbalist numerology and Old Testament motifs, antique mythology and allegoresis of the Middle Ages.”¹⁰⁸ This explains the rather strained relationship between emblematics and the new theories of perspective which developed concurrently, a strain given its most graphic expression by Albrecht Dürer—perhaps unsurprisingly, given his divided allegiances.¹⁰⁹ Though his *Melencolia I* (1514) is the most precise exposition of the new perspective, so numerous are the emblematic materials gathered around the angel, that the arrangement in the foreground cannot help but take on a flattened aspect, beyond which the horizon yawns all the more starkly.¹¹⁰ Dürer’s work is in many respects prophetic, and heralds the intensification of that diffusion which was to define the artistic products of the Baroque. As Benjamin has it:

If writing is to secure its sacral character—as ever again it registers the conflict between sacral and profane intelligibility—then it presses towards complexes, towards hieroglyphics. This happens in the Baroque. Externally and stylistically—in the drastic character of the typography as in the overburdened

¹⁰⁶ William S. Heckscher and Karl-August Wirth, “Emblem, Emblembuch,” in *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, ed. L. H. Heydenreich and Karl-August Wirth, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1967): col. 118.

¹⁰⁷ Manning, *The Emblem*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁸ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ He was both a committed proponent of the new theory of perspective, at the same time as he was closely associated with the humanist circle of Maximilian I, whose enthusiasm for hieroglyphics was unrivalled. See Karl Giehlow, “Dürers Stich ‘Melencolia I’ und der Maximilianische Humanistenkreis,” *Mitteilung der Gesellschaft für Vervielfältigende Kunst* 4 (1904): 74-8.

¹¹⁰ “She is above all an imaginative Melancholy, whose thoughts and actions all take place within the realms of space and visibility, from pure reflexion upon geometry to activity in the lesser crafts; and here if anywhere we receive the impression of a being to whom her allotted realm seems intolerably restricted—of a being whose thoughts have ‘reached the limit’” (Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964), 345). This import of this figure and scheme in regards to Sebald’s work are treated in more detail in chapter III below.

metaphor—the written presses towards image. No starker contrast to the art symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality is conceivable than this amorphous fragment in which allegorical image writing [Schriftbild] reveals itself.¹¹¹

The allegory of the Trauerspiel was constituted of a “schema of emblems, out of which, by means of an artifice that had to overwhelm in constantly new ways, the signified palpably springs forth.”¹¹² In epigrammatic fashion befitting of his subject, he concludes that “the laxity in the arrangement counterbalances a fanaticism in the collecting.”¹¹³

The mode of perception described in brief above informs the manner of this arrangement. If Sebald’s aesthetic can be said to aspire to “an absolutely singular fidelity to every minute detail,” such as he found in favoured passages of Gerhard Roth, then that cannot help but make for strange visual coincidences.¹¹⁴ Thus, in a passage of ekphrasis: “A red glove, a burnt-out match, a pearl onion on a chopping board: these objects contain the whole of time within themselves, as it were redeemed for ever by the painstaking, impassioned precision of the artist’s [Tripp’s] work.” Sebald describes arrangements of this sort “as ephemeral moments and constellations ... preserved from the passage of time” (LOG 168).

The tendency of Sebald’s poetics to subordinate itself to the visual in this sense is one of long standing. As Karl Borinski put it, there was during the Baroque an “inversion of the Horatian motto,” which “augments the naïve ‘ut poesis pictura’ of the allegorising Middle Ages into the self-conscious ‘ut poesis natura picta’ of the ever more ingenious theatre costumiers and dressers ... Next to a visual art over-eloquent with a thousand witty allusions, poetics appeared as mute painting.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, as I will seek to demonstrate in the following pages, Sebald’s symbolism is typically governed by a tense interplay of stasis and motility, of order and

¹¹¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 185.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 253.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 201-2.

¹¹⁴ Sebald, “Unknown Region,” 38.

¹¹⁵ Borinski, *Die Antike*, 183-4.

disorder which is essentially allegorical. Ben Hutchinson puts it best, perhaps, when he writes that in regards to Sebald's work—he has in mind the narrative prose works—“one cannot speak of ‘coincidence’ *in sensu strictu*, but only of *stage-managed* coincidence [*inszeniertes Zufall*] because a trace of the collecting always clings to the collection.”¹¹⁶ It is worth dwelling for a moment on the question of stage-management, for it is the basis for some of the most perceptive critique of the Sebaldian aesthetic, and the most pointed. The playwright Alan Bennett complained that Sebald “seems to stage-manage both the landscape and the weather to suit his (seldom cheerful) mood. ... Once noticed Sebald's technique seems almost comic. ... It seems to me a short cut to significance.”¹¹⁷ The dismissiveness of the criticism is open to dispute, certainly, and Bennett overlooks the comic passages throughout Sebald's prose, but the claim is substantially correct. Benjamin describes the Trauerspiels as “not so much plays that make one mournful as plays through which mourning finds satisfaction: plays for the mournful.”¹¹⁸ Where Bennett has to “persevere with Sebald” as a sort of penance, others are wont to find a certain satisfaction in the arrangement of images with mourning and penance in mind.¹¹⁹ The images of the Trauerspiel, writes Benjamin, “are made to be seen, and are arranged according to the way they are to be seen.”¹²⁰ A like tendency is visible throughout Sebald's narrative works—and, indeed, in some of his essays. Just as the written is never far from the image, so too is the didactic exposition of the latter never far from performance and procession.

¹¹⁶ Ben Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald – Die Dialektische Imagination* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 54-5.

¹¹⁷ Alan Bennett, “Secrets Are Best Kept by Those Who Have No Sense of Humour,” *London Review of Books* 21, no. 1 (2nd January 2003). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n01/alan-bennett/secrets-are-best-kept-by-those-who-have-no-sense-of-humour>

¹¹⁸ Benjamin, *Origin*, 115.

¹¹⁹ See in particular chapter IV below.

¹²⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, 115.

iv. Emblematic value

The allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century.¹²¹

Early modern life, writes Manning, “was essentially emblematic because, to some degree, many aspects of daily experience were self-consciously presented as part of an emblematic theatre, in which no event could be presented without an accompanying gloss.”¹²² When Alciato belatedly took a committed interest in the phenomenon he had inaugurated, it was with the intention that emblems end up in the hands of craftsmen—tailors, goldsmiths and so on—which indeed they did.¹²³ They were soon to adorn every kind of visible, workable surface. Even so committed an exponent of the new philosophy as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) decorated his house with them, at least according to Aubrey.¹²⁴ Not for nothing did Benjamin compare the emblem with the logo.¹²⁵ Considered in retrospect, try though it might to continue to reassert its sacral validity, the former presages the latter—and the commodity production to which it attests—in a number of respects. As I have already stressed, Sebald understood keenly the expressive value of the repeated image, and of those artworks constituted largely of motifs deployed in “ever new stamps and compositions ... forever the same and on the other hand never repeating themselves,” as he puts it in *Austerlitz* (A 35). The works thus described belong to an Austro-Italian artist of the twentieth century, though the description holds equally well for the emblem. If reiteration strikes the consumer of these finished works as a principle

¹²¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 328.

¹²² Manning, *The Emblem*, 29-30.

¹²³ In copying them, as he put it, “they might learn to write in a silent script” (Alciato, qtd. in Holger Homann, “Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der Emblemantik,” *Colloquia Germanica* 2 (January 1 1968), 247).

¹²⁴ “I will write something of Verulam, and his House at Gorhambery ... the most ingeniously contrived little pile, that I ever sawe ... The Lord Chancellor made an addition of a noble Portico ... opposite to every arch of this Portico, and as big as the arch, are drawn by an excellent hand (but the mischief of it is, in water-colours) curious pictures, all Emblematicall, with Motto’s under each. For example, one I remember is a ship tossed in a storm, the Motto, *Alter tum Tiphys* [There will come another Tiphys]” (John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), 12-4. In fact, we need not be surprised, for emblematic perception is indebted to the empirical methods then being propounded by Bacon et al.

¹²⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 348.

tendency, then we can infer that reproducibility is a principle tendency of their creation. Indeed, this is the basis for Praz's derisive conclusions:

As the emblem-writers were making capital of commonplaces, and the stock-in-trade of literary culture, they can hardly claim the honour of being the originators of anything. The emblem literature is the most spectacular example of the vulgarisation and liquidation of a mode of thinking which had had its hey-day in the Middle Ages.¹²⁶

We are now definitely in the realms of commodity production, whose nascence closely tracks the development of emblematics.¹²⁷ As Benjamin determined in the 1939 "Exposé" which anticipates the *Arcades Project*, the emblem remains haunted by the spectre of the commodity: "The singular debasement of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities."¹²⁸ Considered as objects exchanged between would-be independent producers, they most discernibly track the rise of primitive commodity production. The emblematisers seek to elude the association in a number of ways, none wholly successful, though that is not to say unproductive. To begin with, they attempt to insulate their products from the market. Emblems are conceived as private playthings at a time when the so-called private sphere has scarcely been conceived in the imagination, much less realised in material terms. In forswearing any claims to utility, they attempt to evade the stamp of exchange value peculiar to the commodity. Alciato's *Emblematum liber* was conceived as divertissement, "created by one scholar for the amusement of another."¹²⁹ Witness his revulsion when it "happened to catch the imagination of a wider public, becoming itself a best-seller" and eclipsing his juristic

¹²⁶ Praz, *Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, 206-7.

¹²⁷ It is worth recalling that Marx himself, whose theory of the commodity retains an explanatory force practically undiminished to this day, described the same in terms of social hieroglyphics (Karl Marx, "Capital: A Critique of Political Economy," vol. 1, in *Karl Marx & Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 46).

¹²⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 22.

¹²⁹ Alison Saunders, "The Sixteenth-Century French Emblem: Decoration, Diversion, or Didacticism," *Renaissance Studies* 3, No. 2 (June 1988), 116.

works.¹³⁰ Steyner of Augsburg had no such qualms. The crude, mass-produced woodcuts he had interposed in Alciato's script attest to the fact.¹³¹

The development of mercantile capitalism, writes Long, served to “generate the surplus wealth that is necessary in order to perform the collector's archetypal act,” namely, “removing the object from the regime of use value and recontextualising it in the collection.”¹³² It is precisely the act of reclamation, of images drifting in and out of circulation, which makes the emblem so receptive to meaning. They are hollowed out, to repeat Adorno's words, which is perhaps what makes them so fungible, a characteristic which soon became clear, in the starkest of terms, on the Baroque stage: “any person, any object, any relation can signify any other whatever.”¹³³ The emblem's signifying capacity is matched by a no less profound restlessness and despondency. It is this, I think, which Sebald had in mind in the following passage taken from a late, fond essay on Gottfried Keller's (1819-90) *Der grüne Heinrich (Green Henry)* (1854-55):

As always when Keller has the opportunity of indulging his love for all things antique, there follows an incomparable description of all the outmoded, useless and arcane objects piling high on top of and in front of each other, beds and tables and all kinds of assorted implements, and how sometimes on the upper planes and slopes, and sometimes on the perilous lonely peaks of this bric-a-brac mountain,¹³⁴ here an ornate rococco clock and there a waxen angel lead a quiet and as it may be posthumous existence. In contrast to the continuous circulation of capital, these evanescent objects have been withdrawn from

¹³⁰ Ibid, 117.

¹³¹ Emblems played an obscure but important role in eroding the cordon sanitaire between scholarship and mass market—that which was in its final stages of collapse when Sebald was at work. That is, they would adorn bills advertising the disputations which served as induction and gatekeeper to the early modern academy. The ‘Thesenblätter’ of the seventeenth century were, according to their foremost chronicler, “an amalgamation of diverse pictorial genres. Portraits and vedute, genre and historical scenes were bound together by allegories or decorative elements and their meaning put into context by the script” (Sibylle Appuhn-Radtke, *Das Thesenblatt im Hochbarock: Studien zu einer graphischen Gattung am Beispiel der Werke Bartholomäus Kilians* (Weißenhorn: Anton H. Konrad, 1988), 55). By way of anticipating the third chapter of the present study, it is worth noting that these emblematic elements (and sundry) were often arranged upon a stage, itself depicted with great elaboration, in a tableaux vivant of sorts (Ibid, 58-9; see also Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 185-93).

¹³² Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 28.

¹³³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 184.

¹³⁴ As Jo Catling points out in her translator's notes, the German text here reads “Brockengebirge,” i.e., scene of the Walpurgisnacht in Goethe's *Faust I* (LOG 184 n. 8).

currency, have long since served their time as traded goods, and have, in some sense, entered eternity. (LOG 96)

Sebald produced his major works at a time when the commodity and its logic had begun to colonise even the most obstinate preserves, when capital seemed in the process of clearing the field of all competition—an era he described, most derisively, as “the new world of success” (NHD 36). In that regard it is hardly surprising that his emblematic fund suffers from the same encroachment, to the extent that it is difficult to find literary or natural materials uncompromised by so-called market forces. Indeed, certain of Sebald’s emblematic motifs are perhaps more aptly described as *ex mercatus*, not least those moths considered in the final chapter of the present work.

v. Animal emblems

Swift falcon, fish, the terrible, Nile dwelling horse,
Why are these arranged together?
This picture expresses three short words of the Egyptians:
God hates shamelessness.¹³⁵

The primacy of animals within the vast store of emblems is evident even from the most cursory leaf through the books of Alciato, Sambucus, et al. At the close of the seventeenth century, Joachim Camerarius had published in Nuremberg four volumes of emblems, three of which were dedicated to animals of different sorts (insects, birds and quadrupeds). The fourth was dedicated to plants.¹³⁶ Bestiaries were foremost amongst the many “illustrated works of more or less scientific character” which served as fund for the composition of new emblems.¹³⁷ Schöne adds that medieval translations and re-workings of the *Physiologus* furnished another

¹³⁵ Hadrianus Junius, qtd. in Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 33.

¹³⁶ William B. Ashworth, “Emblematic Natural History of the Renaissance,” in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

¹³⁷ Heckscher and Wirth, “Emblem, Emblembuch,” col. 125.

significant model for the early emblem books.¹³⁸ “Once the most suitable medieval illustrations had been selected,” adds José Julio García Arranz, “emblematisers adapted the moral that had been inseparably associated with these figures, preserving, diversifying, or freely transforming it according to the message they wanted to convey.” Again, what mattered to the emblematisers who followed in Alciato’s wake “was the didactic and moral purpose.”¹³⁹

One of the reasons animals are especially promising in the revelation of enciphered meaning is their seeming to represent “an *intercession* between man and his origin,” as John Berger wrote in an essay cited at length in *Austerlitz*.¹⁴⁰ In that sense they are not all that different from the ancient human authorities to which the emblematisers never tired of deferring. Both are prized for their seeming proximity to creation and those truths which have been concealed in the interim. “It is the idea that apart from the revelation as embodied in the words of the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church the whole of nature is, as it were, a hieroglyph of revealed truth; that the strange happenings in nature’s kingdom yield up a kernel of divine teaching.”¹⁴¹ Both demanded to be read, though remained reluctant to give up their teachings unless met with tenacity and cognitive struggle. Yet, in addition to the visible and palpable language belonging to nature as such, animals retain their own obscure utterances, which seem yet more resistant to decipherment. In a posthumously published fragment dating to 1917,

¹³⁸ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 45-6.

¹³⁹ José Julio García Arranz, “Image and Moral Teaching through Emblematic Animals,” *Aspects of Renaissance and Baroque Symbol Theory 1500-1700*, ed. Peter M. Daly and John Manning (New York: AMS Press, 1999), 100.

¹⁴⁰ John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), 4. During a visit to Paris’s Jardin des Plantes with his companion Marie de Verneuil, Austerlitz describes having heard children asking of their parents, “*Mais il est où? Où se cache-t-il? Pourquoi il ne bouge pas? Est-ce qu’il est mort?*” (A 375 / 368). The same questions, given in English, appear in Berger’s account of dismayed zoo-going children. Austerlitz also recalls Marie having said that “captive animals and we, their human audience, look at one another *à travers un brèche d’incompréhension*” (A 368-9). This formulation, again in English, serves as the basis for Berger’s rather sweeping account of the changing relations between humans and animals since the development of highly urbanised, industrialised societies. Sebald was to repeat it quite faithfully in a late interview in New York: “This is the strange thing, that there’s the same gap of incomprehension between us and these machines as there is between us and the animals we look at in the zoo. There’s a gap of incomprehension. We guess at what they might think of us, but we’re not entirely sure” (W. G. Sebald, “A Conversation with W. G. Sebald,” interview by Joseph Cuomo, in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 102).

¹⁴¹ Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*,” 168-9.

Benjamin describes the nature of the Trauerspiel as “betrayed by language,” existing in a purgatory between natural sound and pure music. It grows mute in response. “It was already defined in the ancient wise saying that the whole of nature would lament if it were granted the gift of language.”¹⁴² In very similar terms, Sebald wrote of a “paralytic confrontation” between the need to communicate and speechlessness, from which emerge those opaque images visible on Handke’s stage—it is a confrontation which for him existed at the point of anthropogenesis, conceived in similarly guilt-laden terms to those of Benjamin’s Baroque (CS 67).¹⁴³

It is wrong, as some have done, to view ex natura emblems as merely derivative of the allegory of the Middle Ages and the sense of nature which it expresses. Statements such as the following are wide of the mark: “The goal of [emblematic] natural history is to capture the entire web of associations that inextricably links human culture and the animal world.”¹⁴⁴ This suggests a coherence which was already broken, and which emblematic expression and perception demonstrated no interest in repairing. Where the allegory of the Middle Ages attests to “a spiritualisation of the world every bit as living as it is systematic,” by which that world can be understood as a monograph, then the allegory of the early modern period consists of a glut of fragmentary utterances, each of which is liable to decay.¹⁴⁵ Benjamin introduces the temporal measure most decisively, describing how, “in the Baroque, nature is considered as functioning for the purpose of expressing its meaning, for the emblematic presentation of its

¹⁴² Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I:60.

¹⁴³ Nature as such is guilt-laden, as Benjamin has it. “Because of guilt, what is signified allegorically is unable to find fulfilment of its meaning in itself. Guilt not only inhabits the one who contemplates allegorically, and who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge; it also inheres in the object of his contemplation.” Compounding nature’s obscurity is its tendency to be struck dumb. “Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even deeper into the essence of nature: its sorrow makes it mute. In all mourning there is an inclination to speechlessness, and this is infinitely more than the inability or unwillingness to communicate. What is sorrowful feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named—even when the namer is godlike and blissful—perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning. But how much more so to be not named but only read, to be read uncertainly by the allegorist, and to have become highly significant only through him” (Benjamin, *Origin*, 244-5).

¹⁴⁴ Ashworth, “Emblematic Natural History,” 35-6.

¹⁴⁵ Jöns, *Sinnen-Bild*, 33.

sense, which, as an allegorical presentation, remains irreparably severed from its historical realisation.”¹⁴⁶ Schöne stresses the discontinuity in spatial terms:

Doubtless emblematics achieves no systematic arrangement of beings, nor does it furnish Nature with any order. The pattern of allusions and citations which it spreads across the world is made up of isolated elements [Einzelglieder] and presents itself first to those able to recognise the connections which traverse the analogous meanings of heterogeneous things, or the heterogeneous meanings of analogous things.¹⁴⁷

And to those brooders properly inclined:

This emblematic doctrine of allusion, correspondence and life is, avowedly, no more witness to an untrammelled trust in cosmic order, but rather an expression of humans’ efforts, at the beginning of the new age, to assert themselves against a chaotic world growing every more inscrutable.¹⁴⁸

Heckscher and Wirth attribute this to the new scientific methods—namely, empirical observation and experimentation—and texts whose rise tracks that of emblematics, which the latter attempts to absorb without resolving the epistemological and ontological incongruities. “Emblematics laboured to keep pace with the growing factual knowledge, finding it much easier to use these [scientific] works by relaying them alongside the ‘exact’ teachings of traditional knowledge which melded allegories and fantastical meanings.”¹⁴⁹ Each emblem, then, stands as a “monument of the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas,” as Benjamin put it in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book.¹⁵⁰ He would later cast them in a much more active role: “allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 179.

¹⁴⁷ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 49-50.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁴⁹ Heckscher and Wirth, “Emblem, Emblembuch,” cols. 117-8. Where the representatives of the new science “putt discourse in paper and brought it to use,” as Aubrey wrote of the Royal Society, the emblematisers took a less functional, productive line—at least in principle—seeking instead to influence individual moral behaviour (Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 320).

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, 11.

¹⁵¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 331.

Sebald's avowed fondness for such figures as the seventeenth-century scientist and theologian Thomas Browne was borne of the latter's peculiarly emblematic view of the natural world, which comprised those incongruities described in brief above. Indeed, Browne was fond of emblems, once recommending them as "pieces of good and allowable invention unto the prudent Spectator, but are lookt on by the vulgar eyes, as literal truths, or absurd impossibilities; whereas indeed, they are commendable inventions, and of laudable significations."¹⁵² This is taken from the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), in which, at the same time, "he dispels popular errors and legends," as Sebald puts it in *Saturn* (RS 22).¹⁵³ In a late interview he spoke of being "absolutely mesmerised by the quality" of Browne's writing, "and this very, very curious mixture of scientific enquiry carried out by someone still half held by medieval magic. ... It doesn't matter whether he writes about a bittern or a stone or indeed about the angels, he always has this very pronounced metaphysical bent."¹⁵⁴ Conceived in these terms, Browne appears sage-like, endowed with unique perceptive and expressive faculties, which are in large part borne of his proximity to an earlier age in which the physis was more inclined to relinquish its meaning. Like the animals themselves, he is cast in an intercessory role. He is not the only one. Indeed, much of Sebald's writing—both critical and narrative—is bent on seeking out such figures and such texts of theirs as promise revelation.¹⁵⁵ With uncommon frequency, his encounters with these figures—or, indeed, his narrator's encounters—are attended by animals. Their appearances tend to be fleeting, but their effect is always interruptive, and they seem to demand that curious, mixed compartment somewhere between empiricism—the sober

¹⁵² Thomas Browne, *Works* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928-31), III:137.

¹⁵³ Sheppard dates Sebald's interest in Browne as far back as 1985, though it was only to come to fruition with *Saturn*, first published a decade later (Sheppard, "A Chronology," 640). See also chapter IV.ii below.

¹⁵⁴ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 159.

¹⁵⁵ Nor must they belong to the far horizon of modernity. Ernst Herbeck occupies such a role (see chapter III.iii below). In Gerhard Roth's work, Sebald finds utterances (spoken on behalf of a beekeeper's mute son, no less) which "possess considerable power of suggestion despite their hermetic construction; often it seems that each of them could be – if only one understood what is being said – the basis for a new image of the world," in which "phenomena enter into a completely different relation to each other than they do in an order determined by the logic of discursive language" (Sebald, "Unknown Region," 30).

recording of sensory data—and an earlier perception intent upon retrieving meaning, not to mention moral instruction. Not infrequently these animals are handled in such a way as to instruct the beholder in the very business of perception and expression.

III. Dogs

i. Image and script, fidelity and otherwise

A woman cloth'd in white, with a Seal in one Hand, and a Key in the other; and a white Dog close by her. The Key and Seal are Emblems of Fidelity, because they lock up and conceal Secrets: The Dog is the most faithful Animal in the World, and beloved by Men.¹⁵⁶

Fidelity is entirely in place only in the relation of humans to the world of things. The latter knows no higher law than fidelity, and fidelity knows no object to which it belongs more exclusively than the world of things.¹⁵⁷

In seeking to move beyond a preliminary sense of Sebald's emblematics, we should look no further than his writing on and with Tripp. Though the two classmates were re-acquainted in 1976, only a quarter of a century later did *Unerzählt* (2003) emerge—closely followed by Michael Hamburger's English translation, *Unrecounted* (2004)—which pairs very short poems by Sebald with engravings by Tripp, the latter all renderings of eyes, ranging from those of Samuel Beckett to those of Sebald's daughter. Tripp and Sebald had agreed upon the collaboration soon before the latter's death, though the precise pairing of text and image was later done by Tripp alone. To say that Sebald's contributions to this effort are epigrammatic is no insight of great critical acuity. Hamburger puts it best when, in his introductory note, he describes them as at once “plain and cryptic texts” whose many antinomies contrive to produce “reductive epiphanies.”¹⁵⁸ In the arrangement of image and text, there is a clear echo of the emblem books described in outline above. On one page appears an engraving, on the opposite an accompanying verse. Sebald's short poems, too, broadly conform to type, preceded as they

¹⁵⁶ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia, or, Moral Emblems* (London: Benj. Motte, 1709), 30.

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin, *Origin*, 162.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Hamburger, “Translator's Note,” in W. G. Sebald, *Unrecounted*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004), 6-9.

are by mottoes of sorts, which do as much to frustrate interpretation of the words to follow as they do to facilitate it.¹⁵⁹ That he ‘recycled’ some of these from *For Years Now* (2001), a collaboration with the artist Tess Jaray—behind the back, as it were, of Tripp—is hardly out of keeping with the emblematic tradition, in which obfuscation of sources, not to mention simple plagiarism, is the norm. At the same time, the late work with Jaray can be said to signal the limits of emblematics in a postmodern age. If an aesthetic properly conforming to the latter withdraws all claims to an association with ‘real’ material referents, then it can be considered inhospitable to the emblem, which restlessly traverses the gulf at once separating *and* yoking image-being and meaning, to use Benjamin’s terms. Gombrich goes further, arguing that the emblem corresponds to a “most extreme position in which not only the distinction between symbolisation and representation is removed but which threatens even the distinction between the symbol and what it symbolises ... For if the visual symbol is not a conventional sign but linked through the network of correspondences and sympathies with the supra-celestial essence which it embodies, it is only consistent to expect it to partake not only of the ‘meaning’ and the ‘effect’ of what it represents but to become interchangeable with it.”¹⁶⁰ By my understanding, passage after passage of Sebald’s works suggest an effort to repair that network of correspondences and sympathies, and to recover that availability of meaning, though, it must be said, with little hope of success. Indeed, to Benjamin’s abyss of meaning, Sebald adds another terrible dimension—a vertiginous gulf separating the so-called ‘metaphysische Unterfutter’ from the human observer. In this regard, the poems of Sebald and the pictures of Jaray, as arranged in *For Years Now*, regard one another “à travers un brèche d’incompréhension,” to borrow an epigrammatic phrase reiterated by Sebald on at least two

¹⁵⁹ See again Hamburger’s introduction which begins with the strained admission that “a number of these texts overlap with those included in Sebald’s earlier collaboration.” His sense that the “mere duplication” was “out of character in the Max I knew” is to underrate the extent to which Sebald’s works, of the most various stamp, reiterated one another (Hamburger, “Translator’s Note,” 1).

¹⁶⁰ Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*,” 176-7.

important occasions.¹⁶¹ Hence, a picture whose combination of brash colour and fine, regular detail arrests the reader-observer at the surface is confronted with a poem that seems determined to draw the same beyond it.



Apparently significant (FYN 18-9)

Critical considerations of Sebald and Tripp have tended to fasten upon reality effects—above all, *trompe l’oeil*.¹⁶² Even where they seek to get beyond these, they cannot quite manage to do so.¹⁶³ This is borne of Sebald’s writing on Tripp, and in particular an essay first published in 1993, which consists of an effort to broach and then transcend such questions. “Thinking about the work of Jan Peter Tripp,” he writes towards the outset, “and the way in which the exact

¹⁶¹ See note 141 above, as well as Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 198.

¹⁶² Öhlschläger, “Poetik des *trompe l’oeil*,” *passim*; and Clive Scott, “Sebald’s Photographic Annotations,” in *SM*, 233-4.

¹⁶³ Naomi Beeman suggests that a so-called ‘deviant realism’ determines the works of both. “Tripp introduces minor flaws in the mimetic realism of his images in order to spare his subjects the fate of being mortified by the realist gaze, whereas Sebald advocates for “a new variety of painterly realism that insists on the subtle divergence of the representation from its model rather than on their equation,” from which Sebald derives his own theory of writerly realism (Naomi Beeman, “Stilling Life: Deviant Realism in Sebald and Tripp,” *MLN* 130 (2015): 650). This begs the question, if I may put it in somewhat bald terms, of how much deviation realism can tolerate before it no longer deserves the name.

reproduction of reality achieves an almost unimaginable degree of precision, it is impossible to avoid the tiresome question of realism” (LOG 160). And yet, to speak of that work in connection with photo- or hyper-realism, with “the tendency to reification implicit in its naturalistic mode of perception” is a “false association” (LOG 163). Sebald dismisses, in characteristically summary fashion, “those critics schooled in the traditions of modernism, who tend on the whole to be largely ignorant when it comes to matters of technique,” and those, perhaps one and the same, for whom “the idea that radically exposed artistic positions might nowadays be arrived at just as readily through representational as non-representational art is ... virtually inconceivable” (LOG 160 & 163). In Tripp’s exacting works, which seem to boast an unparalleled fidelity to their subjects, Sebald instead finds “ambiguity, polyvalence, resonance, obfuscation and illumination,” all of which are peculiar to visual art as such (in distinction to photography). Tripp’s paintings demand attention, critical and amateur, precisely for their “interventions, deviations and differences,” without which “the most perfect representation would be devoid of all thought or feeling” (LOG 164). These interventions, deviations and differences exist as much upon a temporal plane as a spatial one, as affirmed by Tripp’s predilection for quotation, which Sebald equates to remembrance of that which is dead and lost, for “the proximity of life to death” is the principle subject of painting (LOG 164). “The quotation interpolated into a text or image forces us ... to revisit what we know of other text and images, and reconsider our knowledge of the world. That, in turn, requires time. In taking it, we enter upon narrated time and cultural time” (LOG 169).

“Countless emblem book mottoes were quotations, which is to say predetermined, with maxims, aphorisms, and moral doctrines preceding the picture.” To this Schöne adds that “whilst the *res picta* struck the emblematisers as meaningful and capable of imparting wisdom, whilst it was to them a likeness, a witness, a confirmation of pre-formed maxims which were already present in the understanding of the learned, the meaning was not to be found manifest

in the picture, but rather (as a given) to be revealed in it. That the world in all its manifestations is shot through with signs at once concealed and capable of discovery, with secret allusions and hidden meanings, is the unconditional prerequisite of emblematics.”¹⁶⁴ Or, as Benjamin put it, what is most allegory’s own is “the secret, privileged knowledge.”¹⁶⁵ In this regard, that which is illustrated by the image “does not stand in a direct and, as it were, tensionless relation” to the elaborating text, but rather in “a comparative and citational one. Something hidden in and expressed through the picture is revealed through the subscriptio ... If the hieroglyph has the character of a code language [Chiffresprache] legible only to those possessing and initiated in the code, in its clarifying, exegetical text, the emblem furnishes the key to help any eye decipher the coded language of the *res naturales* and *artificiales*.”¹⁶⁶

In his essay on Tripp, Sebald describes a large picture showing a “mysterious pair of black shoes” sitting atop patterned floor tiles, illuminated by the light streaming in through an unseen window (LOG 170). A small reproduction of the same appears amidst the text. The challenge posed by its apparently incongruous title, *Declaration de la guerre*, is directed at the viewer, who in response cannot help but feel a sense of bewilderment. Two years later, writes Sebald, the painter produced a much smaller work (100 x 145 cm), in which appears the first picture, “not just as a citation, but as a mediating element of the painting,” or “ein vermittelnder Gegenstand der Darstellung,” as it reads in the German text, which is to say a mediating or intercessory object belonging to the picture (LOG 185-6 / 170).¹⁶⁷ It is mounted on a wall in the background of the later picture, imposing still despite its reduced dimensions. Before it and to the spectator’s right sits a woman, her back turned to the viewer, and to the left stands a dog. That the objects arranged upon the canvas pose an enigma is presupposed by Sebald’s

¹⁶⁴ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 39.

¹⁶⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, 254.

¹⁶⁶ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 40.

¹⁶⁷ “Darstellung” also suggests something of a performance, the full import of which will be explored in the following chapter.

description of the first, much simpler picture, in which shoes, tiles, light and shadow conspire together to “produce a geometric pattern of a complexity which is incapable of expression in words,” and, “from a combination of this pattern—illustrating the intricacy of the various proportions, relationships and interlocking connections—and the mysterious pair of black shoes, there arises a kind of picture puzzle [Bilderrätsel] which the observer, knowing nothing of the previous history, will scarcely be able to solve” (LOG 185 / 170). So it is that Sebald invokes the later picture in an effort to bring its predecessor “at least a little more into the open” (LOG 170). He notes first that the woman regarding the picture of the shoes has removed one of her own, which are, in fact, “the same shoes as the ones she is gazing at in the large picture” (LOG 171). Then, he goes further, revealing certain facts of composition concealed, quite literally, beneath the painting’s surface:

Originally, so I have been told, she was holding this one shoe in her left hand, then it was placed on the floor to the right of the chair, and finally it vanished altogether. The woman wearing one shoe, alone with the mysterious declaration of war—alone, that is apart from the faithful dog at her side, who, however, is not in the least interested in the painted shoes, but gazes straight ahead out of the picture and looks us directly in the eye. (LOG 171)

Given that Sebald had visited Tripp the year before the essay in question was published, we can safely assume that he was told as much by the artist himself.¹⁶⁸ More interesting than the actual conveyance of the fact is the manner in which it is conveyed, at least in the German text. “So habe ich mir sagen lassen,” wrote Sebald (LOG 186). That is to say that he “allowed himself to be told,” which is a rather sly (and not at all convincing) suggestion as to the passivity of his enterprise. For it is not by the mere presence of the shoes that we enter “narrated time or cultural time,” but also by the exegetical labours precipitated by their appearance. The

¹⁶⁸ Sheppard, “A Chronology,” 638.

bounds of that time are only broadened by the interposition of the dog, which can be said to furnish the key with which Sebald proposes to unlock the picture's meaning:

He has been on a journey, and has retrieved a kind of wooden sandal from the fifteenth century, or, as the case may be, from the wedding portrait which hangs in the National Gallery in London, painted by Jan van Eyck in 1434 for Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife in morganatic 'left-handed' marriage, Giovanna Cenami, in token of his witness to the union. '*Johannes de Eyck hic fuit,*' it says on the frame of the circular mirror in which the scene can be seen again, in miniature, from behind. (LOG, 171-2)

The itinerant sandals sit here in the foreground, near the lower left picture's edge. This "strange piece of evidence," as Sebald puts it, lies beside that faithful dog which "is likely implicated [hineingeraten] as a symbol of marital fidelity" (LOG 187 / 172). In these interpretive assumptions, Sebald seems to follow Panofsky, who once described the picture as both "a memorial portrait and a document at the same time."¹⁶⁹ That is, it is a record not of the couple being married, but of the *act* of their marriage. "According to Catholic dogma, marriage is a sacrament which is immediately accomplished by the mutual consent of the persons to be married when this consent is expressed by word and actions."¹⁷⁰ And so, "not only the whole procedure was called by a term derived from 'Treue' in the Germanic languages ... but also the various parts of the ceremony were called by expressions emphasising their relation to

¹⁶⁹ Erwin Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait," *Burlington Magazine* 64, No. 372 (March, 1934): 118. Painted almost a century before Alciato's emblems were first published, the portrait cannot strictly be said to belong to that emblematic tradition described above, though it nevertheless anticipates it. Panofsky is impressed by its "peculiarly hieratic character," which betrays certain of the Bible's "'involuntary descriptions' of ancient oriental images," which he traces back to "the Babylonian type of a god or hero triumphing over an animal or a couple of animals" (Ibid, 125). Certainly, van Eyck's picture bears the stamp of allegory, in which a figural centre—that of the couple and their fidelity to one another—is crowded about by various symbolic appendages, with which it conspires to express an encrypted meaning. As Panofsky puts it, "as in the other works by Jan van Eyck, medieval symbolism and modern realism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter" (Ibid, 127). It is a harmony which had grown altogether strained, to say the least, in the productions of the Baroque.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 118. In the fifteenth century and "up to the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church could acknowledge a marriage contracted in the absence of any priest or witness," a "seeming laxity" which, as Panofsky wryly puts it, "was bound to lead to the most serious inconveniences and could cause actual tragedies ... partly tragic, partly rather burlesque, in which the validity of a marriage could be neither proved nor disproved for want of reliable witnesses" (Ibid, 123-4).

Faith.”¹⁷¹ Thus it is that near enough every fact of the picture’s composition can be said to participate in expressing the couple’s “solemn promise of Faith,” an insistence necessitated by the notion that van Eyck’s work “had the same importance and implied the same legal consequences as an ‘affidavit’” for a couple who were married in Bruges, where neither had any kin.¹⁷² This explains that crass seeming phrase inscribed by the painter on the mirror’s frame, “van Eyck was here.” Van Eyck was not only engaged as the couple’s wedding portraitist, but also as their witness.

In the allegory belonging to the ‘Arnolfini portrait,’ then, there is a unity of intention encompassing each of its constituent parts, and there is a fixity of purpose in the manner by which they are arranged. Tripp’s picture is a more sparse and less coherent affair. The sandals appear “in the form of an analogous object from a world long since past” (LOG 172). The dog is the “bearer of secrets [*Geheimnisträger*] who leaps easily over the dark abysses of time, because for him there is no difference between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries” (LOG 172). Yet Tripp’s dog, a spaniel, bears no resemblance to van Eyck’s, “a little griffin terrier or a Bolognese dog.”¹⁷³ It has undergone a strange metamorphosis at the hands of the artist. It confronts the reader head-on, whereas van Eyck’s stands at an angle to the viewer. Most of all, the later dog’s gaze is transmuted. Whereas van Eyck’s is cheerful to the point of whimsy, Tripp’s faces the viewer with an ambiguous gaze. “His left (domesticated) eye is directed attentively upon us; the right (wild), on account of a touch less light, looks remote and strange. And yet, we feel, it is precisely this eye in shadow which can see right through us” (LOG 173). Then there is the question of its place upon the canvas. Tripp, we are told, laboured over where

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 123.

¹⁷² Ibid, 124. Hence, the “marriage candle,” denoting that the bedroom in which the ceremony takes place, “is to be interpreted as a ‘thalamus,’ to speak in medieval terms,” which is to say a marriage chamber. Then there is the hardly accidental fact that “the back of the armchair standing by the bed is crowned by a carved wooden figure of *St. Margaret triumphing over the Dragon*, for this Saint was especially invoked by women in expectation of a child.” These elements together combine such as to “impress the beholder with a kind of mystery and makes him inclined to suspect a hidden significance in all and every object” (Ibid, 126).

¹⁷³ Panofsky, “Arnolfini portrait,” 118.

to put it—“an X-ray would show that previously he was standing in the middle of the picture” (LOG 171)—revising its place within the composition like he did the shoe (another symbol of fidelity) once in the woman’s left hand, which itself was moved to the floor to the right of the chair, then made to disappear entirely (LOG 171).¹⁷⁴

Understood as a fundamentally citational form of expression, emblems are predetermined, as Schöne rightly puts it, though that is not to say that they are unyielding.¹⁷⁵ In this regard, Sebald’s essay on Tripp can be considered as itself a declaration of fidelity, of ‘Treue,’ albeit an utterly ambivalent one—fidelity to the stuff of the past, whether that is a *res naturales*, *artificiales*, or, as in this and many other cases, a composite belonging to both categories. This is manifest in his labouring to bring the picture “at least a little further into the open,” and above all in his labouring over the *Geheimnisträger*, who appears in an excised detail which brings the essay to a close—all the better to return our gaze (LOG 170). For, as Benjamin puts it, “it has always been acknowledged that [melancholy’s] power must be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the behaviour of a brooding genius.”¹⁷⁶ With this passage in hand, in an essay on Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), Sebald once upbraided a “renowned Baroque researcher” for not having read Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, where he would have learned that a dog bearing the name *Fidèle* is “none other than an incarnation of an ancient symbol of melancholy” (BU 73).

In his essay on Gerhard Roth, Sebald writes that “the enigmatic anatomy of other things, of that which we are not ... reveals itself only to the extent to which we succeed in preserving the world in which we live from the interference caused by our existence,” which in turn demands

¹⁷⁴ Jacob Grimm records an old German custom, according to which a groom would bring his bride a shoe on the occasion of their marriage. The moment she put it on her foot, she was considered to be subject to his authority. In another rendering, the groom removes one of his own shoes, and the bride puts that on, such that the two wear one shoe each (Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer* (Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung Theodor Weicher, 1899), 214). Then, later, it became common for the groom to bring his bride a new pair of shoes. Thus, at the back of the *Arnolfini Portrait*, there sits what appears to be a new pair of red shoes, considerably cleaner than those clogs removed by the groom.

¹⁷⁵ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 39.

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 149

that “absolutely singular fidelity to every minute detail” noted in the last chapter.¹⁷⁷ Yet, in practice, the second half of that proposition is all too often at odds with the first. The essay on Tripp can be understood, in a twofold sense, as a confession of infidelity—an upending of van Eyck’s marriage contract. To begin with, the acts of ekphrasis and exposition necessitate a series of manipulations, of transpositions, of fabrications, as Sebald himself concedes.¹⁷⁸ Then, there is the sense that a fidelity to this or that object already prefigures the point at which it is forsaken for another, for how could an attention so overweening keep faith with more than one thing at a time? Benjamin explains this by association with the pathological aspect of the melancholy temperament: “No doubt the sick person’s absorption in the isolated and petty is followed by the disappointed gesture of letting the emptied-out emblem fall ... pressing forth ever anew are the amorphous details, which alone present themselves allegorically.”¹⁷⁹ This latter quality is only redoubled by the dictates of narrative, even where the temporal measure implied by the latter is decidedly halting and dilatory.

¹⁷⁷ Sebald, “Unknown Region,” 38.

¹⁷⁸ In the latter regard, it is worth noting another, later and yet more allusive essay, written to mark an exhibition of Tripp’s pictures in the autumn of 2000, in which Sebald seeks to explicate two of the artist’s pictures of (dead) mackerel, which are said to be “an emblem of fertility among many peoples” (CS 176). Sebald goes on: “Scheftelowitz, for instance, claims that among the Jews of Tunisia it was the custom to sprinkle mackerel scales on the pillow at weddings or on the Sabbath eve, while the Viennese psychiatrist and anthropologist Aisenbruk, who emigrated to California, tells us in his unjustly neglected writings that the Tyroleans like to nail a fishtail to the parlour ceiling at Christmas” (CS 176-7). The first of those cited, Scheftelowitz, was an obscure though quite real rabbi and Orientalist whose work included *Das Fisch-Symbol im Judentum und Christentum* (1907). The latter, Aisenbruk, is rather justly neglected for the fact that, as Sheppard has pointed out, he appears never to have existed, much less to have written about Tyrolean Christmas rituals (Richard Sheppard, “Dexter—Sinister: Some Observations on Decrypting the Mors Code in the Work of W. G. Sebald,” *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 4 (2005): 428).

¹⁷⁹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 198.

ii. Deviations and delays

For there is falsehood in our knowledge, and darkness is so firmly planted in us that even our groping fails.¹⁸⁰

Sebald's prose narratives, it is well known, are digressive affairs. The case is perhaps most acute in the second part of *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, whose narrator seems always on the point of changing course, of altering or abandoning such provisional plans as he has made.¹⁸¹ Interrupting his movements and his labours (largely intellectual) are certain marginal figures which might seem inconsequential, were it not for their frequency of appearance and their distorting effect upon the narrative's course, an effect which seems out of all proportion. The passage in question here concerns two journeys, one in the autumn of 1980, the other in the late summer of 1987, both intended to begin in Vienna, end in Verona, and take in Venice between these two.¹⁸² The digressive phenomenon is most pronounced in the 1987 trip, during which the narrator journeys, largely unplanned, to Padua, Desenzano and Limone sul Garda, before finally arriving at Verona.¹⁸³ Having spent the morning in the latter city's Biblioteca Civica pursuing his researches, which have a digressive cast of their own, he takes a walk "along the Adige, beneath the trees of the riverside promenade, to the Castelvechio," before

¹⁸⁰ Albrecht Dürer qtd. in *Saturn and Melancholy*, 365.

¹⁸¹ This is not the same as saying that their narrators are forever getting lost. In fact, they are forever failing to do so, as John Zilcosky has pointed out, though he makes an important exception of *Austerlitz* (John Zilcosky, "Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald's *Austerlitz*," *MLN* 121 (2006): 679-98).

¹⁸² Sebald made a near-identical trip in the latter part of 1980, having been awarded a British Academy grant in support of research into "problems of literature and psychopathology" (Sheppard, "A Chronology," 629). Beyond the passages of *Schwindel. Gefühle.* now under discussion, the main fruit of that trip was the essay on Herbrich/Herbeck mentioned above.

¹⁸³ The narrator had hoped to visit Riva, only to disembark his bus at Limone after an embarrassing and failed attempt to photograph a pair of fellow travellers, adolescent twins in the company of their parents, "who bore the most uncanny resemblance imaginable" to pictures of the "*scrittore ebreo* from the city of *Praga* who took the waters at Riva in the month of September 1913 and as a young man looked exactly—*esatto, esatto*" like them (SG 88-9). Not unconnected with that digressive quality, taking the waters and the air in a bid to recover from one ailment or another is a recurring feature of Sebald's narratives. These are but the first of many instances. Ambros Adelwarth goes with Cosmo Solomon to Banff in a bid to settle a severe crisis of the nerves (DA 140-3). With Marie de Verneuil, Austerlitz visits Marienbad, which promises a state of "extraordinary peacefulness," only to experience growing unease (A 289).

venturing on to the Piazza Bra, where he has arranged to meet with a local journalist. Even in the course of such a short and pre-determined journey, he is waylaid by a “sandy-coloured dog with a black mark like a patch over its left eye, that appeared like all stray dogs to run at an angle to the direction it was moving in.” This dog, the narrator reports with conviction, had in fact “attached itself to me outside of the duomo,” satellite like, “and now kept a steady distance ahead of me. If I paused to gaze down at the river, it paused as well and looked pensively at the flowing water. If I continued on my way, it too went on” (SG 124). In a word, it acts as attendant, in which role it both guides and poses a danger:

But when I crossed the Corso Cavour by the Castelvechio, it remained on the curb, and when I turned in the middle of the Corso to see where it was I narrowly escaped being run over. Once I was on the other side I wondered whether I should carry straight on through the Via Roma ... or should instead make a short detour through the Via San Silvestro and the Via dei Mutilati. All at once the dog, which had kept its eyes on me from the other side of the Corso, was gone, and so I turned down the Via Roma. (SG 124)

The decision, apparently prompted silently by the dog, succeeds in bringing him opposite to the pizzeria, owned by one Carlo Cadavero, “from which I had fled headlong that November evening seven years before” (because of a waiter’s disconcerting phone call and his feeling that he had been followed by two sinister figures since leaving Venice) (SG 124).

The dog’s place within the emblematic schema is elaborately determined, to put it mildly. Above all, of course, it is “representative of the melancholy complexion.”¹⁸⁴ According to the humoral medicine prevalent throughout the early modern period and maintained, at least in its broad precepts, from the ancient Greeks, the dog was thought to be governed by the spleen, site of the melancholy black bile. “To the dog belongs the spleen in its hieroglyphic sense, which fulfils such an important function in the formation of the humor melancholicus,” as Giehlow has it.¹⁸⁵ “If death or madness overcomes him, it happens because of his spleen. And

¹⁸⁴ Giehlow, “Dürers Stich ‘Melencolia I,’” 72.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

those in charge of the funerals of these animals become for the most part splenetic, when they are about to die,” or so it was according to Horapollo.¹⁸⁶ Health was defined “as the equilibrium of different qualities, and sickness as the predominance of one—a concept truly decisive for humoralism proper.”¹⁸⁷ This system was also thought to correspond “with general cosmological speculation,” such that seasons and stars could bring certain humours into the ascendancy, always with more or less baleful consequences.¹⁸⁸ “The theory of melancholy stands in precise relation with the doctrine of astral influences,” as Benjamin has it.¹⁸⁹ Saturn, thought to be cold and dry, corresponds to autumn, which, in the Mediterranean climes of Rome and Greece at least, shares those same qualities, as does the black bile.¹⁹⁰ Hence, as Giehlow concludes with admirable concision, the splenetic dog is “satellite of saturnine melancholy.”¹⁹¹

According to Horapollo’s hieroglyphs, the image of a dog sat or stood aside a royal stole was meant to symbolise sacred scribes, judges, prophets—all those most nearly approaching and resembling the highest of Gods, that is—and in turn a divinatory sight. As Pirckheimer put it, merely reiterating the substance of what he found in Horapollo, the dog “would enter the temple and look square at the images of the gods, just as in ancient times the stola-clad judge alone was wont to look upon the king.”¹⁹² It is “more gifted and sensitive than other beasts, has a very serious nature and can fall victim to madness, and like deep thinkers is inclined to be always on the hunt, smelling things out, and sticking to them.”¹⁹³

As the activity of Sebald’s narrators well attests, melancholy brooding rarely alights upon a definite course of action, whether in the realm of ideas or of matter, hence the tendency towards

¹⁸⁶ Horapollo, *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo*, trans. George Boas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 63.

¹⁸⁷ Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 151.

¹⁹⁰ Not for nothing are Sebald’s narrators most often on the move in the autumn, or at least the late summer, “when the dog days were drawing to an end,” as the well-known opening lines of *The Rings of Saturn* have it (RS 3).

¹⁹¹ Giehlow, “Dürers Stich ‘Melencolia I,’” 76.

¹⁹² Qtd. in Giehlow, “Dürers Stich ‘Melencolia I,’” 72.

¹⁹³ Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 323.

“gloomy inertia”—the inverse and inevitable (if temporary) consequence of that dilatory restlessness—such as is depicted in Dürer’s rendering.¹⁹⁴ The strange prospect opening up beyond the Angel of Melancholy also affirms this quality, and suggests something of its grounds, as Benjamin was first to note in his Trauerspiel book. There he associates the sea on the horizon at the engraving’s upper-lefthand corner with “the penchant of the melancholic for distant journeys,” explicable only “if Saturn’s distance from the earth and the long duration of its planetary orbit are conceived no longer in the nefarious sense ... but rather in a beneficial sense, with reference to the divine reason that ordained for this menacing heavenly body the most remote position.”¹⁹⁵ This explains the following pronouncement of Benjamin’s, which appears in a densely allegorical autobiographical sketch: “I came into the world under the sign of Saturn—star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays.”¹⁹⁶ It also helps to explain the strange course of that dog of Sebald’s described moments ago, which is said, “like all stray dogs, to run at an angle to the direction it was moving in,” or, as the German text puts it, “wie alle herrenlosen Hunde schräg zu der Richtung, in der er sich fortbewegte,” which is to say that it somehow contrived to move athwart the direction in which it was moving, which no doubt has something to do with it having gone astray, or, as is suggested by the German idiom, being unmastered (*herrenlos*) (SG 145 / 124). That strange cross-purposive movement is also suggested in Sebald’s essay on the poet Ernst Herbeck, whose schizophrenia is hardly incidental in the present context, where the latter is described as writing “athwart [durchquert]

¹⁹⁴ This also attests to the association of melancholy with sloth, which dates to the Middle Ages (Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 160). Along these lines Burton conjectures: “Two main reasons may be given of it, why students should be more subject to this malady than others. The one is, they live a sedentary, solitary life, *sibi & musis*, free from bodily exercise, and those ordinary disports which other men use: and many times if discontent and idleness concur with it, which is too frequent, they are precipitated into this gulf on a sudden: but the common cause is overmuch study; too much learning ... hath made thee mad; ‘tis that other extreme which effects it (Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989), 1:302-3).

¹⁹⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, 152.

¹⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Agesilaus Santander,” in Gershom Scholem, *Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1978), 207.

his destroyed life.” This he does, naturally, by means of that image writing (Schriftbild) which is as “incongruous [ungereimt]” as it is “arbitrary [willkürlich]” (BU 134).

iii. Madness and creative genius

The *Name* is imposed from the matter, and Disease denominated from the material cause ... from the black Choler. And whether it be a cause or an effect, a Disease, or a Symptome ... I will not contend about it.¹⁹⁷

The brooder whose startled gaze falls on the fragment in his hand becomes an allegorist.¹⁹⁸

Sebald was familiar with Dürer’s engraving from an early stage in his career, a familiarity which extended into occasional pastiche.¹⁹⁹ There is a photograph dating to 1977 in which he appears “brooding with head propped up in that classic melancholic pose going back to Dürer.”²⁰⁰ It is a posture shared by the red-haired woman in Tripp’s painting, and recounted at length by Sebald in his essay (LOG 172). Even earlier he demonstrated an alertness to the finer points of its iconography. In his first essay for *Literatur und Kritik*, published in 1972, he describes the angel as having a “dark countenance and a terrestrial weightiness, as though she might never again take flight.” The sand-glass behind her “suggests ominously that her hours are numbered.”²⁰¹ Panofsky’s remains the most prominent and fruitful account of the engraving, which he produced in concert with Fritz Saxl and Raymond Klibansky. Carrying on the work of Giehlow, he traced Dürer’s conception of melancholy back to the revisionist efforts of the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino, translator of Plato and Plotinus, whose monograph

¹⁹⁷ Burton, *Anatomy*, 1:162.

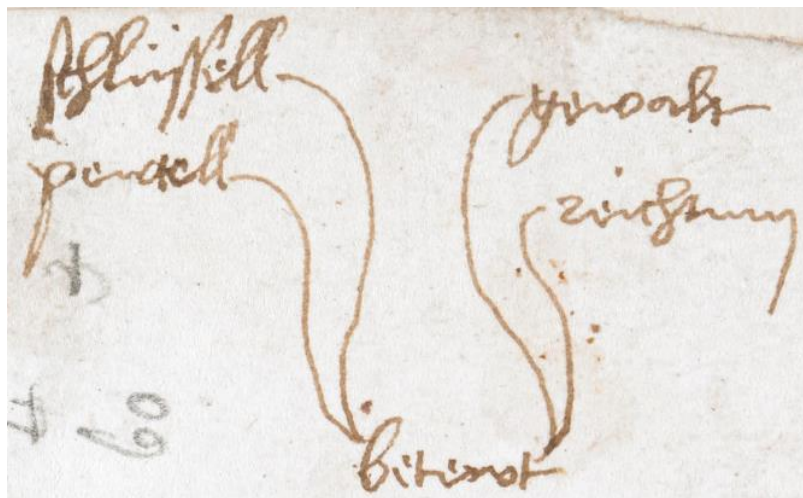
¹⁹⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 324.

¹⁹⁹ Sebald is hardly alone in this. Despite the persistent and widespread distaste for allegorical imagery, Dürer’s work, and this engraving in particular, remain remarkably influential.

²⁰⁰ Tabbert, “Tanti saluti,” 47. The posture of cheek rested upon hand has been traced as far back as mourners depicted on ancient Egyptian sarcophagi. Even then it symbolised a complex and fertile mix of grief, fatigue and creative thought (Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 286).

²⁰¹ W. G. Sebald, “Gedanken zu Elias Canetti,” *Literatur und Kritik* 65, Jahrg. VIII (1972): 283.

De triplici vita (1489) gave shape “to the idea of the melancholy man of genius and reveal it to the rest of Europe.”²⁰² The astrological and humoral tradition of the Middle Ages ranked melancholy as the lowest, most contemptible of temperaments. The excess of black bile which the melancholic shares with the dog causes avarice, miserliness, and therefore a hoarding of wealth and the power which attends it.²⁰³ This explains Dürer’s cryptic scrawl yoking keys and purse with power and riches, found in a preparatory sketch and describing those items that would come to hang from the angel’s belt.²⁰⁴ This diagram expresses better than perhaps any



Schlüssell / pewtell – betewt – gewalt / reichtum (Albrecht Dürer, Preparatory sketch for *Melencolia I*, c.1514, MS 5229, British Library)

other document, before or since, that restless practice of assemblage and correspondence characteristic of allegorical expression.

Saturn was always felt to be a star of “dangerous bipolarity.” Thus, Ficino endeavoured “to show the Saturnine man some possibility of escaping the baneful influence of his temperament (and its celestial patron), and enjoying its benefits.”²⁰⁵ Central to his efforts was the thirtieth of

²⁰² Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 255. In the thought prevalent throughout medieval Europe, the melancholic was first a figure of scorn, characterised by sloth and miserliness.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁰⁴ It reads: “Schlüssell / pewtell – betewt – gewalt / reichtum,” which is to say, “keys / purse – signifies – power / riches” (Albrecht Dürer, *Schriftlicher Nachlass* (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956), 209).

²⁰⁵ Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 261. The schema of the four temperaments was irrevocably associated with the four Christian virtues and vices, which lent theological credence to the image of the melancholic as tight-fisted and work-shy. It is no surprise, then, that Dürer would reiterate these notions, though that is not to say unerringly, for “when a fifteenth-century artist sought models which he might use for a

the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, which affirmed that “all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic, and to such an extent that they are seized by the illnesses that come from black bile.”²⁰⁶ In fact, even the dark inverse of that brilliance took on an exalted bearing as a consequence of this revision. The madness of the melancholic was associated with that of the heroes of ancient Greek tragedy on the one hand, and the frenzy and afflatus of Platonic philosophy on the other.²⁰⁷ Indeed, those gifts are scarcely attainable without risking the very dangers to which the melancholic is susceptible. So, by an effort of grand synthesis, Ficino and his followers succeeded in transforming a hitherto repellent temper into “a jealously guarded privilege.”²⁰⁸

Thus, when the speaker of *After Nature* opens the triptych’s final part with the claim that he was born under “the cold planet Saturn” (NN 86), aside from seeming to cite those remarks of Benjamin’s quoted above, Sebald “writes himself into one of the oldest and noblest occidental traditions—into the history of melancholy under the sign of Saturn. It is a proud gesture of humility [hochgemute Demutsgeste], an act of literary self-ennoblement by means of an ostentatious self-revelation,” as Sigrid Löffler has it.²⁰⁹ Dürer himself set the pattern. “Clearly understanding his own nature ... he painted his own portrait, even in youth, in the attitude of the melancholy thinker and visionary.”²¹⁰ To Löffler’s remarks we must add the correction that

dramatic instead of a merely descriptive representation of the Four Temperaments, he had nothing to turn to except the traditional types of the Vices” (Ibid, 159).

²⁰⁶ ‘Aristotle,’ *Problems (Books 20-38)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 277. According to that pseudo-Aristotle, the melancholy humour is itself antithetical, in that it “is a mixture of hot and cold; for its nature consists of these two things,” meaning that its abundance in the body causes diverse effects on a person’s affective and intellectual state depending on the mixture. Those in whom hot bile is concentrated “near the location of the intelligence” are, for their part, “affected by the diseases of madness and inspiration, whence come Sybils and Bakides and all the inspired persons, when [the condition] comes not through disease [i.e., some other, prior disease] but through natural mixture. Maracus the Syracusan was even a better poet when he was insane. But those in whom the excessive heat is relaxed toward a mean, these people are melancholic, but they are more intelligent, and they are less eccentric, but they are superior to others in many respects, some in education, others in arts, and others in politics” (Ibid, 285-7).

²⁰⁷ Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 15-7.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 251.

²⁰⁹ Sigrid Löffler, “‘Melancholie ist eine Form des Widerstands’: Über das Saturnische bei W. G. Sebald und seine Aufhebung in der Schrift,” *Text+Kritik* 158 (IV/03): 103.

²¹⁰ Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 363. Indeed, it was in the early modern period that the pose began to demonstrate widespread currency with self-conscious melancholics. “In a few rare cases during the

it is Sebald's speaker—nowhere named—who is ennobled, though no doubt he is invested with many facts taken from the writer's biography. It was Sebald's critics, popular and academic, who proceeded to square the circle and confer upon him the same privilege.²¹¹

Accordingly, as earthbound representative of that “demon of antitheses,” Dürer's angel comprises “a union of two figures, one embodying the allegorical ideal of a creative mental faculty, the other a terrifying image of a destructive state of mind.”²¹² As ever in the sphere of allegorical expression, it is not a question of a solitary figure, nor a coherent one. About the angel are arranged emblems as numerous as they are diverse—the aforementioned keys and purse are joined by instruments belonging to carpentry, masonry and geometry. Then, of course, there is the putto, which, according to Panofsky, “signifies the careless equanimity of a being that has only just learnt the contentment of activity, even when unproductive, and does not yet know the torment of thought, even when productive.” Interpretations of the dog's place in Dürer's striking configuration tend to emphasise its downturned face and prominent ribs—those things which strike us as especially melancholic, as signifying “the dull sadness of a creature entirely given over to its unconscious comfort or discomfort.” Thus, by their arrangement in relation to the figural centre of the engraving, the putto and the dog, not to mention all those other instruments, conspire to generate and corroborate the complex temper expressed by the angel. That is to say, “the conscious sorrow of a human being wrestling with

Italian Renaissance, poets were represented in a pose otherwise scarcely used in portraits: sitting, head leant in the hand of a propped-up arm, and with a contemplative expression. This type was subsequently repeated, transferred into other portraits of artists and scholars. In the eighteenth century it became a sort of ‘professional portrait’ for intellectuals” (Ursula Hoff, *Rembrandt und England*, (PhD diss., Hamburg, 1955), 8).

²¹¹ An interview published in the *New York Times* just three days before his death comes to mind. The text is preceded by a large photograph, from which Sebald looks out with the sort of weary consternation beloved of author portraitists. The top of his head, the right-hand side of his face, and his neck all disappear into the surrounding darkness, which is amplified to an absurd degree. The headline below reads, “Preoccupied With Death, but Still Funny” (W. G. Sebald, “Preoccupied With Death, but Still Funny,” Interview by Arthur Lubow, *New York Times*, Arts Section, 11 December 2001, 1-2).

²¹² Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 317.

problems is enhanced both by the conscious suffering of the sleeping dog and by the happy unselfconsciousness of the busy child.”²¹³

If the angel represents above all the faculty and the limits of sight, of the imagination, and the visual arts, then the dog could be said to comport more to scholarship proper. It is apt, then, that it should traverse those bounds too often erected between Sebald’s ‘critical’ and his ‘creative’ labours. Curled on the ground with its muzzle pointed down to the earth, as Benjamin put it, “the nose for detecting and the perseverance of the animal is kept in mind so as to be able to recognise in it the image of the tireless researcher and brooder.”²¹⁴ He might have said faithful, too. “What a sense of smell has the dog / and what loyalty to its master,” wrote Johannes Sambucus in an emblem book dating to the second half of the sixteenth century, and one of the finest of its kind.²¹⁵ In the Pirckheimer translation of Horapollo illustrated by Dürer, the dog is described as being “like deep thinkers ... inclined to be always on the hunt, smelling things out, and sticking to them.”²¹⁶ Sebald was fond of characterising his own working methods in similarly emblematic terms:

Not even my Ph.D. research was done systematically. It was always done in a random, haphazard fashion. And the more I got on, the more I felt that, really, one can find something only in that way, i.e., in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplotable manner. And he invariably finds what he's looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this. ... One thing takes you to another, and you make something of these haphazardly assembled materials. And, as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things.²¹⁷

²¹³ Ibid, 321.

²¹⁴ Benjamin, *Origin*, 156.

²¹⁵ Johannes Sambucus, *Emblemata, et aliquot nvmmi antiqvi operis* (Antwerp: Apud Christophorum Plantinium, 1584), 163.

²¹⁶ Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 323.

²¹⁷ W. G. Sebald, Interview by Joseph Cuomo, 94-5.

This tirelessness accounts for the striking leanness of the dog of *Melencolia I*. It is also suggested by its prominent and taught neck, hardly suggestive of a creature at rest. Panofsky names it “‘canis dormitans’ ... making use of the intensive form, rather than ‘canis dormiens,’” which Benjamin reiterates, writing that “the ambivalence of this emblem is enriched, in Dürer’s engraving, particularly by the fact that the animal is represented as sleeping: if bad dreams come from the spleen, then divinatory dreams too are the prerogative of the melancholy.”²¹⁸ In



Canis vigilāns (detail from Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I* [1514])

fact, its eyes are open—the dark pupil of its right eye is perceptible above its bottom eyelid—though shrouded in darkness, like the angel’s essentially melancholic *facies nigra*. In this regard, it accords with Benjamin’s epigrammatic remark that the saturnine “bore through the ground with their eyes.”²¹⁹ With its eyes open the dog can also perceive those objects arranged around it, objects which have been assembled by the angel only to be cast aside, and to whose

²¹⁸ Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 321; Benjamin, *Origin*, 157. The title was given it by one who owned a preparatory sketch made by Dürer of the dog.

²¹⁹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 162.

level the dog has been reduced. It has been consigned to the plane of things.²²⁰ Such is the state of affairs that, as Benjamin has it, “leads to the antinomies of the allegorical, the dialectical treatment of which cannot be avoided.”²²¹ He goes on:

Any person, any object, any relation can signify any other whatever. With this possibility, an annihilating but just verdict is pronounced on the profane world; it is characterised as a world in which not much depends upon detail. Yet it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone familiar with the exegesis of allegorical texts, that all those stage props of signification, precisely by virtue of their pointing to something other, acquire a potency that makes them appear incommensurable with profane things and elevates them to a higher plane, indeed can sacralise them. In allegorical perception, then, the profane world is both elevated in rank and devalued.²²²

Much of this manner of treating objects and persons is suggested in Sebald’s writing on Tripp—the shuffling about and levelling of things in the manner of “stage props of signification,” the presumption that these acquire meaning precisely in their relation to one another, and, perhaps above all, that exegesis is a necessary, if fraught, part of this means of expression and perception. Sebald writes that Tripp’s “still lifes are not primarily concerned with the skill and mastery of the artist, exercised upon a more or less random *assemblage*, but rather the autonomous life of things—in relation to which we, as creatures in blind thrall to the world of work, find ourselves in a subordinate and dependent position” (LOG 158-9). Telling here is the qualifying “primarily,” which is to say that mastery is a necessary, if secondary, premise of such works, though it is one which contrives ultimately to bring about the artist’s subordination to those profane things which are in turn elevated (always in equal measure) by being given life.

²²⁰ To its right is an object which like a censer, though is more likely an inkwell (aptly enough). Cf. Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 314.

²²¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 184.

²²² *Ibid*, 184.

iv. The idea and the figure of the sovereign

Princes / Gods of this earth
Regard what falls at your feet
Think how suddenly you too
Could fall under foreign feet.²²³

Forsaking an over-determined structuralist reading of Sebald allows such questions as that of sovereignty to be recuperated from beyond the horizon of modernity's long durée.²²⁴ Sebald's interest in the figure of the sovereign was ample. No doubt that interest was concentrated on such 'properly' modern figures as Napoleon, but this was borne of a sense that the recurrence of such figures is evidence less of mere anachrony, more of a paradigm proper, that is, one largely indifferent to historical demarcation (whether of a Foucauldian cast or otherwise).²²⁵ Hence, in 1990, he described the Austrian Bundespräsident as representing "the sins of omission [Unterlassungsschuld] of the entire nation, who, on account of the associated, ever greater abstraction of his person, has been able to transform himself into an allegorical figure, even in his own lifetime—as did the Kaiser Franz Joseph before him—such that one can hardly say whether he appears dead or alive."²²⁶

The idea of sovereignty does not belong to the juridico-political realm alone, even in so far as such a realm can be said to exist discretely in practice. That is, it describes certain intentions, acts and "contemplative necessities," to use a phrase of Benjamin's, which cut across spheres and ranks of human—and, indeed, animal—life.²²⁷ Considered as such, it crops up in

²²³ Andreas Gryphius, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2010), 138-9.

²²⁴ Long dismisses "traditional forms of sovereignty" out of hand (Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 13).

²²⁵ "Napoleon and everything Napoleonic emerge in almost all of my books as historical paradigms, which have to do with the European idea that was then implemented for the first time in a brutal fashion. What interests me about that is the fact that in Germany around 130 years later the same was tried once more, with yet more brutal methods" (UDE 200). Left unsaid is whether such an idea was implemented prior to Napoleon in a less brutal fashion.

²²⁶ W. G. Sebald, "Damals vor Graz: Randbemerkungen zum Thema Literatur und Heimat," in *Trans-Garde: Die Literatur der »Grazer Gruppe«*. *Form Stadtpark und »manuskripte«*, ed. Kurt Bartsch and Gerhard Melzer (Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 1990), 146.

²²⁷ Benjamin, *Origin*, 67.

unexpected places, not least where didactic questions are concerned. Take, for instance, the subject of the second part of *Die Ausgewanderten*, Paul Bereyter, who served from 1952 as the narrator's primary school teacher in the small alpine town of S, and was in many ways an exemplary pedagogue—"indeed, Paul's teaching was altogether the most lucid, in general, that one could imagine" (DA 38). He would spend "at least a quarter of all his lessons on teaching us things that were not on the syllabus," preferring Hebel's *Rheinische Hausfreund* to the prescribed textbooks, which he found "ridiculous and hypocritical" (DA 37). "On principle he placed the greatest value on taking us out of the school building whenever the opportunity arose ... What Paul termed his 'object lessons' took us, in the course of time, to all of the nearby locations that were of interest for one reason or another and could be reached on foot within about two hours" (DA 38-9). Such excursions comprised lessons in French, natural and industrial history, botany and music, or were made without any definite purpose. And yet, despite Paul's evident and avowed fondness for his pupils, he was apt to treat them with a disdain verging on despotism. Madame Landau, his close companion since their meeting "in summer 1971 at Salins-les-Bains in the French Jura" (DA 43), recalls Paul's explanation for his being there:

He had come ... because what he referred to as his condition had been deteriorating in recent years to the point where the claustrophobia made him unable to teach and he saw his pupils, although he always felt affection for them (he stressed this), as contemptible and repulsive creatures, the very sight of whom had prompted an utterly groundless violence in him on more than one occasion. (DA 43-4)²²⁸

²²⁸ The model for this is Ludwig Wittgenstein and his unhappy period as a schoolteacher in Austria. In a letter to Michael Hulse, the English translator of this work, Sebald described how in the Bereyter story "I have added (a very few) touches of Wittgenstein's life as a primary teacher" (Qtd. in Michael Hulse, "Englishing Max," SM, 198). Wittgenstein is known to have tyrannised his less gifted pupils and antagonised the school authorities, secular and clerical. Sebald once described Wittgenstein as "belonging to my constant companions, not so much because I understand his philosophy at all well ... but instead because I find endlessly fascinating the story of his personality, of how it developed, with all the pathological facets belonging to it" (UDE 229). This fascination extended so far as to prompt the writing of a so-called "Sketch for a Possible Scenario for an Unrealised Film" entitled "Leben Ws," which would, according to a later preface, "narrate the history of a solitary figure, that of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, though certainly not in the form of a documentary or visual biography, but

Recalling his own education some two decades earlier, the narrator describes how Paul conspicuously disciplined a schoolmate “who had fallen completely under the Catechist’s influence and displayed a degree of overdone piety ... quite incredible in a ten year old” and who “forgot to doff his hat to him in the street” (DA 37). Impelled by his “aversion to the Church of Rome” and a “horror of God’s vicars and the mothball smell they gave off,” he “removed the hat for him, clipped his ear, and then replaced the hat on [his] head with the rebuke that even a prospective chaplain should greet his teacher with politeness when they meet” (DA 36-7). “Not infrequently” during lessons Paul would “take out his handkerchief, and, in anger [Zorn] at what he considered (perhaps not unjustly) our wilful stupidity, bite on it” (DA 52-3 / 35). These are, of course, expressions of the most petty sort of sovereignty. “After such fits of rage [Rappel] he would always take of his glasses and stand unseeing and defenceless in the midst of the class, breathing on the lenses and polishing them with such assiduity that it seemed he was glad not to have to see us for a while” (DA 53 / 35, translation modified).²²⁹ That is, he would will upon himself a momentary impotence, a suspension of his authority. Paul’s despotism is as precarious as it is fitful, for his father “was what was termed half Jewish, and Paul, in consequence, only three quarters Aryan” (DA 50). Its counterpart belongs to the school’s thoroughgoing, though hardly more convincing, Catholic pedagogues, who would “teach us of the meaning of sin and confession, the creed, the church calendar, the seven deadly sins, and more of a similar kind” (DA 35). A lingering anti-Semitism is perceptible in that “the Beneficiary and the Catechist considered Paul a lost soul, for we were called upon more than once to pray for our teacher to convert to the true faith” (DA 36).

rather in the pure form of pictures from which W’s life was composed [in der reinen Form von Bildern, aus denen sich das Leben Ws zusammengesetzt hat]” (W. G. Sebald, “Leben Ws: Skizze einer möglichen Szenenreihe für einen nichtrealisierten Film,” in SM, 324). The project first began taking shape, such as it was, in 1986. Having failed to attract funding for its proper realisation, Sebald instead had the epigrammatic scene descriptions superimposed upon an image of Wittgenstein’s face. The assemblage was published in a full-page spread in a German feuilleton (W. G. Sebald, “Leben Ws: Skizze einer möglichen Szenenreihe für einen nichtrealisierten Film,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 22 April 1989, ZB3; see “Leben Ws,” 332-3, for a brief account of the piece’s origins and form).

²²⁹ The English text rather neuters Paul’s “Rappel” in rendering them “bizarre turns” (DA 35 / 53).

Though it is nowhere stated, we can assume that the latter would deliver their religious lessons “from the raised teacher’s desk, behind which the crucifix hung on the wall,” from whence “one could look down on the pupils’ heads.”²³⁰ Notes the narrator: “I cannot remember Paul ever occupying that elevated position” (DA 34).

And yet there remains the temptation to ascend the pulpit, there to “bear down, as it were, on the Sunday congregation until they’re no longer able to gasp,” to recall Sebald’s sense of Bernhard’s sovereign authorial position. He was “a well-founded misanthrope, who by reason of the implacability of his position ... became king of the alps, and stood utterly alone upon the stage” (UDE 230).²³¹ Indeed, Sebald’s aesthetic owes much to the implacable, solitary, sovereign position—to which he was alternately attracted and repelled. As he put it in characteristically sweeping terms in an early essay on Kafka’s *The Castle*:

It is, I think, generally accepted that the only possible rationalisation of power is to seize upon it in order to exploit it for a creative purpose. Accordingly, the claims of great works of art to dominate and subjugate the individual imagination are counterbalanced, and thereby made acceptable, by their critical achievements.²³²

Germanistik is again better attuned to this quality in Sebald, this role, than is its English counterpart.²³³ Above all, it is manifest in the figure of the Sebaldian narrator, in whom we see dramatised that will to grasp, to manipulate, to position, which is the inverse of the will to

²³⁰ And the “Lehrerpult” of the German suggests a lectern as well as a desk (DA 51, emphasis mine).

²³¹ “It is an authentic sovereignty, in contrast to the case of Peter Handke, who at certain points in his life, I think, sought to take on this representative position. Bernhard achieved it, I find” (UDE 230-1). Sebald wrote a largely ignored essay for a collection on *Manuskripte* and the ‘Grazer Gruppe,’ of which Handke was a key part, published in 1990, which is instructive as regards his own sense of literary purpose. In it he wrote that “one can say with conviction that the Grazer’s literature, in all its manifestations, is directly determined by an anti-fascist affect, which, amidst a national fraternity at that time composed of a good quarter unreformed National Socialists and their followers, led them ever more to the brink of a betrayal of nation and family.” And yet, “their literature was a sort of self-liberation,” and “continues to lead a tenacious afterlife” in a national “house full of monstrous horrors” (Sebald, “Damals vor Graz,” 144-5).

²³² W. G. Sebald, “The Law of Ignominy: Authority, Messianism and Exile in *The Castle*,” in *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives*, ed. by Franz Kuna (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 43.

²³³ In an essay on Sebald’s Becker polemic, Schütte describes Sebald’s literary critical writings as “bearing witness to the sovereignty of an outsider unbothered by prohibitions of thought” (Uwe Schütte, “Ich möchte zu ihnen hinabsteigen und finde den Weg nicht: Zu den Romanen Jurek Beckers,” *Sinn und Form* 60, no. 2 (March/April 2010), 239).

rescue, to preserve, to leave be. Little wonder that such qualities often redounded upon the author himself. In an oft-cited review of *Vertigo* published in 2000, the year before Sebald's death, Susan Sontag, high representative of the anglophone critical consensus, wrote that "what seemed foreign as well as most persuasive was the preternatural authority of Sebald's voice; its gravity, its sinuosity, its precision, its freedom from all undermining or undignified self-consciousness or irony."²³⁴ The narrator is, by turns, invested with this authority, made to exercise it, then seen to suffer its excesses in an apparently unceasing dialectic of ascending and descending forces.

The figure of the sovereign is subject of some of the most inscrutable and significant passages of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book.²³⁵ "The sovereign represents history. He holds historical happenings in his hand like a sceptre," he writes.²³⁶ Carried over to the realm of literary activity, it is a remark which brings to mind Sebald's brandishing of the air-war in admonishment of his compatriots. Richard Sheppard considered Sebald's *Sternheim* book to be "the start of [Sebald's] own, personal area-bombing campaign on great swathes of the literature that had been produced by twentieth-century 'Germany' and 'Austria'."²³⁷ And yet, the position of the sovereign in the *Trauerspiel* is a precarious one; he is always at risk of that same levelling caprice which he so spectacularly practises:

The plane of the creaturely state, the terrain on which the *Trauerspiel* unfolds, quite unmistakably determines the sovereign. As highly enthroned as he is over his subjects and his state, his status is circumscribed by the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature.²³⁸

²³⁴ Sontag, "Mind in Mourning," 3.

²³⁵ It is made all the more confounding for his deference to Carl Schmitt, who just a few years later zealously provided juristic justification for Hitler's suspension of the constitution and institution of a permanent state of exception (see Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1992): 5-18).

²³⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 48.

²³⁷ Sheppard, "Dexter—Sinister," 445.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Narrativisation, by Sebald's reckoning, is an endeavour which necessarily has something capricious about it, and as such it is always, to one degree or another, compromised. In one of his last interviews, given to a colleague before an audience at UEA, he described writing as a "morally questionable enterprise."²³⁹ It was hardly the first time he had made such a claim, but on this occasion he went further in determining the basis for that *Fragwürdigkeit*:

One is, of course, in the business ... of arranging things in such a way that the role of the narrator is not an entirely despicable one. ... Writing is by definition a morally dubious occupation, I think, because one appropriates and manipulates the lives of others for certain ends.²⁴⁰

If the narrator enacts, or demonstrates, the role of the sovereign—albeit in rather reduced circumstances vis-à-vis the pomp and the despotism of his precursor in the *Trauerspiel*—arrangement is again at the heart of things. Sebald went on to describe “this horrible moment when you discover, almost with a sense of glee, something that, although in itself horrid, will fit in exactly with your scheme of things.”²⁴¹ In a similar vein, Ben Hutchinson writes of how “on the one hand, the narrator gives himself up to coincidence as he travels about and ‘collects’ [sammelt] various wholly disparate experiences”—not to mention materials—“on the other hand, the author always has control. As master of his work, he has (at least in the writing down of his experiences) all of the threads in his hand.”²⁴² There is something in this, though it tends to affirm the coronation of Sontag et al., investing the author with untrammelled authority. Ruth Vogel-Klein is more precise in her account of those “wilful and artificial” arrangements, in which such correspondences as are made to appear between parts “are based above all on the notions of the narrator.”²⁴³ It is the conspicuous dramatising of the narrator's authority to

²³⁹ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 153.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 153-4.

²⁴² Hutchinson, *Dialektische Imagination*, 54.

²⁴³ Ruth Vogel-Klein, “Rückkehr und Gegen-zeitigkeit: Totengedenken bei W. G. Sebald,” in *Mémoire, Transferts. Images.*, ed. Ruth Vogel-Klein (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005), 103-4.

collect, to manipulate and to expose which constitutes the sovereignty, at once capricious and precarious, peculiar to Sebald's texts. Something of this process is suggested in his essay on Tripp, which contains certain flourishes of summoning and unveiling, though the mechanism of these remains obscured by the feigned anonymity demanded of the essayist, which Sebald flouts only fitfully. The chapter to come will chart more closely this dramatisation as it is carried out in his narrative works.

Notwithstanding obvious superficial differences in activity and bearing, there is a hidden relation between the figure of the sovereign proper and that of Dürer's angel, such as they are conceived in the work of Panofsky et al. and, above all, that of Benjamin. The tyrant, endowed with seemingly boundless authority upon earth, is nevertheless laid low by indecision.

Just as the painting of the mannerists knows nothing of composition in pale light, so the theatrical figures of the epoch stand in the glare of their wavering resolution. In them is expressed not so much the sovereignty that their stoic manner of speech brings to the fore as the sudden caprices of a continually changing storm of emotions, in which the figures of Lohenstein in particular emerge like torn, fluttering flags.²⁴⁴

The angel, for her part, in whom "the brooder's knowing and the scholar's learning are as intimately blended ... as in the men of the Baroque," leaves the many creative tools at her disposal, "the utensils of active life, ... unused on the ground."²⁴⁵ Benjamin even elevated her to something like a sovereign position in respect to the mourning plays en masse: "The images and the figures that the German Trauerspiel presents—these are dedicated to Dürer's genius of winged melancholy. Its crude theatre begins its fervent life in the presence of this genius."²⁴⁶ It is with these matters in mind that we should return to *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, where Sebald

²⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Origin*, 56.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

gives these questions of intellectual and aesthetic sovereignty their most emblematic expression.

v. Herbeck, a dog, and the coincidence of things

Whosoever decides on one of these Saturnine professions [...] places himself, as far as his outward life is concerned, under the influence of his chosen patron. His inner life, however, is determined by the road which he has chosen.²⁴⁷

Now that which is fantastical and abnormal in the ‘humour’ becomes the rule for artists.²⁴⁸

Having resolved to head for Venice during his first trip of 1980, the narrator of *Schwindel. Gefühle*. first makes a short visit to Ernst Herbeck in the Viennese suburb of Klosterneuburg. Leaving England “hoping that a change of place would help me get over a particularly difficult period in my life,” instead he finds that “the days proved inordinately long ... and I literally did not know where to turn.” So “early every morning I would set out and walk without aim or purpose through the streets of the inner city” and only later “when I looked at the map, I saw to my astonishment that none of my journeys had taken me beyond a precisely defined sickle- or half-moon-shaped [halbmondförmig] area” (SG 41 / 33, translation modified). His dilatory progress, then, appears governed by obscure and malign forces of a distinctly celestial stamp. He ventures a variety of names for this state and his symptoms: “hallucinations, for that is what they were ... feelings of sickness and of vertigo,” and even “the beginnings of a paralysis or a sickness of the head” (SG 43-4 / 35-36, translation modified), the latter of which he is able to forestall only by leaning against a wall or retreating into a doorway.

²⁴⁷ Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 252.

²⁴⁸ Borinski, *Die Antike*, 201.

As to the eventual encounter with Herbeck, it passes with precious little in the way of speech. “Ernst let it all go by without venturing a word” (SG 40). He awaits the narrator at the entrance of the retirement home to which he was moved after thirty-four years of life in a sanatorium. “I waved to him from the other side of the street, whereupon he raised his arm in welcome and, keeping it outstretched, came down the steps” (SG 39). There is, then, a tacit understanding between the pair.²⁴⁹ Ernst, for his part, is “plagued by the smallness of his thoughts and perceived everything as if through a fine net [ein feines Netz] drawn over his eyes” (SG 47 / 38, translation modified).²⁵⁰ At the narrator’s suggestion, they travel by train to Altenberg, just a few kilometres along the Donau, to visit Burg Greifenstein, “a medieval fortress that plays a significant part not only in my own imagination,” says the narrator, “but also, to this day, in that of the people of Greifenstein who live at the foot of the cliff” (SG 40-1). It is only after having visited the fortress, on the interminable walk back to Klosterneuburg, that the pair are apprehended:

A dog threw itself against a green-painted iron garden gate, utterly beside itself, as if it had taken leave of its senses. It was a large black Newfoundland, its natural gentleness broken by ill-treatment, long confinement or even the crystal clarity of the autumn day. (SG 50)

Far from hurrying along past this ominous creature, the pair “stood as if transfixed,” as “again and again the animal ran up and hurled itself at the gate, only occasionally pausing to eye us.”

Though the narrator “could feel the chill of terror” in his limbs, both he and Herbeck appear

²⁴⁹ Throughout this passage, there is not a little of that “gestic theatre” which Benjamin found in Kafka. Ernst’s mannerisms and utterances, infrequent though they may be, strike the narrator as “theatrical” (SG 44). “When we parted, Ernst, standing on tiptoe and bowing slightly, took his hat from his head and with it, as he turned away, executed a sweeping motion which ended with him putting the hat back on; a performance which seemed to be, at the same time, both childishly easy and an astonishing feat of artistry. This gesture, like the manner in which he greeted me that morning, put me in mind of someone who had travelled with a circus for many years” (SG 49). One of gestic theatre’s most significant functions, writes Benjamin, “is to dissolve happenings into their gestic components.” Indeed, this particular scene is shot through with “animal gestures” which “combine the utmost mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity” (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 116-8). There is also a basic geographical association with Kafka, who spent the last few weeks of his life at a sanatorium in Kierling, just a few miles south of Greifenstein and a part of the Klosterneuburg municipality. Kafka’s visit to Riva is the focus of the book’s third part.

²⁵⁰ The first part of the following chapter (i.e., IV.i) considers grids at greater length.

bound to pay heed. “Ernst turned to look back once more at the black dog, which had now stopped barking and was standing motionless in the midday sun.” In a gesture curiously omitted from English editions of the text, the narrator “threw a shilling, as an offering for its soul [Seelenopfer], into the iron letterbox affixed to the garden gate” (SG 52 / 43, translation modified). No doubt the gesture is as much borne of self-interest, an effort to guard against the unsettling coincidence of a mad black dog and a no less melancholic autumn climate. The human pair’s moments of impromptu meditation is in keeping with a Baroque allegorical tradition of perception and thought—albeit starved of religious content—which “depends upon the co-ordinated interaction of the imagination or memory, by which the object of the meditation is perceived; the understanding, which provides a rational interpretation and analysis of the object; and the affective faculty, the source of feelings and emotions which are to motivate the soul to action.”²⁵¹ That is not to say that the motivation is acted upon. *If* they helped the dog escape its garden imprisonment, the narrator muses, “it would probably have ambled along beside us, like a good beast, while its evil spirit might have stalked among the people of Kritzendorf in search of another host, and indeed might have entered them all simultaneously, so not one of them would have been able to lift a spoon or fork again” (SG 43). Instead, he and Herbeck resign themselves to a weary walk back in the direction from which they came.

The dog acts to compound, if not to exactly to clarify, the saturnine temper belonging to the encounter between the two. Its role as bipolar attendant is clear enough to the narrator. To repeat, the redemption of melancholy given impetus by Ficino comprises a mode of perception (and, indeed, apperception) just as much as it does certain affective characteristics. As

²⁵¹ Marvin S. Schindler, *Sonnets of Andreas Gryphius: Use of the Poetic Word in the Seventeenth Century* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971), 142.

Benjamin puts it, “what fundamentally distinguishes the brooder from the thinker is that the former not only meditates on a thing but also meditates his meditation of the thing.”²⁵²

Some of the most fruitful passages of Benjamin’s work on the Baroque mourning play serve to elaborate those “contemplative necessities” belonging to the form and its governing temperament. “And one of these necessities, consequent upon the collapse of all eschatology, is the attempt to find consolation in the renunciation of a state of grace in reversion to the bare creaturely condition.”²⁵³ The question of eschatology in Sebald’s works will be treated more fully at the conclusion of the present study. For the moment, I want only to stress the degree to which human society, conceived in the broadest of terms, is given as graceless, as fallen, as guilt-laden in his prose, and the degree to which the dog is invoked in that effort. In one of his first publications, an essay on Elias Canetti appearing in a 1972 edition of *Literatur und Kritik*, he writes of how

Dogs seem to inhabit a peculiarly dark middle realm, into which human conjecture is only occasionally able to pursue them. ... Canine society is a caricature and a condemnation of human existence, whose restless and rabid to-ing and fro-ing, revealed as such, would be grounds enough for despair, to say nothing of the captive gaze of the domesticated animal and the fate of humankind. ... Our guilt surely lies in the fact that we have lifted our noses from the ground, as Kafka recognised.²⁵⁴

This sense of “our” existence and “our” guilt is reiterated more than a decade later in an essay dedicated to Kafka himself, possessed of a tone grown rather complacent in the intervening years, not to mention a grammar best described as unrelenting. Sebald writes that the efforts at transformation which occupy so many of Kafka’s characters, not least the canine protagonist of “Investigations of a Dog,” ought to be understood as “the attempt of a being knowingly

²⁵² Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 367. “To the profane these enigmatic images conceal the holy arcanum of the supernatural; to the initiate, however, they serve as the first rung of the ladder by which we ascend to the Divine. ... In the one the image is the means of teaching the doctrine—a mere substitute for the spoken word” (Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*,” 167).

²⁵³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 67.

²⁵⁴ Sebald, “Elias Canetti,” 281-2.

trapped within its own species to break out into a realm in which an already condemned life [ein bereits verurteiltes Leben] might perhaps still be tenable.”²⁵⁵ In his Döblin book, Sebald suggests that both Kafka and Canetti portrayed “the fate of eternal restlessness [Umtrieb] in the age old melancholy symbol of the dog. Nomadism and the migratory drive reveal themselves as cures and burden of human existence. Perhaps Kafka and Canetti had the history of the Jewish people in mind as paradigm” (MZ 105). I will return to the latter point in the last chapter. For the moment, I would simply like to stress Sebald’s keen and abiding sense of the dog’s capacity to express, and indeed bear, a guilt which belongs properly to humankind as such. This can be seen in its bearing and its activity. Then there is the equation of that guilt with contemplation, and the suggestion, however slight, that, by a reformation of the latter, some measure of redemption might yet be possible. If in its restless confusion the emblematic dog embodied for Sebald a certain crisis afflicting humankind as such, then the contemplation and attempted decipherment of this figure might promise some respite, some counsel in the mitigation of that crisis, if not its solution.

Of those attempts to find consolation such as appear in the Trauerspiel, Benjamin adds that “what is decisive,” formally speaking, “is the transposition of originally temporal data into a spatial unreality and simultaneity.”²⁵⁶ Ruth Vogel-Klein, for one, has noted just such a simultaneity, a “Gegen-Zeitigkeit” or anachrony, as characteristic of Sebald’s œuvre.²⁵⁷ Certainly *Schwindel. Gefühle.* is no exception. As Herbeck and the narrator first broach Greifenstein, there appears in the text a photograph not of the medieval fortress itself, but of what appears to be a miniature garden replica, its central courtyard populated by cacti, its towers and ramparts dwarfed by the dark stone wall that forms its background. This incongruity

²⁵⁵ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 195.

²⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 67.

²⁵⁷ “The concept of ‘Gegen-Zeitigkeit’ I take to mean a resistance to the obliteration of memory, which is made manifest in Sebald’s work by the inversion of linear chronology and the return of the dead to the light of day” (Vogel-Klein, “Rückkehr und Gegen-zeitigkeit,” 100).

alone is barely noteworthy, given that the pair visit in 1980, yet the narrator also interposes images from an earlier visit, “in the late 1960s,” when, “from the terrace of the restaurant” at Burg Greifenstein, he “had looked down across the gleaming river and the waterlands, on which the shadows of evening were falling” (SG 41). To this he adds, writing during or after 1987, that “I only know that the view from Burg Greifenstein is no longer the same. A dam has been built below the castle. The course of the river was straightened, and the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was” (SG 42). As if to confirm that process he is at the same time mourning, a panoramic photograph of the dam and the straightened river interrupts the last sentence. The sense of simultaneity is increased, to put it mildly, when the narrator soon after describes East Anglia to Herbeck, and remarks upon “the great wheatfields which in the autumn are transformed into a barren brown expanse stretching further than the eye can see, the rivers up which the incoming tide drives the sea water, and the times when the land is flooded and one can cross the fields in boats, as the Egyptians once did” (SG 48).²⁵⁸ In light of such passages, instead of speaking of an inversion of chronology, as Vogel-Klein has it, which strikes me as too steadfastly linear, it would be more accurate to say that a disarticulation is in play. Herbeck is certainly equipped for such a vision of history, perceiving everything through that “fine net drawn over his eyes,” the better to arrange occurrences across a quasi-geometrical plane (SG 47 / 38, translation modified).²⁵⁹

Much in the manner of Panofsky et al., Ernst Cassirer describes how Ficino was the first to insist that “every constellation contains within its circle a multiplicity of different, even of contradictory possibilities of life,” such that “Saturn is not only the demon of inertia and of

²⁵⁸ It is worth comparing this passage to the narrator of *Saturn*'s visit to the former military installation at Orfordness. “My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas” (RS 236). Yet, it should be added, “the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilisation after its extinction in some future catastrophe” (RS 237).

²⁵⁹ In this context, see Anne Fuchs, “Zur Ästhetik der Vernetzung in W. G. Sebalds Austerlitz,” *Netzwerke: Ästhetiken und Techniken der Vernetzung 1800–1900–2000*, ed. Hartmut Böhme, Jürgen Barkhoff, and Jeanne Riou, (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004), 261-78.

unfruitful, self-indulgent melancholy; he is also the genius of intellectual observation and meditation, of intelligence and contemplation.” An individual is then able “to decide which of the powers and possibilities contained by this star he will develop and bring to full maturity in himself.” If Dürer’s rendering of melancholy is inconceivable without this revision, it is nevertheless characterised by a constraint, suggested above all by the angel’s profound groundedness, which belies Cassirer’s notion that Ficino “clears the way for the free will of man,” that, “by virtue of our reason, we are the unfettered masters of ourselves (nostri juris).”²⁶⁰ As Panofsky has it, “here if anywhere we receive the impression of a being to whom her allotted realm seems intolerably restricted—of a being whose thoughts have ‘reached the limit.’” He explains that “she is above all an imaginative Melancholy,” confined, that is, to the first of three stages of inspiration (imaginatio is subordinate to ratio, which is in turn subordinate to mens, the contemplative).²⁶¹ She is “a being whose powers of invention are limited to the realms of visibility in space—that is to say, to the realm of the mechanical arts—and whose prophetic gaze can see only menacing catastrophes of nature, for [her] mind is wholly conditioned by the faculty of ‘imaginatio’; a being, finally, who is darkly aware of the inadequacy of [her] powers of knowledge, for [her] mind lacks the capacity either to allow the higher faculties to take effect or to receive other than the lower spirits.”²⁶² This is the form of melancholy proper to Benjamin’s Baroque, one whose wings, as it were, are irremediably clipped. It helps to explain the “amorphous details, which alone present themselves allegorically” to the grounded brooder. “What is perfectly clear is this disparateness in the

²⁶⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 113-4.

²⁶¹ Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 345. This he attributes to the influence of Agrippa von Nettesheim, whose *Occulta Philosophia* was influential in Pirckheimer’s circle. His was the first attempt to make the three stages of cogitation available to the melancholic (Ibid, 359). Benjamin finds the inverse of this ‘Platonic’ anagogical ascent in the melancholy brooding of the Trauerspiel. “The tenacity inscribed in the intention of mourning is born of its fidelity to the world of things. It is in this regard that the infidelity the almanacs attribute to the saturnine should be understood . . . Fidelity is the rhythm of the emanatively descending stages of intention in which the ascending stages of Neoplatonic philosophy are mirrored—transformed, yet full of relation” (Benjamin, *Origin*, 162).

²⁶² Ibid, 359-60.

graphic element as a principle of allegorical perception. Especially in the Baroque, one sees the allegorical personage give way before the emblems, which for the most part offer themselves to view in wild, mournful dispersion.”²⁶³ We have already seen that disparateness in the at once enigmatic and geometric works of Tripp, such as they are interpreted in Sebald’s essay. Something of this quality is also suggested by Sebald’s dogs, who are almost without exception possessed of a singular sight, at once attentive and occluded. Amidst its to-ing and fro-ing and its agitated barking, the dog which apprehends Herbeck and the narrator occasionally “paus[es] to eye us where we stood as if transfixed” (SG 43). The later dog which attends the narrator in Verona has a “black mark like a patch over its left eye” (SG 124). The dog of Sebald’s essay on Tripp is most interesting of all. “His left (domesticated) eye looks straight at us; the right (untamed) eye has just a shade less light, seems remote and strange. And yet, we feel, it is precisely this eye in shadow which can see right through us” (LOG 172-3). Then there is Tripp’s engraving of Moritz, Sebald’s dog, which appears in *Unerzählt*.²⁶⁴ His right eye peers melancholically into the distance beyond the spectator, whereas his left is all but obscured. A later poem in the same volume, paired with the eyes of Rembrandt, another



Maurice (U 18-9)

²⁶³ Ibid, 198-9.

²⁶⁴ Writes Hamburger: “The presence among them of the dog Maurice or Moritz is neither a joke nor an accident. The very name Moritz recalls the close companionship of Max and Moritz in the most famous of all German children’s classics, the verse tale with that title by Wilhelm Busch; and the dog Maurice/Moritz, so close to Max Sebald, died not long after Max’s early and sudden death” (Hamburger, “Translator’s Note,” 9).

eminent artist-melancholic,²⁶⁵ traces a collusion between the otherwise disparate seeming fragments:

Like a dog
Cézanne says
that's how a painter
must see, the eye
fixed & almost
averted

(U 51)

Taken together with the prominent nose of Moritz, the sight of these dogs, always somehow averted, concealed or interrupted, is in keeping, I think, with certain tenets particular to melancholic perception of a distinctly allegorical cast. If, again, the nose brings to mind the “image of the tireless researcher and brooder,” then the eyes suggest the subsequent tendency to disperse the spoils of those efforts.²⁶⁶ Looking askance or with one eye at a time implies a loss of depth perception.²⁶⁷ Perhaps that goes some way to explaining Sebald’s description of “the principle of combination” belonging to Herbeck’s poetry, in which “there are no secondary words; each is equally remote from an imaginary midpoint” (BU 145). The sentiment here accords with a later passage in *Vertigo*, in which the narrator expresses “a longstanding affection” for the paintings of Pisanello which is borne not only of the “highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting a depth dimension, upon an essentially flat surface, in

²⁶⁵ Tripp’s engraving is after Rembrandt’s well-known self-portrait of 1669. It is in his portraits of others that Rembrandt reiterated the melancholic pose shared by Dürer’s angel and aped by Sebald. In a portrait of his son Titus dating to 1655, a “passive-wistfulness appears simultaneously with a perceptible transition into a visionary-creative state; melancholy distinction and psychic intensification here find profound expression” (Hoff, *Rembrandt und England*, 22).

²⁶⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 256.

²⁶⁷ See also a sketched self-portrait of the adolescent Henri Beyle which appears in the first part of *Schwindel. Gefühle./Vertigo*. His right eye is covered by an inkblot. The following text describes how “the 53-year-old Beyle, writing during a sojourn at Civitavecchia, attempted to relive the tribulations” of his early adulthood—in particular, the crossing of the Alps led by Napoleon—only to find that “at times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarce credit them” (SG 4-5).

which every feature, the principals and the extras alike, the birds in the sky, the green forest and every single leaf of it, are all granted an equal and undiminished right to exist” (SG 73). In turn, this helps to account for the strange temporal collapse described above, in which the prospects of the 1960s and the 1980s, those of Greifenstein and East Anglia, seem just as near to hand and as strange as those of ancient Egypt. Again, a similar effect is recounted in the passage on Pisanello: “A landscape of a more northerly character rises (the word is suggested by the nature of the depiction) into the blue sky. A ship with billowing sails, making headway on an inlet, is the only element in the composition hinting at remoteness and distance; everything else is very much of the present and of this world” (SG 73-4). Andreas Isenschmid writes that the look of this narrator is “the gloomy contemplative one of Dürer’s *Melencolia I.*”²⁶⁸ Certainly the two share a frustrated groundedness. Reflecting upon his walk with Herbeck, the narrator muses that “we were both within an inch of learning to fly, or at least I might have managed as much as is required for a decent crash [einen anständigen Absturz]. But we never catch the propitious moment” (SG 49 / 42). In that sense, he is another possessed of the “double awareness of weakness and creative power, and the consciousness of walking on the edge of a precipice.”²⁶⁹ But the equation of narrator and angel is a simplification. The look of the former can be understood only when we account for the dog which interrupts his and Herbeck’s walk, which itself belongs to a long line of similar (though by no means identical) dogs extending through and far beyond Sebald’s œuvre. Only by establishing its place within a larger allegorical scheme do we properly account for that confounding mix of attention and restlessness, of distances effaced and traversed, and of a melancholy elaborated in aesthetic-intellectual routines every bit as self-conscious as they are conspicuous.

²⁶⁸ Andreas Isenschmid, “Melencolia: W. G. Sebalds *Schwindel. Gefühle.*,” in *W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 1997), 72.

²⁶⁹ Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 250-1.

IV. Corpses

i. Stendhal-Beyle and the art of dismemberment

The stage lies full of corpses, images, crowns, sceptres,
Swords &c. Above the stage the heavens open,
Beneath the stage, hell. Eternity comes from the
Heavens and remains standing upon the stage.

...

Eternity: Look, wretch! Look, what is this valley of tears?
A torture chamber! Where they play with ropes,
Stakes, and death.²⁷⁰

Despite their immeasurable diligence and utility, Sheppard's bibliographical labours in *Saturn's Moons* are guilty of one simplification that strikes me as particularly misleading.²⁷¹ Beneath a very detailed enumeration of Sebald's "Critical Articles and Essays" appear "Extracts from Individual Works," which are taken to comprise "Books of Poetry," "Works of Prose Fiction," and "Critical Works."²⁷² In each case, the text in question is designated either a "pre-publication extract" or a "post-publication extract." These categorisations, necessary to a catalogue of this sort, cannot help but have something arbitrary about them, but the case is particularly acute here. It is also symptomatic of the treatment afforded these shorter works in the main part of anglophone criticism. That arbitrariness is suggested by Sheppard's own commentary, which notes the variants particular to each text, ranging from the apparently "minor" to the admittedly "significant." Each of these is considered to be a deviation from the monograph in question, regardless of chronological precedence. Take, for example, the entry for an article published in the June 1988 edition of *Manuskripte* (E.B.12 in Sheppard's scheme),

²⁷⁰ Andreas Gryphius, *Catharina von Georgien. Oder bewehrete Beständigkeit*, in *Dramen*, ed. Eberhard Mannack (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 125.

²⁷¹ Sheppard, "Primary Bibliography," in SM, 446-96.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 474-82.

which is designated as a “pre-publication extract” of the first part of *Die Ausgewanderten* (B.B.2), which was first published over four years later:

The epigraph to B.B.2 has intensified ‘verzehret’ to ‘zerstört’ (‘verzehret’ follows the wording of the quotation from the fourth stanza of Hölderlin’s ‘Elegie’) ... Four of the pictures in the two versions differ significantly ... the text of E.B.12 is largely the same as that of the later B.B.2 with minor variants, but E.B.12, p. 155 (‘glänzender Staub, ein ganzes Sternengefeld aus der Streusandbüchse Gottes, zitterte im Kegel des Lichts als Vorspiel vor dem Erscheinen der Bilder’), becomes ‘und der sonst unsichtbare Zimmerstaub erglänzte zitternd im Kegel des Lichts als Vorspiel vor dem Erscheinen der Bilder’ (p. 26); E.B.12, p. 156 (‘Montreux’), becomes ‘Gstaad’ (p. 26); and the final sentence of E.B.12 on p. 158 (‘denn was Genügen gibt, endet dort, wo es genügt, und wo es endet, genügt es nicht mehr’) is omitted from B.B.2, p. 37.²⁷³

Other than the painstaking extent of Sheppard’s efforts, such passages serve also to demonstrate the degree to which Sebald subjected his work to ceaseless revisions, which no doubt varied greatly in significance and explicability. For that reason, it is mistaken to brand the shorter texts as mere extracts, or merely ‘extra-monographic’—to coin a phrase more apt than elegant—as if they belong in the fore- and aft-shadows of Sebald’s longer and more prominent texts. All of them were in fact implicated in an apparently inexhaustible, fugue-like process of iteration and reiteration. To fasten upon what is unique to this or that iteration is not—or at least not always—an act of critical pettifoggery. Proceeding from that which is particular to each can help to determine more general characteristics belonging to Sebald’s ‘Prosaarbeit’ (his prose-work), to borrow and expand the remit of a term he used to describe what would later divide into two separate works, *Schwindel. Gefühle.* and *Die Ausgewanderten*.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Ibid, 477. Figure III.2 is a photograph of Sebald riding a bicycle in Wymondham, where he lived from 1970 to 1976.

²⁷⁴ See Scott Bartsch, “W.G. Sebald’s ‘Prose Project’: A Glimpse into the Potting Shed,” in *Über W.G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 99-134, here 100.

Indeed, the variance from one iteration to another is more marked in regard to his earlier narrative work. In March 1988 *Manuskripte* would publish an ‘Essay’ of Sebald’s with the enigmatic title “Berge oder das ...”²⁷⁵ A much shorter iteration appeared as late as 2001 in an edition of PEN America’s eponymous journal, now entitled “Memory’s Defeat.”²⁷⁶ The two pieces are characterised in Sheppard’s bibliography as pre- and post-publication extracts of the first part of *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, itself entitled “Beyle, oder das merckwürdige Faktum der Liebe,” translated to “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet” in editions of *Vertigo*. Taken together, these three German iterations span practically the full length of Sebald’s career in narrative, the first appearing in the same year as *Nach der Natur*, the last in the year of both his death and the publication of *Austerlitz* (in German and English). All can be termed biographical sketches of Henri Beyle, better known as Stendhal. The earliest piece, that of *Manuskripte*, is said by Sheppard to have “minor variants” in regard to *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, which is true at least insofar as the text is concerned.²⁷⁷ The images undergo significant alterations, however, one of which broaches the stated concern of the present chapter. In every iteration noted above, Sebald describes Beyle’s stay in Milan in the latter half of 1800, a time when he forsakes diplomatic service for the military, joining Napoleon’s 6th Dragoons. He then “finally dared disburden himself of the virginity he had brought with him from Paris,” as the text of *Vertigo* puts it (SG 11). That is, he visits a brothel.²⁷⁸ The one event follows the other, as the trappings of the seventeen-year-old Beyle’s uniform, acquired at considerable expense, convince him

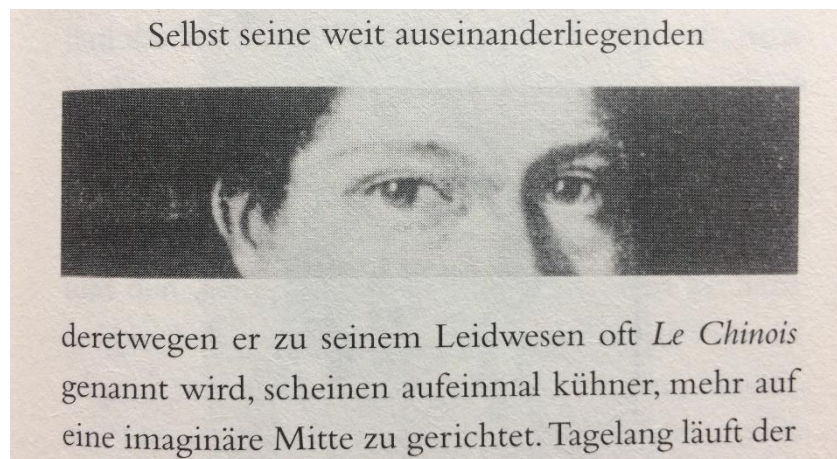
²⁷⁵ W. G. Sebald, “Berge oder das ...,” *Manuskripte* 99 (March 1988): 71-8.

²⁷⁶ W. G. Sebald, “Memory’s Defeat,” *Pen America* 2 (Fall 2001): 77-9.

²⁷⁷ “Primary Bibliography,” 476.

²⁷⁸ Sebald’s interest in brothels and sex-work is worthy of further study, given its persistence. In addition to the passage cited above, see also: W. G. Sebald, “Die Mädchen aus der Feenwelt: Bemerkungen zu Liebe und Prostitution mit Bezügen zu Raimund, Schnitzler und Horváth,” *Neophilologus* 67, no. 1 (January 1983), 109–17; and W. G. Sebald, “Via Schweiz ins Bordell: der Schriftsteller W. G. (Max) Sebald erinnert sich an Kafkas Sommerreise 1911,” *Die Weltwoche* 40, 5 October 1995: 66. Much of the substance of the former appears in an essay on Schnitzler published two years later, the latter of which is reiterated, if you will, with substantial alterations, in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (1985). The essay on Kafka is included, with minor variations to the placement of images, in editions of *Campo Santo* (2003), though of course Sebald had no hand in this later effort.

that he has at last succeeded in transcending the limits of his physical form: his “high embroidered collar had lengthened his all to short neck,” and even his eyes, “set somewhat far apart, on account of which, to his chagrin, he had often been called *Le Chinois*, suddenly seemed bolder, more focussed on some imaginary midpoint” (SG 11). In the German iterations belonging to *Manuskripte* and *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, there appears here an instance of image-writing proper, in the sense that, where the text might have read “Augen”—and where in English editions it reads “eyes” (SG 11)—there appears instead an image of the eyes of young Beyle, in the form of a detail taken from a portrait dating to 1802.²⁷⁹ The theme of bodily contortion, not to mention the visual disarticulation of body parts, anticipates the image which



Beyles Augen (SG 11)

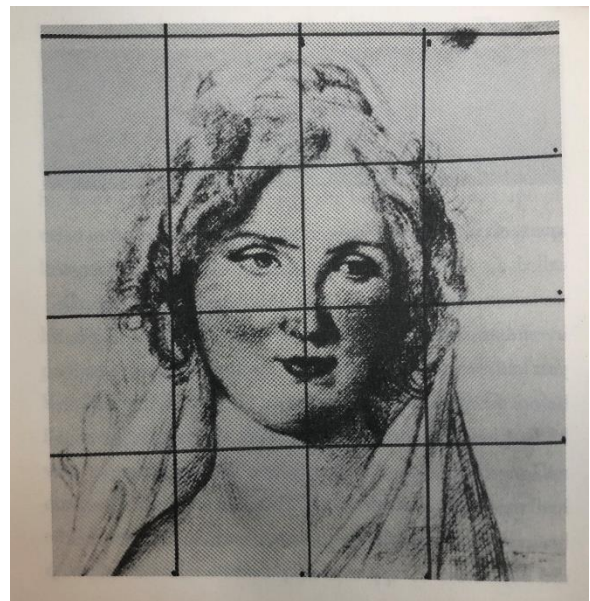
appears just a few lines later. It is the sketched portrait of a young woman, considered frontally. The text above and below describes how, before the year’s end, Beyle began “working on a passion of a more abstract nature. The object of his craving was Angela Pietragrua, the mistress of his fellow-soldier Louis Joinville” (SG 12-3). A shawl descends down from her hair and over her clavicles. She looks to her left and slightly downwards, the faint smile on her pursed lips at odds with somewhat heavy, melancholy eyes. Any reader is bound to guess that it is a

²⁷⁹ See Victor Litto, *Album Stendhal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 68. Many of the images appearing in Sebald’s Beyle texts appear to have been taken from this volume book, including the hand of Dembowski (Ibid, 181), two sketched self-portraits of the young Beyle (Ibid, 44-5), and a landscape painting of Napoleon’s crossing of the Great St. Bernard pass which opens proceedings in each of the iterations discussed here (Ibid, 53).

rendering of said Pietragrua, which is in fact the case.²⁸⁰ In *Manuskripte*, the portrait has evidently been cropped, rendered in black-and-white, and subject to that severance implied by facsimile reproduction, but otherwise it appears unadulterated. The same cannot be said of its counterpart in *Schwindel. Gefühle.* (and *Vertigo*), which has been subjected to a strange



Pietragrua (“Berge oder das ...” 73)



Pietragrua under grid (SG 12, English edition)

effacement. A grid has evidently been drawn by Sebald, extending from the picture’s outer perimeter and overtop Pietragrua’s image.²⁸¹ In earlier, better quality editions of the text, in which the images are larger—such as the first British English one (Harvill, 1999)—small black marks are visible around the picture’s perimeter, of the sort used to guide the drawing of gridlines at regular intervals. The effect is less visible in later paperback editions, which perhaps explains why it is little remarked upon.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 60.

²⁸¹ I must acknowledge my debt here to a humble little blog dedicated to “W. G. Sebald and literature with embedded photographs” (Terry Pitts, “The Gridded Lover,” *Vertigo*, December 23, 2007, <https://sebald.wordpress.com/2007/12/23/the-gridded-lover>). The subsequent speculations regarding Dürer are my own.

This grid is taken, I think, from Dürer, albeit in an indirect fashion. Sebald has cited a citation, taking something of Dürer's from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). The latter appeared in a list of his favourite books hastily compiled by Sebald in 2000, and the passage in question was cited in his 1984 essay on Gerhard Roth.²⁸² Written in an oppositional vein familiar to readers of Sebald's short prose, the third essay of Berger's book concerns the European nude, which is, writes Berger, "usually presented as an admirable expression of the European spirit," a spirit "inseparable from individualism."²⁸³ Yet this implied an irresolvable contradiction. "On the one hand the individualism of the artist, the thinker, the patron, the owner: on the other hand, the person who is the object of their activities—the woman—treated as a thing or an abstraction."²⁸⁴ Berger furnishes the following example:

Dürer believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth – and so on. The result would glorify Man. But the exercise presumed a remarkable indifference to who any one person really was.²⁸⁵

Placed amidst the text cited above is a reproduction of Dürer's *Der Zeichner mit der liegenden Frau* [*Draughtsman with a reclining woman*, 1525], taken from his studies of human proportion. At one end of a long, rectangular desk sits the male draughtsman. At the other end and on top of the desk lies the female model, her bare body exposed to the eye of the beholder, but for a sheet concealing her left leg and vulva. Between them are two grids: the first bounded by a frame and fastened at the mid-point of the desk, so as to form a screen between the two

²⁸² The list was to serve the basis for a window display in a bookshop in Freiburg, where Sebald spent an unhappy undergraduate spell from 1963-5 (W. G. Sebald, "Favourite Books," in SM, 264). In the Roth essay, Sebald writes that "John Berger has shown how the representation of the naked female body always presupposes a male observer"—an apt summary of Berger's thesis (UH 157). For Sebald's reading of Berger, see Scott, "Photographic Annotations," 238-9.

²⁸³ Berger's antagonist was Kenneth Clark and his politically naïve *The Nude* (1956).

²⁸⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and Harmondsworth: BBC and Penguin, 1972), 62. The brevity and the gusto of Berger's polemic naturally does not account for the significant changes which Dürer's method and theory of art underwent over the course of his life, not least his departure, after his return from Venice in 1506, from a Leonardesque ideal of human proportion to a determined empiricism that admitted such infinite variations as are encountered in life (see Panofsky, *Dürer*, 260-70).

²⁸⁵ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 62.

figures; the second on the desk before the draughtsman. The latter's eyes peer across the tip of a miniature obelisk, through the first grid, and on to his model, whilst his right hand records



Albrecht Dürer, *Der Zeichner mit der liegenden Frau* (Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 1525)

her body in outline upon the second grid before him. According to Dürer, the lesser draughtsman could use such an apparatus to record faithfully his model's proportions, relieving the hand of the eye's inaccuracies.²⁸⁶

If making such a connection between the grids of Sebald and Dürer seems spurious, consider the following passage from *Vertigo*, which follows soon after Pietragrua's dissected portrait:

In *De l'Amour* he [Beyle] describes a journey he claims to have made from Bologna in the company of one Mme Gherardi, whom he sometimes refers to simply as La Ghita. La Ghita, who reappears a number of times on the periphery of Beyle's later work, is a mysterious, not to say unearthly figure. There is reason to suspect that Beyle used her name as a cipher for various lovers such as Adèle Rebuffel, Angéline Bereyter and not least for Métilde Dembowski, and that Mme Gherardi, whose life would easily furnish a whole novel, as Beyle writes at one point, never really existed, despite all the documentary evidence, and was merely a phantom, albeit one to whom Beyle remained true for decades. (SG 21-2)

²⁸⁶ "Solchs ist gut allen denen, die jemand wollen abconterfeien und die ihrer Sache nicht gewis sind," as Dürer put it, that is, "good for those who wish to portray somebody, but who aren't sure of their subject" (Albrecht Dürer, *The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer*, ed. Willi Kurth (London: W. & G. Foyle, 1927). The draughtsman must shut one eye as he peers over the obelisk, forsaking his own depth perception in the process, and giving himself over to the geometrical logic of the segmented plane before him. This, of course, is just one of many contradictions and conceits at the heart of that perspective which emerged in European art of the Renaissance.

Consider, too, that immediately prior to the above cited passage appears the image of a dismembered hand, likely female. If the surrounding text is to be followed, it shows the plaster cast of Dembowski's left hand, which Beyle-Stendhal kept "on his writing desk, as a memento" (SG 20). Thus, Sebald's grid recalls Dürer's practice of disarticulating the bodies of his models. Unlike Dürer, however, there is no attempt then to reassemble the parts into a coherent, proportionally harmonious whole. Pietragrua's likeness is dissected, as is the hand of Dembowski, only to be left as such. "The language of the Baroque," writes Benjamin, "is constantly convulsed by rebellions among its elements ... broken to pieces so as to acquire, in its fragments, an altered and heightened expressiveness." Thus, concludes Benjamin, "effectively validated with this development is not only the pursuit of pomp but also the dismembering, dissociative principle of allegorical perception."²⁸⁷ All too well documented is Sebald's claim to have followed "the system of bricolage, as conceived by Lévi-Strauss," that "wild form of work, of irrational thought, by which one roots around in randomly accumulated found objects for as long as it takes for them somehow to cohere" (UDE 84).²⁸⁸ This sort of claim as to method warrants circumspection, not least in light of Sebald's stated hostility to systems (however wild they may appear on the surface).²⁸⁹ Long takes a more measured approach than most, noting, for instance, the so-called salvage paradigm's "built-in tendency to bring about the disappearance of the very objects it claims to be salvaging."²⁹⁰ But to describe the objects as simply 'disappearing' is to efface the manipulative and, indeed, disintegrative character of Sebald's method. Better to think of these objects as persisting in an altered, blemished form. Hence, again, the opening passages of *The Rings of Saturn*, where the

²⁸⁷ This applied above all to its nominal subject matter, to the extent that "the Baroque naturalised the capital letter in German orthography"—for common nouns, that is. The gerund followed later. Benjamin, *Origin*, 224-5.

²⁸⁸ Or, as he put it later, yet more benignly: "I just potted away and produced these bits ... I was just setting things down" (Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 152).

²⁸⁹ See his essay on Elias Canetti (BU 93-102).

²⁹⁰ J. J. Long, "In the contact zone: W. G. Sebald and the ethnographic imagination," *Journal of European Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (2011): 417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244111413706>

narrator describes “making a fair copy [ins reine ... schreiben]” of his notes just as his colleagues are dying suddenly around him (RS 12-4 / 5-7, translation modified). He describes the office of Janine Dakyns, in which “there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper.” It was “a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys” (RS 8).²⁹¹ It is here the narrator remarks “that sitting there amidst her papers she resembled the angel in Dürer’s *Melancholia*, steadfast among the instruments of her destruction [der bewegungslos unter der Werkzeugen der Zerstörung verharrenden Engel]” (RS 16-7 / 9). The traces of that destruction are perceptible at the edges of the landscape of notes, the physical manifestation of scholarly activity, which, “like a glacier when it reaches the sea ... had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around the floor” (RS 8). Immediately before being pictured amidst this ever-advancing accumulation and disintegration, the reader is told that she “succumbed to a disease that swiftly consumed her body” (RS 7).²⁹²

The association of artistic creation with self-destruction implied in such a passage—not to mention those on Herbeck discussed above—is also suggested, albeit in very different terms, by the text accompanying Sebald’s Pietragrua composite. Beyle’s wilful loss of innocence in the Milanese brothels is described as an “apprenticeship [Lehre]” thoroughly served, to the

²⁹¹ Although, as Catling hastens to point out, it would be wrong to project such an image back upon the author himself, whose own “office at UEA, and perhaps to an even greater degree his study in The Old Rectory in Poringland, were models of calm and order. Any superfluous paper would be immediately relegated to the waste-paper bin, and indeed even books may sometimes have met with this fate” (Catling, “Sebald’s Library,” 273).

²⁹² Also worth recalling here is “that hospital window” through which the narrator of the same book peers, which, “for some strange reason, was draped with black netting” (RS 4). “In a state of almost total immobility,” he is able to drag himself to the windowsill and, “in the pose of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the glass” (RS 3-5). Like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa looking out on the Charlottenstraße before him, the once familiar prospect strikes him now as “utterly alien,” and so desolate that “I could not believe that anything might still be alive in that maze of buildings down there; rather, it was as if I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble, from which the tenebrous masses of multi-storey carparks rose up like immense boulders” (RS 5). In this regard, it is worth recalling that Benjamin singles out the stone-embell for special consideration in his *Trauerspiel* book. It shares the cold, dry character of the melancholic temper. As an inert mass, it alludes to “the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which involves a mortal sin. The sin is *acedia*, indolence of the heart. The slow planetary orbit of the lustreless Saturn made it possible to establish a relation between this slothful condition and the melancholic” (Benjamin, *Origin*, 160). Indeed, the stone might well have furnished another chapter for the present project, so prevalent and suggestive are they in Sebald’s works.

extent that “before the year was out he was suffering the pains of venereal infection ... although this did not prevent him from working on a passion of a more abstract nature,” namely, Pietragrua, whose portrait appears immediately following these words, which can be thought of as a motto of sorts (SG 16 / 11-2).²⁹³ That is to suggest that the concrete person of Pietragrua is overwhelmed by Beyle’s composite creation, only for Sebald’s narrator to disassemble into fragments what the former had earlier cobbled together, and so to return to these fragments some remnant of that which was material and particular to each.²⁹⁴ Thus are they made emblematic, suspended between the abstract and the concrete. The association of so-called ‘creative’ activity with a wilful destruction is implied in the re-composition of the portrait excised by Sebald, in all likelihood, from a book belonging to the UEA library.²⁹⁵ The superimposed grid is excised from Dürer’s woodcut, which had been subject to an earlier excision and transposition into the pages of Berger’s book. In the process, it is debased by Sebald’s pen, apparently a felt-tip, which cannot but seem crude in comparison to the expertly carved lines of the engraving from which it is taken, an engraving, lest we forget, intended to instruct artists bent upon a precise verisimilitude (or in fact the illusion thereof). The amateurish quality of Sebald’s drawing is most evident in those dots around the picture’s perimeter, which might easily have been cropped out without encroaching upon Pietragrua’s silhouette. The Baroque dramaturge was not, according to Benjamin, “supposed to conceal his combinatory practice, since it was not so much the mere whole as its manifest construction that was the centre of all intended effects. Hence the ostentation of the craftsmanship that ... shows through like the masonry wall on a building whose plaster has begun to crumble.”²⁹⁶ If Sebald’s

²⁹³ The same goes for the equivalent words in the *Manuskripte* piece and German editions of *Schwindel. Gefühle*.

²⁹⁴ Of course, this interplay of the concrete and the abstract in the production of composite persons is typical of Sebald’s work. For just one of the more pointed instances, see Klaus Gasseleder, “Erkundungen zum Prätext der Luisa-Lanzberg-Geschichte aus W. G. Sebalds *Die Ausgewanderten*: Ein Bericht,” in *Sebald. Lektüren.*, ed. by Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Isele, 2005), 157-75.

²⁹⁵ See Litto, *Album Stendhal*, 60.

²⁹⁶ *Origin*, 189-90.

narrative prose is not quite so ostentatious, then it is hardly shy of its seams. Indeed, those dots bear more than a passing resemblance to the marks of a needle at work suturing together parts, which is in keeping with the disarticulation at the heart of Dürer's technique. The subjection of bodies, dead and alive, to acts of dislocation and dissection, and the often spectacular staging of such acts, are subjects for the latter part of this chapter.

ii. Browne's skull

[Joseph Roth] knows that the effort is great, that the handiwork of the writer is none other than that of the swindler, which consists in finding a 'formula' which allows him to endure his own circumstances. The realm of aesthetics, then, is ultimately one revolving around ethical questions. (UH 115)

I would like to keep in mind, for the moment, that sleight of hand by which Sebald makes images appear, no doubt transfigured, as well as his tendency to reveal the means by which he does so. Turning to the opening pages of *Saturn*, recall that the narrator's stay in a Norwich hospital prompts researches into the life and works of Thomas Browne. The narrator relates that Browne:

Died in 1682 on his seventy-seventh birthday and was buried in the parish church of St Peter Mancroft in Norwich. There his mortal remains lay undisturbed until 1840, when the coffin was damaged during preparations for another burial in the chancel, and its contents partially exposed. As a result, Browne's skull and a lock of his hair passed into the possession of one Dr Lubbock, a parish councillor, who in turn left the relics in his will to the hospital museum, where they were put on display amidst various anatomical curiosities until 1921 under a bell jar. It was not until then that St Peter Mancroft's repeated request for the return of Browne's skull was acceded to, and almost a quarter of a millennium after the first burial, a second interment was performed with all due ceremony. Curiously enough, Browne himself, in his famous part-archaeological and part-metaphysical treatise, *Urn Burial*, offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnaw'd [gekratzt] out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But, he adds, who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? (RS 18-9 / 10-11)

At the foot of the above passage appears a photograph of Browne’s skull, again scratched out of the grave, as it were, and propped up on editions of his *Religio Medici* (1643). *The Rings of Saturn*, writes Simon Cooke, “collates marvels [Wunder, that is] in compendious numbers,” and this is only one, though an important one at that.²⁹⁷ Long adds that “Sebald’s narrators and protagonists frequently dwell on the abstruse, the deviant and the monstrous ... in their accounts of zoological and medical collections,” among which he ranks Browne’s miscellanea.²⁹⁸ According to Long, Browne’s researches and writings attest to a nature constituted according to divine Law, marked by a universal resemblance, and legible to those observers willing to practise a “devotional hermeneutics whose analogical method ultimately seeks similitude among diverse singularities that remain irreducibly particular while participating in the oneness of divine creation.” Sebald’s text, on the other hand, consists of a “reconfiguration of Browne’s interest in ‘singular phenomena’ in terms of norm and deviation, thereby turning Browne into an avatar of a distinctly modern epistemology.”²⁹⁹ Of the following passage in *The Rings of Saturn*, which Sebald’s narrator attributes to Browne, Long remarks that it contains within it “a lexicon that post-dates Browne by at least a century and a half (‘abnormality’ is first attested in English in 1854, the German *Abnormität* in 1805 in a psychiatric context and 1822 in a clinical one).”³⁰⁰

We are occupied above all with the abnormalities of creation, be they the deformities produced by sickness or the grotesqueries with which Nature, with an inventiveness scarcely less diseased, fills every vacant space in her atlas. (RS 21)

²⁹⁷ Simon Cooke, *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipaul, Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 143.

²⁹⁸ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 34. Anticipating later concerns, it is worth noting the connection between these displays and the Baroque anatomical theatres, the latter of which only operated as such for a small portion of the year—“the depth of winter,” as Sebald’s text records (RS 12)—on account of the perishability of the corpses. The remainder of the year saw them revert to “devotional and moralising museums.” That is, they were “an important branch of the Kunst- and Wunderkammern of their day” (William S. Heckscher, *Rembrandt’s Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp: An Iconological Study* (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 98).

²⁹⁹ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 34 & 38.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

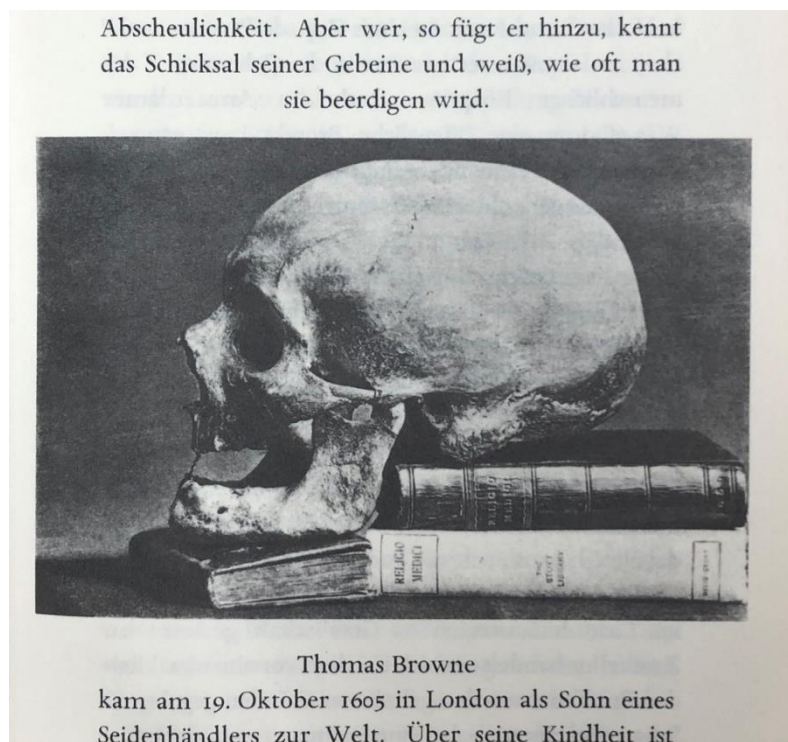
There is no reason to doubt Long's claim that this passage is an invention of Sebald's, rather than a paraphrase of anything from Browne. Less persuasive is the conclusion that therein lies a merely and "distinctly modern epistemology."³⁰¹ No passage of Sebald's, it seems, can escape the bounds of a distinctly high-modern episteme (to use Foucauldian terminology). The notion that influences from beyond this historiographic horizon—at once hazy and unyielding—might coincide with those from within it, even in a subordinate role, is scarcely admitted. By Long's reckoning, the sense that "the thematic recurrence of the deviant, monstrous and deformed goes hand in hand with a degree of textual excess" might prompt the supposition that "Sebald's texts illustrate the persistence into the present of pre-modern forms of organising and representing nature," or even the "eruption of the cabinet of curiosities or the fairground side-show into the bastion of modern scientific education," would be to forget that (per Foucault) "spectacle as well as surveillance is a part of modernity and its disciplinary regimes." It is a disciplinary and delimiting spectacle, by which "attention is managed through the distribution of exhibits, and the removal of the haptic aspects of perception by placing objects under glass domes, as in the case of Thomas Browne's skull."³⁰² There is some truth in this, at least in respect to museums as such, but it tends to overlook certain particulars of the text in question. For instance, there is no such glass case in the picture of Browne's skull reproduced in Sebald's book. It has disappeared, rather in the manner of a magic trick, much as the skull itself has been summoned from the grave, in spite of its most recent, "second internment ... performed with all due ceremony" (RS 11). There is an echo here, however faint, of a Gryphius in the graveyard conjuring up the bones of the dead before petrified eyes (his own and those of his readers).³⁰³

³⁰¹ Ibid, 37-8.

³⁰² Ibid, 38-9.

³⁰³ "Help, God! the coffins burst open! / I see the bodies bestir themselves / The heap of folk, long since turned pale / Begins to rouse its remnant limbs! / Suddenly I am surrounded / By great armies debased by death / What a play! It forces hot tears / Out from these petrified eyes!" (Andreas Gryphius, "Gedancken / Vber den Kirchhoff und Ruhestädte der Verstorbenen," in *Lyrik des Barock II*, ed. Marian Szyrocki (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1971), 24). Sebald doubtless knew these lines, taken as they are from one of the most important entries in this, his well-thumbed volume of baroque poetry.

Sebald's narrator, too, is fond of visiting graveyards, all the better to meditate upon the remains of the dead, though he would never admit to hot tears being forced from his eyes.³⁰⁴ The effect, again, is more pronounced in German editions of *Saturn*, which sees the bones interred (wird beerdigen), only for the image of the skull to appear, succeeded (with a flourish) by its owner's name in subscriptio. Browne is buried, only to be born again. If Browne's skull is not quite seen to speak, like Lohenstein's 'Redender Todtenkopf,' then the long-dead natural historian is given a voice of sorts.³⁰⁵ More than once the narrator prefers "Browne said" or even "says" to verbs suggestive of the written word (RS 28 & 30 / 19 & 21), and all the while Browne's



Buried and re-born (RS 19)

³⁰⁴ To cite just one example in the present text, he visits a graveyard at Ditchingham to muse over the tombstone of Charlotte Ives' son. "What struck me about this tomb were the round holes on the upper edges of the four sides. ... It was possible, I thought to myself, that the bereaved had had these holes bored into the stone in the eventuality that the dear departed in her sepulchre should wish once more to breathe the air" (RS 260). Again the dead are made reanimate.

³⁰⁵ "I am a death's head / a churchyard is my school / The lesson mortality / a coffin the pulpit" (Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, *Lyrica*, ed. Gerhard Spellerberg (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1992), 589).

writing is spun out in that free paraphrase which marks Sebald's short and long prose alike, and which serves to efface any clear distinction between text and speech.

All of this is to say that the manner of display cannot readily be reduced to an archival logic (or interpretation, for that matter). Cooke stresses that Sebald's very "compendiousness ... including the gathering of different text-types and images, also bears a certain similarity to the compilations in which books of wonder have been preserved," to which he might have added the emblem book. He concludes that "Sebald's evocation of pre-modern forms is very much part of his critique of modernity: it resists a tendency towards presentism; and it loops back to recuperate ways of thinking considered discredited by modernity."³⁰⁶ And, indeed, sets those moribund forms and methods to work against those of the present. Taking up a passing remark from Novalis, Benjamin ascribes to allegory the "fragmentary, disordered, and overstuffed character of magicians' dens or alchemists' laboratories, such things as were known precisely to the Baroque."³⁰⁷ There is much of that here, and the manner of the skull's conveyance must be dwelt upon. Freed of the confines of grave and bell jar, it reaches the narrator neither from the hospital's records, nor "the local history section of the main library" (RS 10), those bastions of the archival episteme. Both, it transpires, have been shuttered, one on account of fire, the other, it seems, by more prosaic, though no less consumptive, cuts to public services. Instead, the whereabouts of Browne's skull are relayed to the narrator by a scholar, one Anthony Batty Shaw, whom he met "through Janine," herself belonging to the hereafter at the time of writing, who "sent me an article he had just published" (RS 10). It is rather in the manner of the network of ad hoc, private, epistolary associations which bound together scholars belonging to an earlier episteme, if we are tempted to put it that way.

³⁰⁶ Cooke, *Traveller's Tales*, 144.

³⁰⁷ Benjamin, *Origin*, 201.

As a conjuring trick, Sebald's production of Browne's skull recalls a passage of Benjamin's on the banquets of death—the culmination of the Trauerspiel's preoccupation with the corpse, more of which below—in which he describes an “Italian trick recommended by Harsdörffer and Birken,” scholar-poets of the seventeenth century, such that “through a hole in the top of a table, the cloth of which hung down to the floor, the head of an actor appeared.”³⁰⁸ That this sort of sleight of hand is at work in Sebald seems to have escaped Long, who can only see a “visual mastery” of viewer over object, which then redounds upon the observer “by further workings of power/knowledge that operate through spectacle.”³⁰⁹ This is to ignore the author's *manual* mastery of the object in question, not to mention the caprice by which the *facies hippocratica* of Browne is summoned forth. Of this *handling* the reader is given ample notice, not least in the all too visible wires which stitch the mandible to the remainder of the skull, a boded job of keeping together, only for a moment, that which has been so misused for the sake of amusement and edification. It is a conjuring act with little playful about it—the skull is no mere plaything.³¹⁰ It is a prop of some significance. In its mute eloquence, Browne's death-head evokes the dumb shows of the Trauerspiel, which, according to Schöne, “bear emblematic features above all when they serve not only as substitute for those parts of the action left out of a scene, but also furnish the moral-didactic quintessence of the succeeding events, which, to that end, are illustrated and elaborated by a speaker designated as *Chorus* or *Presenter*.”³¹¹ Sebald's narrator fulfils the latter function, drawing liberally from Browne's cabinets of curiosities, as Cooke notes, and also elaborating something of his peculiar method and grammar. Browne “sought to look upon earthly existence from the things that were closest to

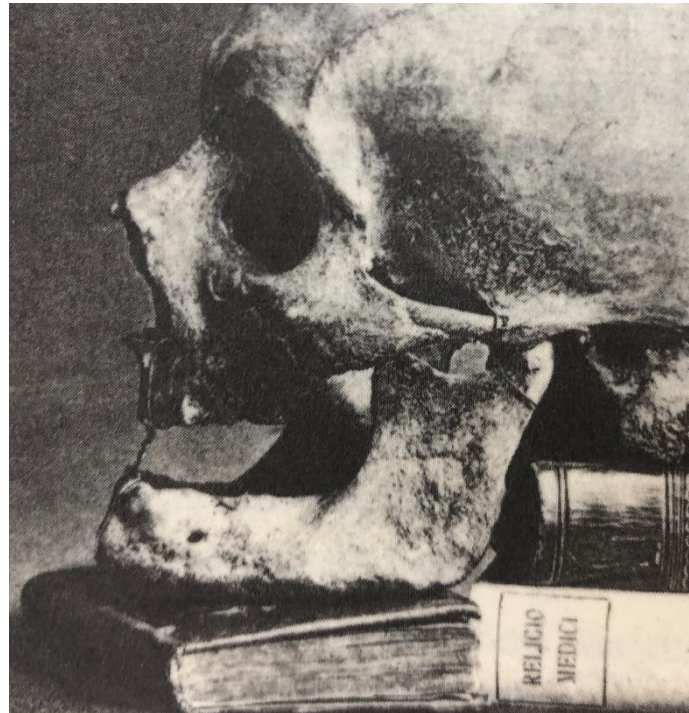
³⁰⁸ Benjamin, *Origin*, 238.

³⁰⁹ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 39.

³¹⁰ Where Sheppard is accommodating of the Schelm, or trickster, in Sebald, the biographer Carole Angier would have preferred had he practised it in a less “ruthless” fashion (Carole Angier, “Sebald's Paradoxes: In Search of an Enigmatic Author,” *Literary Review* 498 (July 2021), 40-1).

³¹¹ *Emblematik und Drama*, 187. “The trauerspiel is thinkable as pantomime,” as Benjamin puts it (*Origin*, 115). Lohenstein's “Todten-Kopf” is again worth citing here, which upbraids his audience (struck dumb, as it were) in the following terms: “You lunatic mortals / come and regard my head! / Your eyes had better become a second pair of ears / So to hear / how I can teach you without speaking” (Lohenstein, *Lyrical*, 590).

him to the spheres of the universe, with the eye of an outsider, one might even say of the creator” (RS 18-9). He “wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors, analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over two pages,



Stitched back together (RS 19)

sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness” (RS 19). In such a manner, the “moral-didactic quintessence” unfolds by degrees over the pages following the appearance of the skull-emblem, and not least upon mention of René Descartes, who “teaches that one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded” (RS 13). Sebald anticipates the above precis of this new mode of thought—with its utilitarianism given firm accent—by the introduction of a disembodied head. A head, what’s more, voided of its brain, a rather blunt rebuke to Descartes and his investigations, which, we are told, “form one of the principal

chapters of the history of subjection” (RS 13).³¹² By Sebald’s reckoning, to repeat, Browne was someone who pursued a “very, very curious mixture of scientific enquiry carried out by someone still half held by medieval magic.”³¹³ The elective affinity was borne of the latter quality, no doubt, which helps to explain that ceremonial air belonging to this passage. This extends not only to Sebald’s syntax—itsself prone to lavish excurses occupying several pages—but to the treatment of Browne’s skull, which is laboured over and brandished in a manner belonging as much to ritual as to the stage. Form and expression are determined to flout the “Cartesian rigidity” of the new philosophy—its aesthetic of “much-admired verisimilitude,” its epistemology, and the ethics implied by both (RS 16). This is not to say that verisimilitude is given up entirely.³¹⁴ Nor is there an altogether convincing rebuttal of the Cartesian injunction to mechanistic productivity. Traces of both remain to animate the text with an abiding tension. Browne’s skull is put to use, though it is a narrowly defined utility, a signifying one. In a well-known passage of his Trauerspiel book opposing symbol and allegory, Benjamin describes the appearance of history in the latter in the following terms: “Everything untimely, sorrowful, and miscarried that belongs to it from the beginning, is inscribed in a face—no, in a death’s head ... in this figure, the most fallen in nature, is expressed meaningfully as enigma not only the

³¹² Fuchs goes further, not without credence, connecting the passage on Rembrandt and Descartes (and therefore Browne, too) with that juxtaposition of North Sea herring fishing and Buchenwald which occurs in the book’s third part (Fuchs, “Sebald’s Painters,” 173). In his essay on Gerhard Roth, Sebald wrote of his belief that the structuralism of, above all, Lévi-Strauss allowed “for an abstraction from the notorious philosophical subject, [which] leads to different and deeper insights” (Sebald, “Unknown Region,” 39 n.1).

³¹³ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 159.

³¹⁴ For was it not Sebald himself who quite vociferously extolled the virtues of the documentary report, that is to say, an aesthetic which denies it is any such thing? “The ideal of truth inherent in its entirely unpretentious objectivity,” he said of Hans Erich Nossack’s *Der Untergang* (1948) in the course of his air-war lectures, “proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist” (NHD 53). Of course, as others have pointed out, Sebald contradicted assertions of this sort at least as often as he made them. In an essay on Peter Weiss first published in 1986, which has standing in the present context, he described one of Weiss’s anatomical pictures as imagining a procedure “performed not in the service of vengeful jurisdiction but of some other idea, *some neutral principle of knowledge*, and [which] is justified by the purpose or value extrapolated, by a new professional attitude, from the suffering of a created being” (NHD 177-8, emphasis mine). Sebald’s assessment of “the famous picture by Rembrandt van Rijn early in the bourgeois era,” namely, his *Anatomy*, largely accords with that found in *Saturn*. “Rembrandt’s picture of the dissection of a hanged body in the interests of higher ideals is an unsettling comment on the particular kind of knowledge to which we owe progress” (NHD 178).

nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual. This is the core of the Baroque profane exposition of history as the Passion of the world—meaningful only in the stations of its decline. So much meaning, so much forfeiture to death, for at the deepest level death incises the jagged line of demarcation between physis and meaning.”³¹⁵ As a mute emblematic device presented at the opening of the narrator’s research excursus into Browne’s life and works, the skull well expresses the quintessence of this view of history. It anticipates, too, the epigrammatic remarks towards the section’s end, which encompass Browne’s “notion that the endless mutations of Nature, which overleap every rational limit” represent a “continuous process of consuming and being consumed” in which “nothing endures,” to the extent that “upon every new form there lies already the shadow of destruction” (RS 22-4, translation modified).³¹⁶

³¹⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, 174.

³¹⁶ Where the English text has it that those mutations “go far beyond any rational limit,” the German describes the same in the following terms: “der unendliche, über jede Vernunftgrenze *sich hinwegsetzenden* Mutationen der Natur” (RS 32, emphasis mine). The mutations, that is, are hurdling, overleaping, flouting all of reason’s bounds, much in the manner of a horse running amuck.

iii. Kindt's corpse and the staging of a dissection

The dramatic action insists not only on the process of execution, martyrdom, suicide, or tyrannicide, but also on their eye-catching products: blood-filled glasses, heads of the decapitated, flayed limbs, corpses of the martyred and murdered. In ceremonial trains they are carried onto the stage. Full of pomp they are borne away.³¹⁷

As noted above, though conceived as an essentially private and static form bound to the page, the emblem soon betrayed a will to be set in motion and to escape that nascent private sphere which was its midwife. Processional pageantry has been described as the “quintessence of emblematic art,” and many of its devices were carried over onto the Baroque stage, as was something of its essential transitiveness.³¹⁸ Schöne describes how emblematic images and figures populated early modern processions, accompanied by expository text written on the figures themselves or on boards. “And so, if the relation to the *pictura* and *scriptura* of the emblem books is obvious, this also hints at the affinity of the allegorical-emblematic procession to the stage play.”³¹⁹ As well as that interplay of image and text, both were possessed of the emblematic dialectic of representation and exposition, which the theatre gave new, spectacular impetus. “When images were shown on the stage explained by banners in the hands of painted figures, or were expounded in epigraphs and multiple lines of text appearing on boards beneath the images, then the proximity to the *pictura*, *inscriptio* and *subscriptio* of the emblematisers is quite striking.”³²⁰ Or as Benjamin puts it, a little more enigmatically, it should be said, “the deep gaze of allegory at one stroke transforms works and things into moving script,” which then “presses towards complexes, towards hieroglyphics.”³²¹

³¹⁷ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 218.

³¹⁸ Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.1:209. Benjamin goes further, describing the stage set as “not a strictly fixable, authentic location, but ... dialectically sundered. Tied to the royal court, it nonetheless remains an itinerant stage, its boards inauthentically represent the earth as the created scene of history” (Benjamin, *Origin*, 116).

³¹⁹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 209.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, 211-2.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 185-6.

To this it is necessary to add a few words regarding the impetus which the anatomical theatre lent the properly dramatic theatre of the Baroque.³²² It was primarily economic. As Heckscher writes:

It appears quite likely that the sale of tickets to those wishing to attend public anatomies preceded the sale of ordinary theatre tickets by several years and may even have encouraged theatrical confraternities to follow suit ... The tradition of entrance ticket sales can be traced back as far as 1497, when we first hear of tickets being sold for an anatomy at Padua ... In Edinburgh we hear of it as late as 1829, when, to the chagrin of the medical students who had to be excluded, a large audience of ticket holders attended the public and punitive dissection of William Burke, among them Sir Walter Scott.³²³

Gryphius was a regular and eager spectator at the Leiden anatomical theatre when he studied law in that city, so eager, in fact that he would take ‘Sectiones’ (i.e., ‘cuttings’) away with him.³²⁴ The dismembering practised by Sebald at the outset of *Saturn* is of a less literal sort, but remains in keeping with these confluent performative traditions. Hence, his somewhat lavish description of the “spectacle ... of dismembering a corpse [Zergliederung eines Menschen], of harrowing the flesh [Peinigung des Fleisches] of the delinquent even beyond death,” of “the greenish prone body of Aris Kindt, his neck broken and his chest risen terribly in rigor mortis [Todesstarre],” and of how, “contrary to normal practice, the anatomist shown here has not begun his dissection by opening the abdomen and removing the intestines, which are most prone to putrefaction, but has started ... by dissecting the offending hand” (RS 21 / 16). The aesthetic-material focal point here is a static one, Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*

³²² That impetus was felt on both secular and Christian stages. In regards to the latter, Heckscher describes the Northern European practice of staging anatomies in Protestant churches as follows: “In one or two instances it is even possible to demonstrate that the anatomical table took the place of the altar” (Heckscher, *Rembrandt’s Anatomy*, 29). Only later, presumably when sufficient capital was accumulated, were permanent lodgings found (or, indeed, built).

³²³ *Ibid.*, *Rembrandt’s Anatomy*, 32. There is a book to be written about the anatomies’ influence on the literature of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. Both Herder and Goethe attended. In 1832, the year of his death, the latter wrote in favour of the preservation of corpses by plastination. Judicial reforms across Europe had undermined the executioners’ trade, which was the chief provider of the anatomists’ primary raw material. Rousseau, for his part, was an unreserved opponent of the practice (Alexander Košenina, “Anatomie, Vivisektion und Plastination in Gedichten der Frühen Neuzeit: Gryphius, Wiedemann, Brockes,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 19, no. 1 (2009): 64 & 71).

³²⁴ Košenina, “Anatomie, Vivisektion,” 66.

(1632), a reproduction of which takes up fully two pages of the text. The surrounding writing is to a large degree informed by passages of Francis Barker's *The Tremulous Private Body* (1984),³²⁵ in which, notwithstanding the vital status of his 'patient,' the protagonist-surgeon Tulp is described as an "agent of pain," whose dissection of the executed Aris Kindt before a paying public "extracts a recompense of surgical information."³²⁶ Of Rembrandt's image, he describes:

An aesthetic which is rationalistic, classical, realistic, but one to which the iconography of a previous mode of representation that symbolised more than it depicted is not completely alien; medical but still inextricably connected with the earlier pageant of sacramental violence. If it continues to evoke the signs of a punitive corporeality no longer quite appropriate to the republic of property it was made to epitomise, it contains still a—newly barbaric—reference to defeated transgression and to penal revenge exercised on the body of the transgressor.³²⁷

Much of this is recounted by Sebald in a brisk synopsis, itself tending towards the polemical,³²⁸ employing that familiar citational sleight of hand by which the original text is taken up and its origins effaced:

The anatomy lessons given every year in the depth of winter by Dr Nicolaas Tulp were not only of the greatest interest to a student of medicine but constituted in addition a significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself as emerging from the darkness into the light. The spectacle, presented before a paying public drawn from the upper classes, was no doubt a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences; but it also represented (though this surely would have been refuted) the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment. That the anatomy lesson in Amsterdam was about more than a thorough knowledge of the inner organs of the human body is suggested by Rembrandt's representation of the ceremonial nature of the dissection – the surgeons are in their finest attire, and Dr Tulp is wearing a hat on his head – as well as the fact

³²⁵ I owe this observation to Catling ("Sebald's Library," 286).

³²⁶ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), 19. There is a striking anticipation of these notions in an essay of Sebald's which predates Barker's book by more than a decade, and in which he describes a doctor in Kafka's *The Castle* as "a secularised messiah who expels sickness from the suffering body, but ... also the accomplice of death" ("The Undiscover'd Country," 30).

³²⁷ Barker, *Private Body*, 75-6.

³²⁸ Fuchs, "Sebald's Painters," 173.

that afterwards there was a formal, and in a sense symbolic, banquet. (RS 12-3)

Noteworthy is the question of time in regards to the painting and its treatment. The narrator here does not conduct a simple act of ekphrasis, recounting that most significant, fruitful moment arrested and given continuance in the painting, to paraphrase Lessing's well-known treatise on the qualities belonging to painting and poetry.³²⁹ Karine Winkelvoss has identified Sebald's fondness for subverting Lessing's formula, such that poetry is made the preserve of space and painting the preserve of time.³³⁰ As I have suggested more than once already, the former is a tendency shared with Baroque allegory, which arrests historical occurrence and arranges it upon a spatial plane. Now, in regarding the Rembrandt passage, we begin to see the inverse tendency, by which static images are made to move, are subject to temporal flux. So, Sebald begins with a narrative account of the procedure of the dissection, rather than Rembrandt's depiction thereof. Not only the dissection, in fact, but also the greater sequence in which it served as climax, as "crisis."³³¹ Here is the preceding act: "a petty thief ... hanged for his misdemeanours an hour or so earlier" (RS 12). There the succeeding act: "afterwards there was a formal, and in a sense symbolic, banquet" (RS 13). That is, a performance is set in motion before the appearance of the image, only for the image to be caught up in the performance as just one part of the stage requisite, though no doubt a central one.

The elaboration of such a complex, even confused scheme, in which images ape the living figures in being set in motion, while around both snatches of text are brandished, requires the involvement of a demonstrator, a *Darsteller*, to use Schöne's term, who might stand upon a

³²⁹ "If the artist can never, in presence of ever-changing Nature, choose and use more than one single moment, and the painter in particular can use this single moment only from one point of vision; if, again, their works are made not merely to be seen, but to be considered, to be long and repeatedly contemplated, then it is certain that that single moment, and the single viewpoint of that moment, can never be chosen too significantly. ... As this single moment receives from Art an unchangeable continuance, it must not express anything which thought is obliged to consider transitory" (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön* (London: Dent, 1970), 14-5).

³³⁰ Karine Winkelvoss, "Bild-Text," in *W. G. Sebald-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Claudia Öhlschläger and Michael Niehaus (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 116-7.

³³¹ Cf. Heckscher, *Rembrandt's Anatomy*, 8.

designated spot to give meaning to the proceedings.³³² As one preeminent Baroque poet put it: “If a speech cannot picture / then a picture cannot speak / but both can be resolved by the living persons on the stage.”³³³ Hence the following passage in *Saturn*, which immediately precedes the two-page reproduction of Rembrandt’s picture:

If we stand today before the large canvas of Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* in the Mauritshuis we are standing precisely where those who were present at the dissection in the Waagebouw stood, and we believe that we see what they saw then: in the foreground, the greenish, prone body of Aris Kindt, his neck broken and his chest risen terribly in rigor mortis. (RS 13)

The narrator invites us to envisage the scene, guiding the eye to that which is significant. “He narrates at the edge of the stage ... and watches that which is performed,” as Sebald put it in a 1997 interview.³³⁴ As it is rendered in the English translation, the scene is static twice over. We stand, as the Amsterdam public did before us, fixed to a spot, and “we believe see what they saw then,” namely an amalgam of discrete objects or images frozen in time. The German text, to the contrary, runs as follows:

Stehen wir heute im Mauritshuis vor dem gut zwei mal eineinhalb Meter messenden Anatomiegemälde Rembrandts, so stehen wir an der Stelle derer, die im Waagebouw seinerzeit *dem Vorgang der Sezierung gefolgt sind*, und meinen zu sehen, was diese gesehen haben: den grünlichen, im Vordergrund daliegenden Leib Aris Kindts mit dem gebrochenen Nacken und der in der Todesstarre furchtbar hervorgewölbten Brust. (RS 11, emphasis mine)

That is, we stand on the spot from which those present at the Waagebouw followed the proceedings. In both iterations there is an elision of two viewpoints; standing before the picture in the Mauritshuis, we stand also at the crucial spot in the Waagebouw. In the German text, the passage from one to another is more disjointed. First, the reader-spectator is affixed to the position before the picture, only to be jolted into a narrative account of those proceedings, into,

³³² Cf. Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 211-2.

³³³ Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, qtd. in Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 207.

³³⁴ W. G. Sebald, “Katastrophe mit Zuschauer: Ein Gespräch mit dem Schriftsteller W. G. Sebald,” interview by Andrea Köhler, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22/23 November, 1997, 52.

as Sebald put it in his essay on Tripp, “die Zeit der Kultur” (LOG 185). Here the arrested, fruitful moment which is the subject of Rembrandt’s painting—whose fixity is suggested above all by Kindt’s corpse, described as lying in a state of “Todesstarre” or “rigor mortis” (RS 21 / 13)—confronts the processional time of Kindt’s execution, dissection, and the feast and parade which followed. Both are transfigured. As Schöne remarks:

The bloody and sombre ceremony of death-banquet, execution scene, and mourning procession celebrate on a public stage the shattering of those barriers which guard the dramatic figures as private individuals, at the same time as petrifying them in an illustrative figure [Schaubild]. Both establish the corpse’s emblematic status, elevating it into something lasting, valid, and significant. But this overcoming of subjective limits and that pictorial petrification apply not only to silent or mute persons, such as those corpses entered into a ledger, but also to those speaking and playing persons, too.³³⁵

Fuchs writes of how “for Sebald the recuperation of historical suffering in the individual’s life must be the purpose of all true art. He therefore proposes an aesthetic of remembering which embraces the principle of partisanship for the victims of history’s accumulating catastrophes. His works attempt to voice the experience of history as a violation by tracing not only what happened, the *res gestae* of history, but also the painful memory work that underpins the reconstruction of the past in the *historia rerum gestarum*.”³³⁶ To this I would add that the individual’s suffering is given significance only by means of a transgression of those barriers described by Schöne, an effort which entails speculation in a quite deliberate sense. If, following Fuchs again, this recuperative work “necessitates the scrupulous indexing of the chain of circumstances that leads to the recovery of an individual’s life story,” then there is also something audacious about the manner in which those same circumstances, having been indexed, are then re-staged.³³⁷ Certain of those *res gestae* are paraded before the reader,

³³⁵ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 219.

³³⁶ Fuchs, “Sebald’s Painters,” 169.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, 169.

petrified and elevated all at once. As a speaking and playing person, as demonstrator, Sebald's narrator is himself not immune to these consequences.

“The dramatist,” writes Peter Daly, “employs many devices to underscore the emblematic and generalising function of a character in a particular situation. He can allow one character to point an interpretive figure,” or “he can also have the emblematic figure point to himself.”³³⁸ Sebald's narrator points to the corpse, as does the anatomist, but the corpse is made to point to



The offending hands (RS 24)

itself, too. The detail—an excision, if you will—from Rembrandt's painting which is produced after the complete reproduction serves to foreground both dissecting and dissected hands. In this connection, Schöne's remarks on the interplay of stage property and actor are telling:

Like the stage property, so too is the dramatic figure a key part of the display. Not only in the sense that an actor on the stage can be seen. Rather, said actors would make the stage into a figure of display to be paraded before the spectator. Thus, as demonstrators [Darsteller], they come to the stage

³³⁸ Daly, *Light of the Emblem*, 166.

property's aid with deictic formulas: *Here is the arrow / here the candle*. In fact these emblematic figures say of themselves: *Look at us!* Thus they raise themselves above personal diffidence, grasping their significance and speaking it aloud. They present themselves as *pictura*, at the same time as announcing their own *subscriptio*.³³⁹

I would venture to suggest that one of the Sebaldian narrator's chief functions is providing the means by which figures, animate and inanimate, overcome their personal diffidence, grasp their significance, and give expression to it. As for the dead, if they cannot properly be said to speak their significance aloud, they are certainly prompted to demonstrate it by means of gesture. Thus, in the detail noted and reproduced above, the emblematic figures say of themselves, *Look at us!* The torso of Kindt glances starkly from the page, more white than greenish, that chest beset with rigor mortis now unmistakable. The hands of Tulp and Kindt command attention on the picture's right side. Heckscher remarks that "the anatomical detail has here for the first time in an anatomical painting ceased to serve as mere staffage or professional attribute, as we see in the significant role that Rembrandt has assigned to the human hand, dissecting and dissected. This emphasis undoubtedly was meant as a pun, leading from the 'hand' to 'him that works manually' and from there to the Greek word *cheirourgos* (surgeon), which means just this."³⁴⁰ The effect is redoubled with the appearance of Sebald's subscript, which again cites Barker liberally:

Now, this hand is most peculiar. It is not only grotesquely out of proportion compared with the hand closer to us, but it is also anatomically the wrong way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand. In other words, what we are faced with is a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas [which can be seen at the bottom right-hand corner of the picture], evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true-to-life painting [nach dem Leben gemalt] (if one may so express it) into a crass

³³⁹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 219.

³⁴⁰ Heckscher, *Rembrandt's Anatomy*, 8.

misrepresentation [Fehlkonstruktion] at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made. (RS 25 / 16-17)³⁴¹

It is the narrator's belief "that there was deliberate intent behind this flaw in the composition. That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt" (RS 17). In that sense, this is yet another instance of Sebald's "principle of partisanship for the victims of history's accumulating catastrophes," as Fuchs has it, by means of what Long calls a "stress on the suffering of the individual victim [that] reinscribes embodiment at the very moment of its disappearance into the body."³⁴² The detail interpolated in the text no doubt contributes to this sense. The reader is confronted with Kindt's torso and upper legs, which occupy something like a quarter of the detail excised by Sebald, a consequence of the peculiar angle of the cadaver relative to the picture pane, "a motif, after all, which, ever since artists used perspective and spatial illusion, had served to indicate 'passivity,' 'defenselessness,' 'suffering,' 'death.'"³⁴³

Long adds that "the embodied practice of the narrator" is counterposed to "the disciplined body as defined by cartographic discourse," though he is less than exact in determining the whereabouts of that embodied practice.³⁴⁴ For it is not the narrator who stands before the painting, or at least not in so far as we can see him doing so. In his place, there is a reconstituted, though indefinite, mass spectatorship—"stehen wir heute" (RS 11)—into which the narrator merges. We see the spectators Descartes and Browne; indeed, the latter is rather foisted into the scene, a speculative interpolation. We might also imagine the contemporary throngs at the Mauritshuis. Sebald's narrator, on the other hand, is more difficult to pin down, a fact further betrayed by the grammatical form of his conclusions: "*Es handelt sich* also um eine rein

³⁴¹ Writes Baker: "Not only is the left arm of the corpse grossly over-large ... but in addition it is anatomically inaccurate. The tendons revealed belong not to the palm of the left hand – the position of [the] thumb indicates that the hand is palm upwards – but to the back of the right. If the dominant discourse of the picture gives us the real as we have been taught to perceive it ... the diagram of the hand which has been superimposed by Rembrandt on a body evidently drawn ... 'from life,' while seeking that apparency in its highest, most 'scientific' form, veers away into what is by its own terms of reference a crass error" (Barker, *Private Body*, 79).

³⁴² Fuchs, "Sebald's Painters," 169; Long, *W.G. Sebald*, 135.

³⁴³ Heckscher, *Rembrandt's Anatomy*, 17.

³⁴⁴ Long, *W.G. Sebald*, 135.

schulmäßige, offenbar ohne weiteres dem anatomischen Atlas entnommene Aufsetzung ... *Daß Rembrandt sich hier irgendwie vertan hat*, ist wohl kaum möglich. ... Mit ihm, dem Opfer, und nicht mit der Gilde, die ihm den Auftrag gab, *setzt der Maler sich gleich*” (RS 25, emphasis mine). This series of reflexive formulations means that we see the practice of Rembrandt, and of course the subjects of that practice, whereas the narrator recedes from view, the better to interpret the scene. In this respect, rather ironically, he follows Tulp’s “proud personal motto, one that the emblem books prescribe for teachers and magistrates: *CONSUMOR ALIIS INSERVIENDO*—‘I consume myself by serving others.’”³⁴⁵ He does not quite escape the taint of association with Tulp and his colleagues, “who are not looking at Kindt’s body,” and whose “gaze is directed just past it to focus on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being” (RS 13). Perhaps that explains why, in his efforts to salvage Kindt’s body from under the gaze and the tools of the surgeons, efforts intended to remove it from the regime of use value, the narrator is possessed of a notable alacrity. He practically seizes upon Kindt’s hand, that it might resume significance, might fully occupy its position as “Bedeutungszentrum,” as a centre of meaning (RS 25). Tracing the passage from earlier painted scenes of Christian suffering to later ones of dissections, Heckscher remarks that “all that had to be provided to turn a martyrdom into an anatomy was a change in the emotional climate.”³⁴⁶ Sebald’s narrator appears bent on recuperating that earlier emotional climate, in which the agonised victims might at least be allowed to express some meaning, might be accorded a status beyond that of raw material (belonging either to the anatomist or his portraitist).

³⁴⁵ Heckscher, *Rembrandt’s Anatomy*, 120. The motto was, of course, expressed emblematically, in the image of a candle, “which by giving light to others, consumes itself. Appropriately enough, Dr Tulp had himself represented in 1634 pointing to a candle half consumed by its flame, with the motto carved on a stone parapet (itself reminiscent of Roman tomb memorials as they are found in the North) underneath a human skull. The magic of what we may call the emblem of Dr Tulp is by no means diminished when we call to mind that he accepted this portrait in lieu of a doctor’s fee for having treated the artist’s sick child” (Ibid, 120).

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 88.

Schütte observes that, from his Sternheim study of 1966 onwards, Sebald insisted on a foundational connection between ethics and aesthetics, and in so doing took up “a rigid stance, deciding between oppositions like right and wrong, victim and perpetrator, lies and truth, in order to derive aesthetic value judgements.”³⁴⁷ This is no doubt the case, but it does not preclude the taking up of intermediate—or, indeed, indeterminate—positions between these dialectical poles. Such is the case in the Rembrandt passage, inter alia. The narrator drifts in and out of view, descending from the gallery to bear down upon the corpse itself, seizing the anatomical material for his own exegetical ends. So alacritous is he, in fact, that he falls foul of a patent misinterpretation, for the exposed tendons of Kindt’s left hand are in fact rendered accurately, “after life,” as it were.³⁴⁸ Moments later, the narrator himself is prone under the surgeon’s knife, and, as if to confirm the ambiguity of his position, moral, ethical and aesthetic, he reveals himself to be an avowed beneficiary of that “newly barbaric” regime of “hygienic science,” to use Barker’s words.³⁴⁹ “Under the wonderful influence of the painkillers coursing through me, I felt, in my iron-framed bed, like a balloonist floating weightless amidst the mountainous clouds towering on every side” (RS 17).

If we take the strictly Foucauldian line of Barker, such that the anatomies of Tulp and his contemporaries were at once “medical but still inextricably connected with the earlier pageant of sacramental violence,” or, in Sebald’s terms, “demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences” as well as “archaic ritual” (RS 12), and in the main there is little

³⁴⁷ Schütte, “Ein anderes Bild,” 10.

³⁴⁸ I do not claim to be the first to debunk the narrator’s revelation (which, again, was taken from Barker). In an essay whose bombast is worthy of its subject, Adrian Nathan West describes it as sheer “nonsense ... uncritically accepted and reiterated, thus providing a flimsy basis for exegetical models that extend not only to the interpretation of the *Rings of Saturn* but also [Sebald’s] works in general.” Not content to leave it at that, he considers this as one bid among many intent on “accumulating symbolic capital in the Anglophone literary marketplace”—for Sebald and, by extension, his beholden critics (Adrian Nathan West, “Nostalgia for Probité in the Era of the Selfie: W. G. Sebald’s American Imitators,” in *Über W.G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 294).

³⁴⁹ Barker, *Private Body*, 76.

reason not to, then it follows that Kindt and his contemporaries were martyrs of sorts.³⁵⁰ Hence Barker's claim that "the power of Tulp's world is not that of the old kingdom, but nor has it quite erased the traces of that older sovereignty."³⁵¹ The reciprocity between the stages of the anatomy and the Trauerspiel also serves to affirm the fact, for martyrdom was a constitutive force in Baroque dramaturgy, prompting Benjamin to recognise, with characteristic sweep, "in all the definitions of drama to be found in the handbooks a description, basically, of the martyr drama."³⁵² This was especially the case in the Herod plays common at that time, for "tyrant and martyr in the Baroque age are the two Janus-faces of the crowned head."³⁵³ Something of this intimacy, as terrible as it is peculiar, is suggested by Sebald's handling of Rembrandt's picture, and in particular that detail reproduced above. Over the hands of both Kindt and Tulp appear the ambivalent words, "mit der Sezierung der straffälligen Hand" (RS 24). The genitive formulation leaves open the question of whose hand bears the guilt, that of the dissector, the dissected, or, indeed, that of the image's explicator, for "Sezierung" might as well mean the work of analysis as that of anatomy. This tendency to traverse the extremities of victim and perpetrator, of tyrant and martyr, is common to Sebald's narrative works and animates their most impressive passages. It is given perhaps its keenest expression in Sebald's last completed narrative work, *Austerlitz*, as the following pages will seek to demonstrate.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 76. The punishment was no mere retribution, but one with the community's self-interest in mind. "Public anatomies were magic precautions taken in order to protect society against the criminal's power to do evil, which the execution alone had by no means managed to annihilate" (Heckscher, *Rembrandt's Anatomy*, 105).

³⁵¹ Barker, *Private Body*, 75-6.

³⁵² Benjamin, *Origin*, 57-8.

³⁵³ Ibid, 54.

iv. A Tourist's Passion

No road that can be travelled by logic leads us to death, but perhaps the thought is permissible that through pain a path of feeling and premonition can be paved to it for us. In the end, we would be faced with the equation: Body = Pain = Death, and in our case this could be reduced to the hypothesis that torture, through which we are turned into body by the other, blots out the contradiction of death and allows us to experience it personally.³⁵⁴

“Whoever visits Belgium as a tourist,” wrote Jean Améry in an essay first published in 1966, “may perhaps chance upon Fort Breendonk, which lies halfway between Brussels and Antwerp.”³⁵⁵ In 1967 the narrator of *Austerlitz* makes just such a visit, though, it should be said, he visits Belgium not as a mere tourist, but “partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me” (A 1). Neither is his digression from Antwerp to Breendonk on Améry’s recommendation, for he read the latter’s account “only a few years later” (A 33).³⁵⁶ Instead, his visit is occasioned by Austerlitz’s mention of the fortress during a disquisition on the history of European fortifications, a passage which is often recalled by critics for the culminating remark that “outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (A 23-4). The initial prospect of the fortress and its environs as described by the narrator

³⁵⁴ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 33-4.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵⁶ Sebald described his own visits to Breendonk in the following terms: “For my last book, *Austerlitz*, I went to one of those forts that the Belgians built before the First World War. It is outside Antwerp and in the 1940s it was a sort of reception camp where members of the Belgian resistance were tortured. I visited this place for the first time, quite inadvertently, in the 1960s and then I went back to it about two summers ago” (Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 146). On another occasion he described the experience in the following terms: “I suppose if there is such a thing as a revelation, if there can be a moment in a text which is surrounded by something like *claritas*, *veritas*, and the other facets that qualify epiphanies, then it can be achieved only by actually going to certain places, by looking, by expending great amounts of time in actually exposing oneself to places that no one else goes to. These can be backyards in cities, they can be places like that fortress of Breendonk in *Austerlitz*. I had read about Breendonk before, in connection with Jean Améry. But the difference is staggering, you know—whether you’ve just read about it or whether you actually go and spend several days in and around there to see what these things are actually like” (“Invisible Subject,” 85-6). Sheppard suggests that Sebald probably got to know Améry’s work in the autumn of 1985, i.e., some seven years after the latter’s suicide (Sheppard, “A Chronology,” 632).

shares certain tropes common to Sebald's landscape scenes: a vast yet circumscribed area, of ten hectares "surrounded by an embankment, a barbed-wire fence and wide moat," a massive, imposing sky, of "large cumulous clouds ... piling up on the south-west horizon," objects on the ground arranged after "a precise geometrical ground-plan," but which nevertheless defy the narrator's efforts to apprehend them, regardless of viewpoint, appearing instead as something "hunched and misshapen" (A 25). He surmises: "The longer I looked at it, [and] the more often it forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes"—again the eyes are drawn to the earth—"the less comprehensible it seemed to become" (A 26).³⁵⁷

Marianne Hirsch has demonstrated, quite persuasively, I think, the affiliative nature of the narrator's relationship with Austerlitz as the latter pieces together his account of his escape from Prague, and, in particular, his mother's falling victim to the Nazi camp and ghetto system—"l'Univers Concentrationnaire," as Améry puts it.³⁵⁸ In respect to the Améry passage, the relations between perpetrator, victim, and the narrator are more difficult to establish. To begin with, the narrator affiliates himself with Breendonk's SS guards. Though he struggles to imagine how the prisoners bore the camp labour and the blows of their overseers, looking into the "so-called mess ... with its scrubbed tables and benches, its bulging stove and the various adages neatly painted on its wall in Gothic lettering," he has no such difficulties imagining "the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home. After all, I had lived among them until my twentieth year" (A 29). The German text is all the more affirmative: "unter ihnen *hatte ich ja gelebt* bis in mein zwanzigstes Jahr" (A 38, emphasis mine). Later in the text, when at last the torture is addressed, he notes that the "third-degree interrogations [sogenannte verschärfte Verhöre]" were taking

³⁵⁷ More on heavens and horizons in chapter V.v below.

³⁵⁸ Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 120; Améry, *Mind's Limits*, 21. The phrase is taken from David Rousset's book of the same name.

place at Breendonk “around the time I was born” (A 41-2 / 33). In the interim, however, he attempts to shift his affiliation to Améry, which is made easier by the latter’s occasional efforts of displacement. For instance, he begins with a description of Breendonk as it appears to a mere visitor, rather than an internee. Indeed, the opening sentence, quoted above, is written in the language of a newspaper travel section, addressing a would-be tourist and inviting them to visit a museum.³⁵⁹ Améry continues as follows:

One steps through the main gate and soon finds oneself in a room that in those days was mysteriously called the “business room” [Geschäftszimmer]. A picture of Heinrich Himmler on the wall, a swastika flag spread as a cloth over a long table, a few bare chairs. The business room. Everyone went ahead with his business, and theirs was murder. Then the damp, cellarlike corridor, dimly lit by the same thin and reddish glowing bulbs as the ones that used to hang there. Prison cells, sealed by inch-thick wooden doors. Again and again one must pass through heavy barred gates before one finally stands in a windowless vault in which various iron implements lie about.³⁶⁰

Similarly, Sebald’s narrator alternately refers to the experience of an indefinite visitor and his own recollections of having visited the fortress:

My memory [*die Erinnerung*] of the fourteen stations which the visitor to Breendonk passes between the entrance and the exit has clouded over the course of time, or perhaps I could say that it was clouding over even on the day when I was in the fort, whether because I did not really want to see what it had to show or because all the outlines seemed to merge in a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs, and cut off from the light of nature. ... At the time, anyway, in that silent noonday hour in the early summer of 1967 which I spent inside the fort of Breendonk, encountering no other visitors, I hardly dared to go on to the point where, at the end of a second long tunnel, a corridor not much more than the height of a man, and (as I think I remember) somewhat sloping, leads down to one of the casemates. (A 29-32 / 38-40, emphasis mine)

³⁵⁹ We might here refer to an early text from amongst Sebald’s own works. at the outset of an article written for the travel section of *Die Zeit* in 1974, he used the same mode of address: “Wer die graue Nordsee überquert hat ...” (W. G. Sebald, “Die hölzernen Engel,” in SM, 319). Sebald visited Breendonk precisely because it struck him as less commodified than the more infamous sites of persecution and murder. Breendonk, he said, “is as close as I dare to go because most of these places, whether you talk of Belsen or Auschwitz, are tourist places” (*Christopher Bigsby*, 146).

³⁶⁰ *Mind’s Limits*, 22; Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (München: dtv, 1970), 33.

The absence of other visitors is somewhat typical of Sebald's stage management of scenes. As Alan Bennett put it, with a degree of overstatement: "The fact is, in Sebald nobody is ever about."³⁶¹ All the better for the narrator to take up an ambivalent position and to remain suspended there without interruption. Here, at the bottom of the slope, the competition between affiliations, with perpetrator and victim, is at its most acute. The curious indeterminacy of that position is at its starkest when he regards the erstwhile site of torture. As Uwe Schütte writes, "it isn't only bodily bounds which are crossed. Likewise, temporal and spatial bounds dissolve in the torture pit of Breendonk," such that "the divide between victim and non-victim is not suspended, but instead is transformed into a febrile border zone."³⁶² Indeed, the ultimate bound, that separating life from death, is liable to dissolve under Sebald's hand.³⁶³ He took Améry's assertion that "torture blots out the contradiction of death and allows us to experience it personally" to mean that "the act of writing" for such a person is "the moment in which a man who has escaped death must recognise that he is no longer alive" (NHD 167).³⁶⁴ Borders are obfuscated to such an extent that it is impossible to say whether even the most material of them is crossed. The corridor at Breendonk "leads down into one of the casemates [hinabführt in eine der Kasematten] ... *in which one* senses immediately [in der man sogleich spürt] that there is a layer of concrete several metres thick over-head," and whose floor is "at least a foot lower than the passage *by which one enters* it [als der Gang, durch den man ihn betritt]" (A 36 / 32, emphases mine and translations modified). Nowhere does the narrator speak definitely of having entered the casemate, much less of having stood where Améry was made to stand. Wherever the personal "ich" is used, it suggests instead that the narrator was superordinate to the ground upon which the Améry stood, and up from which he was hoisted. Thus, the narrator

³⁶¹ Bennett, "Sense of Humour," n. p.

³⁶² Uwe Schütte, *W. G. Sebald: Leben und Literarisches Werk* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 414.

³⁶³ For a valuable account of a similar dissolution of bounds, see Simon Cooke, "Sebald's Ghosts: Travelling Among the Dead in *The Rings of Saturn*," *Journeys* 11, no. 1 (June 2010): 50-68. <https://doi.org/10.3167/jys.2010.110103>.

³⁶⁴ Améry, *Mind's Limits*, 34.

“stared *down into* the pit [indem ich in diese Grube hinabstarrte],” thence “*onto* its base, which seemed to be sinking ever further, and *onto* the polished grey stone floor [auf ihren, wie es mir schien, immer weiter versinkenden Grund, auf den glattgrauen Steinboden]” (A 37 / 32, emphases mine and translations modified). This position makes it all the easier for the narrator to register the contents of the room. Where in his essay Améry notes only “various iron implements,” that is, an undifferentiated mass, the narrator of *Austerlitz* notes each in turn: a “metal pail” and the “iron hook hanging on a cord from the ceiling” (A 32-3).³⁶⁵ To these we might add the “grating over the drain”—yet another grid, an “Abflußgitter”—in the middle of the floor (A 32 / 41). In this regard, it is worth recalling Benjamin’s allegorical court, in which dispersion and collection operate in concert. Around the figural centre of Améry’s body are collected and dispersed the torturer’s implements. “Especially paradoxical,” concludes Benjamin, “is the luxuriant distribution of instruments of penance or of violence.”³⁶⁶ In Sebald’s scene there is also an allusion to the concealment of violence, in the form of the bucket and the drain, an impulse his narrator is determined to counteract by an elaborate re-telling of Améry’s torture, more of which below.

To the question of affiliation, in this case the narrator stops short, apparently unwilling to cross that last bound, to interpolate himself into the scene of the worst persecution (at least insofar as was practised at Breendonk and upon Améry). On the one hand, this suggests more of a restraint than Hirsch and the like are willing to afford. On the other, as I have already suggested, it leaves the narrator in an ascendant position, hovering above the pit, which suggests a belated complicity with the crimes committed below and before him. It is mistaken, then, to follow Irene Heidelberger-Leonard in viewing the narrator as “most scrupulous” in his passage through the former camp.³⁶⁷ The provisional character of his scruples is precisely what

³⁶⁵ Améry, *Mind’s Limits*, 22.

³⁶⁶ Benjamin, *Origin*, 201-2.

³⁶⁷ Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, “Jean Améry’s Werk—Urtext zu W. G. Sebalds *Austerlitz*?” In *Mémoire, Transferts. Images.*, ed. Ruth Vogel-Klein (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005), 127.

lends this scene its moral and aesthetic charge. Referring to an essay on Peter Weiss, to which I will return shortly, Schütte defines Sebald's position in the following terms: "Lacking personal guilt on the grounds of his birth at the highpoint of the Holocaust, he nevertheless felt himself to be liable for the crimes of his German compatriots in—as he saw it—complicity [Tateinheit] with his parents, who were guilty as fellow travellers [Mitläufer]." Sebald shares with Weiss an involvement at once culpable and innocent, whose tension demands literary elaboration.³⁶⁸ Perhaps nowhere is that tension dramatised more spectacularly than in the passage under discussion, which sees the narrator suspended above the pit—at once looking down upon the scene of horror, and in a position discomfiting for its likeness to that inflicted upon Améry. Where the latter's suffering is above all that of the flesh—to the extent that, as he reflects later, in torture the person is made flesh alone—the narrator's belongs above all to the ethical-aesthetic plane. He is met by upsurging images from his childhood:³⁶⁹

A picture of our laundry room at home in W. rose from the abyss and with it ... the image of the butcher's shop I always had to pass on my way to school, where at noon Benedikt was often seen in a rubber apron washing down the tiles with a thick hose. No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing-brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favourite of my father's and which I had always disliked. (A 32-3)³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 399-400.

³⁶⁹ Cf. Améry, *Schuld und Sühne*, 46-7. Sebald's childhood, too. According to Schütte, the author himself was obliged to pass Benedikt the butcher on his way to school (*W. G. Sebald*, 411). The analogy of butcher and torturer bears more than a slight resemblance to a passage from a letter of Kafka's: "So that you can see something of my 'occupation', I'm enclosing a drawing. These are four poles, through the two middle ones are driven rods to which the hands of the 'delinquent' are fastened; through the outer poles rods are driven for the feet. After the man has been bound in this way the rods are drawn slowly outwards till the man is torn apart in the middle. Against the post leans the inventor who, with crossed arms and legs, is giving himself great airs, as though the whole thing were his original invention, whereas he has only copied the butcher who stretches the disembowelled pig in his shop-front" (Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, ed. Willy Haas & trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), 204).

³⁷⁰ The sense of antagonism between father and son is all the greater in the German text, where the narrator claims always to have been opposed to the word—"immer zuwider gewesen"—which appears to have done nothing to stop his father using it with fondness—"mit Vorliebe gebraucht" (A 41)—apparently out of spite.

The downward tending procession of images corresponds to the fourteen stations which the narrator is compelled to follow into the depths of Breendonk. Thus, Améry's travails are given a Christ-like aspect, his passage through Breendonk a *via dolorosa* whose climax is hook rather than cross. The narrator repeats the passage as a sort of pilgrim, and is almost overcome at the crucial point. "Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall" (A 33). More hatching—"ein schwarzes Gestrichel" (A 41)—this time interposing itself between object and narrator. It is worth noting, if only in passing, the regularity with which Sebald returned to the *Leidensweg*: There are Giotto's angels mourning Christ's crucifixion in *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (SG 100 / 84); then there is Grünewald's *Crucifixion* (1505), whose hinterlands show "the prehistory / of the Passion. We see the gate / to the Garden of Gethsemane, the approach / of the henchmen and the kneeling figure of Christ / so reduced in size that in the / receding space the rushing / away of time can be sensed" (NN 29). Benjamin describes the Baroque renderings of the Passion—extending from the visual arts to the stage—as contriving to thrust Christ himself "into the middle of the provisional, the everyday, the precarious ... and one should not forget that what is offensive and provocative about this gesture is what is properly baroque."³⁷¹ Sebald enacts something of an inversion of that formula, such that mortals are compelled to rehearse the pathetic stages of Christ's downfall, and to do without the salvific ones. He once described an Achternbusch monologue as having the effect of leading the audience through "the stations of the *Leidensweg*" endured by the character in question, all of which "correspond to a series of punishments every bit as terrible as they are undeserved."³⁷² That is to say that the character in question was undeserving

³⁷¹ He precedes these remarks by describing how "the eternal is separated out from the events of salvation history, and what remains is a living image amenable to all corrective interventions. ... In paintings of apotheoses ... the drastically rendered foreground works to gather all worldly happening into itself, not only in order to heighten the tension between immanence and transcendence but also in order to secure for this tension the greatest imaginable rigor, exclusivity, and inexorability" (Benjamin, *Origin*, 195). In the pit of Breendonk, the foreground is rendered all the more drastically by the pressing down of "a layer of concrete several metres thick overhead" (A 32).

³⁷² Sebald, "Herbert Achternbusch," 179; W. G. Sebald, "Die Kunst der Verwandlung: Herbert Achternbuschs Theatralische Sendung," *Patterns of Change: German Drama and the European Tradition*, ed. by Dorothy James and Silvia Ranawake (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 301. I have modified the English translation found in

of said punishments, though also to suggest that although the spectators may not bear direct responsibility, nevertheless they are compelled to endure the process in the re-telling.

Again and again across Sebald's œuvre, his narrator re-enacts terrible and undeserved punishments in a twofold sense: at times he stands to the side in explication, at others he follows the paths once tread by the victims of the past. Anticipating a line of inquiry developed by Schöne (amongst others) several decades later, Benjamin described the mourning of the Trauerspiel less as an affective register belonging to the dramatist or the audience, and more as a "motor attitude" belonging to the allegorical intention—that of the brooder—which "progresses as slowly and ceremoniously as do the processions of those in power."³⁷³ In this regard, the tenacious though obscure processional quality belonging to Sebald's narrative works, which persists from *Nach der Natur* through to *Austerlitz*, can be seen to provide impetus to the narrator's travels, acting as a counterweight to his tendency to digress and give pause. This is all the more the case when the procession invoked is a constitutionally mournful one. As Bianca Theisen put it, "for Sebald, travel resonates with *travaille*, implying toil, suffering, or torture, rather than with the etymology of the German word *Reise* [departure], and his travel narratives reconstruct the prose of a world inscribed with a history of loss and destruction that extends into the future."³⁷⁴ Sebald makes the function explicit in the essay on Achternbusch just cited, in which he writes that "historical rites bring the past into the present," whereas "mourning rites ... take the present into the past. The difference is one of memory as against remembrance. And the physical realisation of remembrance upon the stage is at the heart of any truly theatrical event."³⁷⁵

Patterns of Change, done by Antony Mathews, because it renders the "Leidensweg" a "life of suffering," starving it of its association with the Passion.

³⁷³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 141-2.

³⁷⁴ Bianca Theisen, "Prose of the World: W. G. Sebald's Literary Travels," *The Germanic Review* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 174.

³⁷⁵ Sebald, "Art of Transformation," 181.

v. Objectivity and succession

STRAPPARE, to snatch, or pull away by force.

STRAPPAZZARE, to oppresse, to misuse, to put to all drudgerie, to hurrie, to contemne.

STRAPPAZZO, abuse, drudgerie, illusing, hurring or oppression, contempt.³⁷⁶

“Searching Sebald’s works for explicit scenarios of torture, for graphic descriptions of cruelty and agonising physical pain, returns few satisfactory results,” writes Christian Moser, arriving at the confounding conclusion that, “in fact, there are virtually none.”³⁷⁷ Sven Meyer agrees, writing of Sebald as one who “renounced the imaginary paraphrase of terror and suffering and the artistic reproduction of pain.”³⁷⁸ Sebald made similar claims. “I would never attempt to describe a scene of violence in a realistic fashion because in doing this one invariably falls into the trap of action writing. The only way to write about persecution and its consequences is to approach the subject obliquely.”³⁷⁹ It is difficult to square these utterances with that early passage of *Austerlitz*, in which the narrator recalls that “a few years” after his visit to Breendonk he read “Jean Améry’s description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims” (A 33), which prompts the following account:

He was hoisted aloft by his hands, tied behind his back, so that with a crack and a splintering sound which, as he says, he had not yet forgotten when he came to write his account, his arms dislocated from the sockets in his shoulder joints, and he was left dangling as they were wrenched up behind him and twisted together above his head. (A 34)

³⁷⁶ John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 692.

³⁷⁷ Christian Moser, “The Anatomy of Torture: W. G. Sebald and the Representation of the Agonized Body,” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 87, no. 1 (2012): 58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2012.654439>

³⁷⁸ Meyer, “Medium der Prosa,” 181-2 & 178.

³⁷⁹ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 146.

There is plenty that is graphic in this depiction of cruelty and pain, rather in spite of the suppositions of Moser and Meyer.³⁸⁰ Indeed, the manner in which Améry's body is traduced before the eyes of the reader recalls the elaborate re-enactment of Kindt's dissection. However, there is also something oblique about it, in the sense that it hews closely to the equivalent passage in Améry's text, and for the conspicuous interpolation of "as he says," or "wie er sagt" (A 34 / 42). It conforms to Sebald's demand, repeatedly expressed in interviews, that such events be rendered periscopically, as he termed it, which depends upon a technique adopted from Thomas Bernhard, such that "everything that the narrator relates is mediated through sometimes one or two other stages, which makes for quite complicated syntactical labyrinthine structures and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends that he knows more than is actually possible."³⁸¹ Remarkable here is the unusually close adherence to the text in question, especially in the case of those verbs which stress contortion, distortion and dismemberment. Both texts describe shoulder joints springing from ("sprangen aus") sockets and arms wrenched ("ausgerenkten ... gerissen") out and upwards, over the head, and thence twisted together ("verdreht geschlossen").³⁸² Again, the dismembering aspect of the Kindt passage is brought to mind. In one of four essays treating with Améry published in the latter half of the 1980s, Sebald wrote admiringly of how Améry's essay-memoirs "dispense with any kind of literary stylisation [Literarisierung] which might encourage a sense of complicity between the writer and his readers," of how he "employs a pervasive strategy of understatement

³⁸⁰ There is another mention of this method of torture at the other extreme of Sebald's narrative oeuvre, though it is much more allusive. Notable is the association of disarticulation with the business of writing in general, and writing from memory in particular. In *Schwindel. Gefühle*, we find the following: "Die Notizen, in denen Beyle im Alter von dreiundfünfzig Jahren ... die Strapazen jener Tage aus dem Gedächtnis heraufzuholen versucht, demonstrieren eindringlich verschiedene Schwierigkeiten der Erinnerung." The English translation makes "tribulations" of those "Strapazen" (SG 8 / 5). In this subterranean connection, separated though it is by over a decade, we see again a tacit admission of the potential complicity of the writer in the sufferings of those victims which he would record in narrative.

³⁸¹ Wood interview.

³⁸² Améry, *Schuld und Sühne*, 46; A 38.

which prohibits both pity and self-pity” (NHD 155 / CS 155).³⁸³ He draws the conclusion that, “considering the superior force of objectivity, it is even less defensible to refrain from writing than to go on with it, however senseless that may seem” (NHD 159). In his fidelity to Améry’s account of the torture process, Sebald maintains the latter’s objectivity, but eschews the understatement. This has the effect of abolishing what distance, what tact Améry had succeeded in imposing upon his text, an effort which Sebald casts in heroic terms, as requiring the “supremacy of a mind intent on thinking freely even in extremis, however useless doing so might seem” (NHD 154-5).³⁸⁴ Gone are the ironic, even abashed phrases which bracket the equivalent passage of Améry’s text, which begins with the apologetic “I can only try to make it brief,” and ends with his remark that “torture” comes “from the Latin *torquere*, to twist. What visual instruction in etymology!”³⁸⁵ In commentary Sebald describes the latter phrase as one “provocatively deviating almost into the ridiculous,” and as showing “that the composure, the *impassibilité* allowing Améry to recapitulate such extreme experiences has here reached breaking point. Améry makes use of irony where otherwise his voice would be bound to falter” (NHD 156).³⁸⁶ It is that implacability which Sebald seems to have admired the most in Améry,

³⁸³ The German text, too, describes Améry as employing “eine Strategie des *understatements*” (CS 155). Sebald’s sustained critical interest in Améry ought to cast further doubt on an over-determined structuralist reading of his narrative work, and especially one yoked too tightly to Foucault, of whom Améry was one of the earliest and sharpest critics. See, in particular, Jean Améry, “Foucaults Vision des Kerker-Universums,” *Merkur* 31, no. 4 (April 1977): 389-94. Améry’s critique is effective for probing certain of the more exposed flanks of Foucault’s work, as well as for its tone, which is characteristically unsparing. It is also effective, of course, because Améry was one of the tortured, a victim of methods inherited from the old sovereignty which had lately experienced a renaissance of unprecedented brutality. This, above all else, lends weight to his rebuke, which is perhaps best formulated in the following, acutely measured, assertion: “Denying progress outright and scarcely shrugging one’s shoulders at every reform is an erroneous [abwegig] and – I weigh my words – in the final analysis a reactionary attitude” (“Foucaults Vision,” 393). Long is alert to the “profound ambivalence” to Foucault, at least insofar as Sebald’s critical works are concerned, yet still sees a “high degree of thematic coherence” in the latter’s prose narratives, comprising those arch-Foucauldian tropes of discipline, power/knowledge, and the diffuse structures which serve in support of these forces (Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 18). The traces of the old sovereignty are not erased, nor are they particularly hard to discern. That much is clear in Améry’s determination of torturer as sovereign, tortured as martyr, which is recapitulated in *Austerlitz* and in certain respects intensified.

³⁸⁴ Note that refrain of perseverance in the face of futility which qualifies so many of Sebald’s statements on writing, its means and its ends.

³⁸⁵ Améry, *Mind’s Limits*, 32-3.

³⁸⁶ These remarks as to the limits of objectivity are not to be found in the first iteration of the essay in question, which, according to Sheppard, was “probably written autumn 1985” (Sheppard, “Primary Bibliography,” SM, 465). It was first published in a Frankfurt feuilleton (W. G. Sebald, “Augen des Nachtvogels,” ZB3). In a roughly contemporaneous essay first published in *Text + Kritik*, Sebald described Améry’s want of a Heimat as affording

and, perhaps for that reason, irony is almost wholly absent in the Breendonk passage of *Austerlitz*. In its stead, we find a remarkable act of succession. Sebald appends a second, shorter, bilingual account of a similar procedure. In fact, they could be said to give way one into the other, in that they are separated only by a colon, thus:

... he was left dangling as they were wrenched up behind him and twisted together above his head: *la pendaison par les mains liées dans le dos jusqu'à évanouissement* – this is how it is described in the book *Le Jardin des Plantes* [1997], in which Claude Simon descends once more into the storehouse of his memories, and on page 235 begins to tell the fragmentary tale of a certain Gastone Novelli who, like Améry, was subjected to this particular type of torture. (A 34)³⁸⁷

That is, the attentive, even laboured account of Améry's suffering promptly gives way to a much brisker account of another instance of the same procedure. The image of one body in pain is succeeded by that of another. This is something like the inverse of objectivity properly considered, which by any definition depends upon a determined, unyielding gaze.

The mournfulness of the Trauerspiel, insofar as it was conceived by Benjamin, is disseminated throughout the physis, and in that sense is general. At the same time, however, it is subject to ever new iterations, is expressed in ever new "allegorical schemata," and in that sense is particular.³⁸⁸ In such a way can the tortured body appear as expressive of tyranny and martyrdom as such, though also an individual's suffering.³⁸⁹ Benjamin described the

him a "radical intellectual position." His "refusal to compromise, his clinging onto a justified resentments, had something to do with his pride, and this had something to do with his courage and his will to resist, with those special and rare qualities which he possessed to such a great extent" (UH 142).

³⁸⁷ The italicised text is carried over substantially unchanged from Simon's book, whose English translation renders it thus: "the punishment, being suspended by his bound hands until he lost consciousness" (Claude Simon, *The Jardin des Plantes*, trans. Jordan Stump (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 179). *Jardin's* periscopic narrative is more restrained than that of *Austerlitz*. After the cursory outline of the procedure quoted above, the narrator of the former mentions Novelli having made "one allusion to torture ... on which he did not elaborate." Afterwards, writes Simon, "he never again spoke of what he had endured there, except to say that once he was free he could no longer bear contact with nor the sight of not only a German but any being, woman or man, considered civilised" (*Jardin*, 179-80). The latter part of this account appears practically unaltered in Sebald's text (A 39 / 34-5).

³⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), I:56-61, here 57.

³⁸⁹ Perhaps the most striking fact of Améry's essay is the extent to which he enounces torture as martyrdom and the tortured as martyr. The Nazis "martyred [marterten] their prisoners for definite purposes, which in each

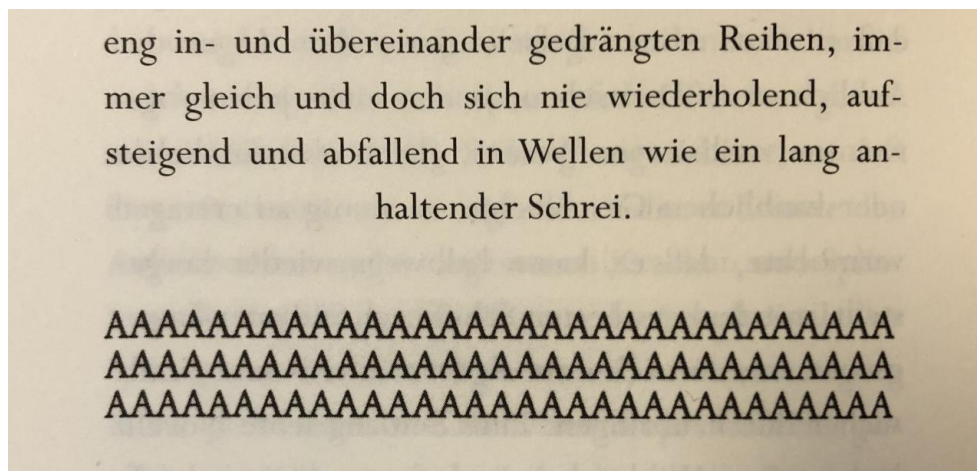
corresponding temporality as hybrid—a time which “is not fulfilled, but nevertheless ... is finite,” which “is nonindividual, but without historical universality.”³⁹⁰ This gives to the Trauerspiel its thoroughgoing immanence, its sense of boundedness to the earth and of being pressed under unyielding heavens, though also its capacity to render earthly suffering in the starkest of terms, even and especially when that suffering is subject to apparently endless repetition (more of which below). In its claim to express an essential truth, a claim which, at the point of its utterance, is already giving way to the current of reiteration (hence, mutability) of which it is a part, the emblem is at the heart of this dynamic. That is true of the human body subjected to torture—whether in life or in death. Indeed, as the epigraph preceding these remarks attests, Améry himself went so far as to suggest that torture dissolves the distinction between the two. In typically aphoristic fashion, Benjamin proposes that “the allegorising of physis can be energetically carried through only by means of the corpse. The characters of the Trauerspiel die because only thus, as corpses, do they enter the allegorical homeland. They go to rack and ruin not for the sake of immortality but for the sake of the corpse,” which is to say that they can only then express their meaning with allegorical cogency.³⁹¹ Sebald was evidently struck by this passage, citing it affirmatively and quite faithfully in an essay on Joseph Roth (UH, 110). If such conclusions can hardly be said to accord any kind of transcendence to the victims in question, then there is some consolation, however scant, in their being allowed—or, indeed, made—to express themselves. Such is the case in *Austerlitz*, which first gives renewed voice to Améry, even as it restages his torment, before Novelli appears in succession, with

instance were exactly specified. Above all, however, they tortured because they were torturers. They placed torture in their service. But even more fervently they were its servants” (*Mind's Limits*, 31; *Schuld und Sühne*, 44-5) He later writes that, “of all physical celebrations [Körperfeste], torture is the most terrible ... for the martyred [Gemarterten] they are death rituals [Todesrituale]” (*Mind's Limits*, 33; *Schuld und Sühne*, 47). Then, most emphatically, the torturer is described as wanting “to realise his total sovereignty,” in transforming his victim into flesh [Verfleischlichung], even driving him “beyond the border of death into Nothingness,” to the extent that “the torturer and murderer realises his own destructive being, without having to lose himself in it entirely, like his martyred victim [Gemarterte]” (*Mind's Limits*, 35; *Schuld und Sühne*, 48-9).

³⁹⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I: 57.

³⁹¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 236.

some alacrity. The passage quoted above is succeeded by a paraphrase of Simon’s account of Novelli’s flight to the Amazon after the war, where he spent time living with a tribe whose language, previously unknown to Sao Paolo’s linguists, consisted solely of vowels.³⁹² The biographical sketch is then succeeded by a broad characterisation of Novelli’s art, such that “his main subject [Hauptmotiv], depicted again and again in different forms and compositions – *filiforme, gras, soudain plus épais ou plus grand, puis de nouveau mincei, boiteux* – was the letter A, which he traced on the coloured ground he had applied sometimes with the point of a pencil, sometimes with the stem of his brush or an even blunter instrument, in ranks of scarcely legible ciphers crowding closely together and above one another” (A 35-6). The As are rendered in *Jardin* in much the same way as they are in *Austerlitz*, in solid banks of uniform capitals, yet nowhere are they described as anything like a “Hauptmotiv.” That honour is conferred by



Novelli’s so-called Hauptmotiv (A 40)

Sebald alone. In fact, they appear in just small number of Novelli’s paintings from the early 1960s—perhaps five at most—making up a tiny fraction of an enormous and various body of work.³⁹³ And it is only in Sebald’s imagination that the As are transmuted into that “long,

³⁹² The connection to Lévi-Strauss is more than speculative. Novelli was a student of his work and method.

³⁹³ See Gastone Novelli, *Gastone Novelli: Catalogo generale*, vol. 1, eds. Paola Bonani, Marco Rinaldi and Alessandra Tiddia (Milan: Silvana, 2011), 203 and passim.

incessant scream [lang anhaltender Schrei]” (A 40 / 36, translation modified) which appears, motto-esque, centred above the image of the letters.³⁹⁴ It is given special impetus by Sebald’s narrator, who describes the As as recurring, altogether emblematically, in “ever new stamps and compositions [Ausprägungen und Zusammensetzungen]” (A 39 / 35, translation modified). They are “always the same, and yet never repeating themselves” (A 36), and in that sense they evoke the images of the bodies of Améry and Novelli. This process of reiteration and of giving way interrupts the tendency to over-affiliate, to defer to Hirsch’s terms, though it also runs the risk of effacing that which is particular to each victim and to each act of persecution. The harrowed bodies of Améry and Novelli bear a discomfiting resemblance to one another—and to Kindt’s before them—though that is not to say an identity. This we can perceive in Novelli’s scream. The disjointed rising and falling waves of Novelli’s pictures are straightened out, made rigid and regular. As Sebald’s narrator relates, the language of the native people with whom Novelli lived, which furnishes the content of the scream, “consisted almost entirely of vowels, particularly the sound A in countless variations of intonation and emphasis” (A 35). Simon’s narrator records Novelli having said that “even using all the signs that could be borrowed from the most diverse languages, as for instance Greek aspirates, the umlauts or little circles used in Nordic languages, circumflexes, grave or acute marks, it was virtually impossible to convey the variety of nuances (and consequently meanings) that those sounds, rendered in the Roman alphabet by one single letter, could signify.”³⁹⁵ Those banks of As which appear in *Austerlitz* are disburdened of diacritics, and in that sense lose all trace of that rich variation which

³⁹⁴ It is worth revisiting that fragment of Benjamin’s cited above, in which he describes “the interplay between sound and meaning” as “a terrifying phantom for the mourning play” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 60-1). In his *Trauerspiel* book, image-writing (sc. the emblem) conceals a “high-tension polarity” between script and sound. “This tension between word and script is immeasurable in the Baroque. The word, one may say, is the ecstasy of the creature, is exposure, daring, impotence before God; script is the collectedness of the creature, is dignity, superiority, omnipotence over the things of the world” (Benjamin, *Origin*, 217-8). Needless to stress, perhaps, that the higher powers to which Améry found himself exposed—who were the sole auditors of his own screams—were utterly profane, though he did express a terrible wonderment at the scope of their authority: “For is not the one who can reduce a person so entirely to a body and a whimpering prey of death a god or, at least, a demigod?” (Améry, *Mind’s Limits*, 36).

³⁹⁵ Simon, *Jardin*, 186.

characterised the utterances of the people to which the language belonged. This attests to the futility of the lexicographer's enterprise, but also to the loss of character borne by the victims of torture—a loss which can merely be recorded in writing without being made good. Viewed thus, the narrator's attitude in respect to his agonised subjects takes on something of that sovereign, arbitrary bearing, such as I attempted to elaborate above. Perhaps it was for that reason that in one of his Améry essays Sebald could only go so far as to conclude that “it is even less defensible to refrain from writing than to go on with it” (NHD 159). It is also suggested by his rendering in *Austerlitz* of those “measures ... introduced by the Germans” which led to Novelli's being “arrested and taken to Dachau” (A 34), which represents a significant departure from Simon's text.³⁹⁶ “In view of the total powerlessness of the police in Italy” to deal with the resistance, General Rommel is supposed to have written in his diary on 26th October 1943, “one must bring them to book oneself [man ... jetzt selber dort das Heft in die Hand nehmen müsse]” (A 38 / 34, translation modified).

³⁹⁶ “On October 26, he writes his wife: ‘Even the Italian police are totally impotent today. We must help him’” (*Jardin*, 179). The corresponding passage in the French text—i.e., the one read by Sebald—reads, “Il faut que nous l’aidions” (Claude Simon, *Œuvres*, ed. Alastair B. Duncan and Jean H. Duffy (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2006), 1073). Catling notes that Sebald once sketched the chronology of *Austerlitz* in his copy of *Le Jardin* (Catling, “Sebald’s Library,” 291-2). In that sense, the latter was a sort of “Heft” in Sebald’s hands, which might be said to reinstate a very obscure layer of irony to the proceedings.

V. Moths and butterflies

i. Spinning and weaving

And of course there is his fascination with moths.³⁹⁷

“His name is Winfried Georg Sebald. Full-stop. ‘Maximilian’ does not exist. He is just the same as his literature! He invented the name because he didn’t like his first name.”³⁹⁸ What did Sebald’s sister mean by such a remark? Perhaps she had in mind something of that ‘Schelm’ (trickster) quality remarked by Sheppard.³⁹⁹ More specifically, no doubt, she was referring to a knack for metamorphosis which he shared with his writing, one given literary and physical form at the outset of *Saturn* on the appearance of Baldanders, “whom Simplicius Simplicissimus encounters in the sixth book of Grimmelshausen’s narrative” (RS 23). “Personifying the mutability of all world concerns, Baldanders can assume just about any form and shape,” as Theisen put it.⁴⁰⁰ And, indeed, Sebald’s narrator describes how “before the very eyes of Simplicius, Baldanders changes into a scribe who writes these lines [I am Beginning and End, and have influence everywhere] ... and then into a mighty oak, a sow, a sausage, a piece of excrement, a field of clover, a white flower, a mulberry tree, and a silk carpet” (RS 23). That the scribe might just as well appear in the form of a mighty oak as a piece of dung (Bauerndreck) suggests something of Sebald’s ambivalence to his enterprise. The following chapter will explore some of the forms in which mutability appears in, and determines the form of, Sebald’s writing, at the same time as describing the place of moths and butterflies in giving emblematic expression to that quality.

³⁹⁷ Anthea Bell, “Translating W. G. Sebald—With and Without the Author,” SM, 212.

³⁹⁸ Aebischer-Sebald, “Ein Fleckerlteppich,” 216.

³⁹⁹ Sheppard, “Sternheim Years,” 102 n. 94.

⁴⁰⁰ Theisen, “Natural History,” 564.

The tenth and final part of *Saturn* returns to Thomas Browne's so-called "convolute [Konvolut] of miscellaneous writings" (RS 337 / 271), and in particular his *Musæum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita* (1683). A word largely alien to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century reader, "convolute" is not out of place in a discussion of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, having been used by Robert Boyle and others to describe twists and coils of various sorts. However, it was not a word used by Browne or his publishers to describe the work in question.⁴⁰¹ In fact, the English translation of Sebald's book is unusual for ascribing the word to a work of literature. That being the case, it might be said to suggest certain characteristics shared by both works, Browne's and Sebald's, not least a sense of their being caught in the process of spooling and unspooling—that, for all their elaborate syntactical patterning, they might at any moment be unpicked and re-woven all over again. "Konvolut" is comparatively familiar to a contemporary German reader, and usually describes a bundle of papers or a miscellany, as well as those natural and physiological convolutions. It was the term chosen by Adorno for the constituent parts of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*. The English translators of the latter work also prefer "convolute." Acknowledging its lack of philological connotations, they counter that, "aside from its desirable closeness to the German rubric, which ... is both historically and philologically and historically legitimated, it remains the most precise and evocative term for designating the elaborately intertwined collections of 'notes and materials' that make up the central division of this most various and colourful of Benjaminian texts."⁴⁰² It is a justification which readily applies to Sebald's text, too. In "Convolute J" of *The Arcades Project*, referring now to its English translation, Benjamin makes the revealing

⁴⁰¹ *OED*, s.v. "convolution" (n.). The entry also cites the "convolutions of the brain" contained in the work of Helkiah Crooke, an East Anglian anatomist of the seventeenth-century. In this connection, it is worth recalling the Sebaldian narrator's earlier account of a dream in which he walks again "the endlessly intertwined [verschlungen] paths" on Dunwich heath, and how "again I could not find my way out of the maze [Irrgarten] which I was convinced had been created solely for me." Viewed from above, the paths assume a "pattern simple in comparison with the errant paths [Irrwege] I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain" (RS 173 / 216, translation modified).

⁴⁰² Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, "Translator's Preface," in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), xiv.

remark that, “if we can distinguish between spinning and weaving activity in poets, then the allegorical imagination must be classed with the former.”⁴⁰³ Perhaps no better remark could serve as epigram to a discussion of the compositional basis of *Saturn*, and its last part in particular.

It is worth first stressing certain aspects of that book’s provenance. No parts of *Saturn* can be traced back to *Manuskripte*, so in that sense it represents a departure from Sebald’s previous three narrative monographs. Nevertheless, its genesis bears a resemblance to its predecessors’, in that early iterations of certain passages appeared in arts sections of two Zurich newspapers in the year or so prior to the book’s first publication.⁴⁰⁴ Asked about the narrative form of *Saturn* during a televised interview given in New York in 2001, Sebald responded as follows: “I can’t quite remember how it worked. I had this idea of writing a few short pieces for the feuilletons of the German papers in order to pay for this extravagance of a fortnight’s rambling tour. That was the plan. But then as you walk along, you find things.”⁴⁰⁵ I mention these facts if only to stress that even this later work has something provisional about it. Of those contemporary critics who hastened to proclaim that Sebald had invented a new genre, it is notable that none was forthcoming with a name for that genre, rather in spite of the rage for literary critical neologisms which was then in full flight.⁴⁰⁶ Instead of monuments of coherence, then, these works are better viewed as attesting to the disparateness of the threads from which they are composed, and to the tendency of these to anticipate their own unravelling.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 272.

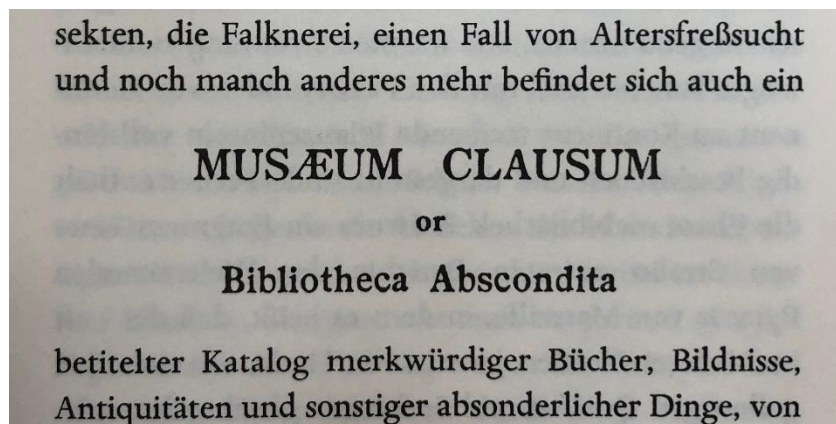
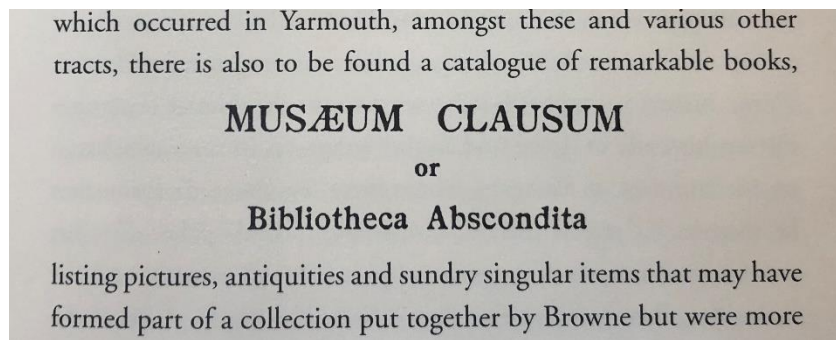
⁴⁰⁴ See Sheppard, “Primary Bibliography,” 278. Again the “pre-publication extract” label is affixed to each early iteration.

⁴⁰⁵ Sebald, Interview by Joseph Cuomo, 94.

⁴⁰⁶ See, for example, his interview with Wood. Lynn Wolff seems much more sensible, not to mention perceptive, in describing Sebald’s as a “hybrid poetics.” See Lynn L. Wolff, *W. G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 33-68 and passim.

⁴⁰⁷ Asked by his sister how he produced his works, Sebald responded in the following terms: “Do you know, it’s quite simple. I make it like the Allgäuers do. It’s a rag rug. So I go a couple of steps backwards and say: Now it needs a wee bit blue” (Aebischer-Sebald, “Ein Fleckerlteppich,” 219).

The last section commences with a detail from the *Musæum*'s title page.⁴⁰⁸ The work is described by Sebald as consisting of a “catalogue of remarkable books ... listing pictures, antiquities and sundry items that may have formed part of a collection put together by Browne



Figures ix & x: Sundry items (RS 337 / 271)

but were more likely products of his imagination, the inventory of a treasure house that existed purely in his head and to which there is no access except through the letters on the page” (RS 271, translation modified).⁴⁰⁹ This inventory is soon followed by a crude image of a weaver sat

⁴⁰⁸ The detail from the book’s title page interrupts the sentence where I have inserted the ellipses. Thus, it functions as a subordinate clause of sorts. In the German text, the *Bilderschrift* is more pronounced – insubordinate, if you like – in that it serves as the sentence’s subject, albeit one appearing reflexively and very late in the day. Thus, it appears in place of the second set of ellipses in the following: “In einem von Thomas Browne nachgelassenen Konvolut vermischter Schriften ... befindet sich auch ein ... betitelter Katalog” (RS 337).

⁴⁰⁹ With the concerns of the previous chapter in mind, note that Sebald’s selection from this catalogue includes “a number of pieces delineating the worst inhumanities in tortures for the benefit of the observer: the scaphismus of the Persians, the living truncation of the Turks, the hanging sport at the feasts of the Thracians, the exact method of flaying men alive, beginning between the shoulders, according to the meticulous description of Thomas Minadoi” (RS 273). It is worth emphasising, too, Sebald’s alterations to Browne’s text. In certain respects, admittedly minor, he outdoes his predecessor in the delineation of torture methods. Browne’s “the living truncation of the Turks” is, rather ironically, protracted as follows: “die bei der Vollstreckung von Todesurteilen in der Türkei übliche stückweise Verkürzung des Körpers.” For the absence of doubt, the act of flaying is described not merely as “beginning between the shoulders,” as Browne has it, but “mit einem Schnitt zwischen

at the sort of loom described in the preceding text as made of “wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and reminiscent of torture racks [Foltergestelle] or cages.” Man and machine are said to exist in a “peculiar form of symbiosis” (RS 350 / 282, translation modified). The weavers’ plight is soon after compared to that of the scholar and the writer, “with whom they have much in common.” All are given to “melancholy and all the evils associated with it,” and can be driven into scarcely imaginable “depths of despair [Abgründe],” or indeed into an inescapable state (the latter “Ausweglosigkeit” is regrettably elided in the English translation) (RS 351 / 283, translations modified).⁴¹⁰ All are subject to work which “forces them to sit bent over constantly, to meditate keenly and at length and to check endlessly their long-winded and artificial patterns.”⁴¹¹ All are “pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they might have caught hold of the wrong thread” (RS 283).⁴¹²

The handling of this image largely conforms to the emblematic type described above and throughout the present work. The picture is pre-empted by those epigrammatic remarks concerning torture, confinement, and that peculiar symbiosis, though it in turn exerts an obscure, imposing authority which belies their seeming clarity.⁴¹³ It is somewhat smudged in the middle and blurred at the edges. The weaver, though, is more distinct than the remainder and, far from appearing trapped within the apparatus, he sits rather assertively on its edge—

den Schulterblättern” (RS 339; Thomas Browne, *Musæum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita* (London: Charles Mearn, 1683), 204).

⁴¹⁰ See section ii. of the present chapter.

⁴¹¹ The bent posture, of course, recalls the attitude and the ailments of that class of creative melancholics described at length in chapter III.

⁴¹² The degree to which these creative classes are likened is all the greater in the German text. Again, the English translation comprises regrettable elisions and omissions, more likely a product of Sebald’s hand than Hulse’s. See, in particular, reproductions of the latter’s draft English translations in “Englishing Max,” 202-3. of the book’s English translation, in which numerous phrases are struck out—“delete”—by Sebald, though they are directly descended from the German text. In regards to the passage currently under discussion, the German text describes how “besonders die Weber und die mit ihnen in manchem vergleichbaren Gelehrten und sonstigen Schreiber, wie man in dem etwa zu jener Zeit in Deutschland veröffentlichten *Magazin für Erfahrungsseelenkunde* nachlesen kann, zur Melancholie und zu allen aus ihr entspringenden Übeln neigten” (RS 350-1). Translated more faithfully, if a little pedantically: “One can read in the *Magazin für Erfahrungsseelenkunde* [*Journal for the Study of Psychic Experience*], published in Germany at around that time, of how in particular weavers, scholars and sundry writers, who are in many ways comparable, are prone to melancholy and to all those ills issuing from it.”

⁴¹³ Sebald, *Christopher Bigsby*, 155.

bringing to my mind an organist at his (admittedly primitive) instrument as much as a man condemned to a torture apparatus or cage—though indeed he is clearly harnessed into it. With this in mind, the text below, in which weaver, scholar and writer are likened, is not altogether unexpected. All are engaged in a combinatory enterprise the execution of which can threaten to imprison and imperil the practitioner.

The false thread is in fact an ambiguous proposition, especially for the writer-scholar. In the German text we find the unusual verb “erwischen” where the English text reads “caught hold of,” instead of, say, some conjugate of the much more common “greifen” or “fassen” (RS 351 / 283). Beyond its active meaning, the root “Wisch” refers to notes or documents of a humble sort, taken to include brochures, pamphlets and the like. Having informed the reader that Browne’s catalogue comprises things likely assembled only in Browne’s imagination, Sebald’s narrator acts in kind. At the beginning of a chronicle of sericulture’s migration after a centuries-long hermitage, he notes how Browne’s *Musæum* includes “the bamboo cane in which, at the time of the Byzantine Emperor Justinianus, two Persian friars who had long been in China to discover the secrets of sericulture had brought the first eggs of the silkworm over the Empire’s borders into the Western world” (RS 273-4). Just a page or two later, we read the following:

Chinese merchants traversed the length and breadth of Asia with their silk-laden caravans, taking some two hundred and forty days to travel from the Chinese sea to the coast of the Mediterranean. Because of the enormous distance, and also because of the horrific punishments awaiting those who disseminated the knowledge of sericulture beyond the borders of the Empire, the fabrication of silk was restricted to China for thousands of years, until the two aforementioned friars with their hollowed-out walking staffs arrived in Byzantium. (RS 276-7)

But the cane in question is nowhere to be found in the *Musæum Clausum*,⁴¹⁴ where there is mention only of:

⁴¹⁴ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 308.

Some handsome Engraveries and Medals, of *Justinus and Justinianus*, found in the custody of a Bannyan in the remote parts of *India*, conjectured to have been left there by the Friars mentioned in *Procopius* who travelled those parts in the Reign of *Justinianus*, and brought back into *Europe* the discovery of Silk and Silk Worms.⁴¹⁵

So, canes ostensibly taken from Browne's text—itsself full of false threads—are in fact conjured up from elsewhere. Likely they came from Sarah Bush's *The Silk Industry* (1987), an unassuming pamphlet (a 'Wisch,' if you like) formerly in Sebald's library, now in his archive at Marbach, to which he seems to have alluded in that interview cited moments ago. The "advantage of walking," he said, is that "you find things by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian, which is in a tiny little museum somewhere ... and in that you find odd details that lead you somewhere else, and so it's a form of unsystematic searching, which of course for an academic is far from orthodoxy."⁴¹⁶ Bush's text records how "the secret of sericulture spread very slowly ... not reach[ing] the Byzantine Empire until AD 550, when the Emperor Justinian persuaded two Persian monks to journey to Khotan and search out the secret. They returned first with mulberry seeds and later with silkworm eggs concealed in a bamboo stick."⁴¹⁷ The narrator, then, is culpable of a 'theft' and a concealment comparable to that of the friars. They are complicit, even, in that he relieves them of the engraveries and medals given them by Browne, and in return provides them with the bamboo stick taken from Bush, multiplied into two in the process, all the better to complete their own thievery. Bush's pamphlet serves as a mere instrument in this effort.

Benjamin once described interruption as "one of the fundamental devices of all structuring" and "the basis of quotation."⁴¹⁸ The theory of allegorical expression which he elaborated is

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Browne, *Musæum Clausum*, 210.

⁴¹⁶ Sebald, Interview by Joseph Cuomo, 94.

⁴¹⁷ Sarah Bush, *The Silk Industry* (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1987), 3. Beyond its brisk history of the spread of sericulture, the silk industry and its weavers, a number of other stretches of this last part of *Saturn* seem to derive from Bush's work, not least the account of the life-cycle of the *Bombyx mori*, its diet, and its preferred habitat (cf. Bush, *Silk Industry*, 4-5 & 10-12; RS 341-3 & 348-9 / 273-6 & 280-1).

⁴¹⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV:305.

itself grounded on ceaseless quotation and is constitutionally interruptive—a sundering of things *ex natura* and *ex historia*. “That which the allegorical intention has fixed upon is sundered from the customary contexts of life; it is at once shattered and preserved.”⁴¹⁹ That is what he had in mind in ascribing to the allegorical imagination the act of spinning. This has important historiographical implications, not least in regard to passages such as the one currently under discussion, which seems to present something like a coherent chain of events. After the secreting of the silkworms out of China, the narrator charts the progress of sericulture to the Byzantine court and the islands of the Aegean, where it stalled for another thousand years, before moving on to Sicily and Naples, then to the north of Italy, from whence, within just half a century, it travelled to France, thence to the British Isles and East Anglia, which is to say the feet of the narrator himself (RS 344-9 / 277-81). In the re-telling of this history, however, the narrator collects and interpolates a formidable array of texts: Olivier de Serres’ “manual for landowners, published in 1600 under the title *Théâtre d’agriculture et mesnage de Champs*” (RS 277); the memoirs of Maximilien de Béthune, Duc de Sully, “a fine edition of which, printed in 1788 by F. J. Desoer in Liège, à la Croic d’or, I acquired for a few shillings many years ago at an auction in the smally country town of Aylsham, north of Norwich” (RS 278); “Bavarian Counsellor of State Joseph von Hazzi’s *Lehrbuch des Seidenbaus für Deutschland* of 1826” (RS 289-90); and the National Socialist “educational pamphlet F213/1939,” written by Professor Lange, who, “citing the Führer’s pronouncement, at the 1936 party rally, that Germany must become self-sufficient within four years in all the materials it lay in the nation’s power to produce itself ... observed that this self-evidently included silk cultivation” (RS 292-3). Images of cover pages from Sully and Lange appear in the text, as does a reproduction of a page apparently taken from the pattern book of a silk merchant.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 329

⁴²⁰ Dated 14th May 1796, it takes up a two-page spread, like the reproduction of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* in the book’s first part. If the book’s structure ought be considered circular, as Gray has it, then perhaps there is an

Any discussion of emblematics is never far away from questions of predetermination and of teleology. Indeed, the basic form of the emblematic Idealtypus invites these questions. The progression from *inscriptio* through *pictura* to *subscriptio* appears a unilinear proposition, at least on the face of it. Much the same applies to emblems after their emigration into the Trauerspiel. Schöne describes the appearance of the ‘argumenta emblematica’ upon the stage as providing the impetus both for “a teleological interpretation of the present occurrence and for premonitory utterances.”⁴²¹ The moths of *Saturn* can be understood in this light. The argumenta might be said to have appeared some time before the passage just discussed, where it is said that the Dowager Empress Tz’u-hsi had a “deep sympathy” for her own silk moths, which “would presently give their lives for the fine thread they were spinning,” and whom she considered to be her “most loyal subjects” (RS 151, translation modified). In many regards these are the descendants of those sixteenth-century silkworms described by Sambucus in the following terms:

Whilst I relieve the indebted and with great effort and supplication produce wealth, I myself am fettered by this work. I, the silkworm, bind myself up in my thread and unhappily perish from my labours, yet leave behind my progeny. They too proceed without suspecting the worst, their fate, and because of the profits no-one is minded to warn them. So great is the love of profit, so great your delight in our silk, that no-one takes it upon himself to save our lives. It is too hard to serve for years, get no wage, and die in one’s own fetters.⁴²²

Sebald’s narrative supplements a terrible premonitory quality, in that this passage anticipates the systematic and clinical violence attested to by Lange’s pamphlet. Where the Dowager Empress ministers to her moths while millions of her human subjects perish from starvation,

echo of Kindt’s dissected corpse to be located in the cuttings of silk arranged so schematically upon the pages of the book in question.

⁴²¹ Schöne, *Emblematik und Drama*, 89.

⁴²² Joannes Sambucus qtd. in *Emblemata. Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne (Stuttgart: Akademie der Wissenschaften (Göttingen), 1967), col. 917.

the scientists of the NS-Zeit minister to theirs while millions of their contemporaries are murdered.⁴²³

And yet the emblem has from the very first frustrated the very teleology which it seems to guarantee. The primacy of the *pictura* compels readers to double back on themselves, to revisit and reinterpret, to pore over images in the light of the text which follows. Transplanted to narrative, it is the apparently inexhaustible recurrence of the same emblematic material, as is the case with the moths of *Saturn*, which bids the reader (or, indeed, the beholder) to pause. “The quotation interpolated into a text or an image forces us,” wrote Sebald, “to revisit what we know of other texts and images, and reconsider our knowledge of the world” (LOG 169).⁴²⁴ The tireless repetition of this action itself implies interruption after interruption, and functions as a rejoinder—if hardly a solution—to teleologies negative and positive, to indulgent fantasies of apocalypse (see MZ 46-53), or to utopianism and a “naïve belief in progress.”⁴²⁵

⁴²³ Sebald frequently made the connection between livestock rearing, broadly considered, and genocide. In his Döblin book, he writes of “the orderly mass slaughter“ of animals which existed before Auschwitz and “what has happened since” (MZ 52). More than once Sebald made explicit his sense of the connection between the slaughter of livestock (especially, though not only, on an industrial basis) and the camps of the Third Reich. In an interview in 1997, he noted that “in England recent months, in the most horrible conditions, hecatombs of cattle—it is now three million animals, I think—have been executed [hingerichtet wurden], because it is said that the market cannot handle cattle that were once infected with a relatively harmless illness. So, one can see, how such things [i.e., the camps] continue to determine our lives. Terrible as it was, I do not see the catastrophe perpetrated by the Germans as a unicum” (UDE 159-60). His essay on Achternbusch contains one especially careless conflation. Sebald’s “ethical verdict” is that “the fate of the pigs in the death factory [Todesfabrik] is in fact our own. The common denominator between Auschwitz and the animal concentration camps is the extreme exploitation of nature. At issue in both cases is the maintenance of one species [Art] at the expense of another” (Sebald, “Theatralische Sendung,” 306; Sebald, “Theatrical Mission,” 184). That “Art”—a term which might equally be translated as “sort” or “species”—is the linguistic point on which historical particularities are reduced to equivalences. The manoeuvre is slipshod, ignoring a fact no doubt well known to Sebald, namely that the extermination at Auschwitz (inter alia) continued well beyond the point at which it became clear that it was contrary to the maintenance of the Third Reich and its Aryan inhabitants.

⁴²⁴ In doing so he alludes to Eco, aptly enough.

⁴²⁵ Sebald, “Die Zweideutigkeit der Toleranz: Anmerkungen zum Interesse der Aufklärung an der Emanzipation der Juden,” *Der Deutschunterricht* 36, no. 4 (August 1984): 46.

ii. Metamorphosis and inescapability

I gradually drifted into creative writing—as one generally calls it—in my mid-forties, out of a sense of frustration with my academic profession, I imagine, and simply because I wanted to find an escape route out of it.⁴²⁶

Regarded from a distance, Sebald's œuvre testifies to a pronounced and abiding interest in metamorphosis as a natural-historical and a symbolic phenomenon. That interest was not concentrated on metamorphosis as re-birth, much less as transcendence. Instead, that concern was with metamorphosis as a response to threats of one sort or another. As an idea it is voided of all redemptive content, and what remains appears merely as a mechanism by which ever more intolerable conditions might be endured. Thus reimagined, metamorphosis is an ethically and politically ambivalent notion, to put it mildly, to which the final passages of *Saturn* attest. With their silkworms and their silk—each mutable in its own right—the Huguenots fled to England upon the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (in 1685), which had up until then “safeguarded at least a degree of tolerance” of a group that “until that time had been subject to severe persecution” (RS 280). Yet it was those self-same materials which, cultivated into a proto-capitalist industry, allowed the descendants of those merchants to so entrap and oppress the weavers in their looms. That is, whilst wealth and high culture were the immediate inducements for these merchants to press their workers into such pitiable conditions, as Schütte rightly notes, the means to do so were earlier provided by the quality and the stuff of metamorphosis itself.⁴²⁷

The question of metamorphosis is given its most sustained treatment in Sebald's essay on Kafka's “Evolutionsgeschichten.” It is a piece noteworthy for its relative obscurity—it remains untranslated and appears nowhere in any of the essay collections—as well as for its halting

⁴²⁶ Sebald, Interview by Wood.

⁴²⁷ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 309.

genesis. Schütte records that in early 1983, on the recommendation of Sheppard, the editors of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* asked Sebald to produce an article marking Kafka's hundredth birthday.⁴²⁸ Sheppard suggested "something rather different from the usual, as sharply polemical or iconoclastic as you think fit," to which Sebald responded with uncharacteristic hesitation: "I am not sure ... that I will be able to produce a polemical piece as I tend to find myself in disagreement far less with Kafka himself than with his critics." Instead, he thought it better to "have a look at some of Kafka's ideas on natural history and more particularly his conjecture that in evolving the so-called psychozootica, i.e. us, nature outmanoeuvred herself."⁴²⁹ Having produced a piece along these lines, the chief editor of the *THES* rejected it as too *outré*, so Sebald translated the original English text into German, then turned to the more obliging editors of *Literatur und Kritik*, who eventually brought it to print in 1986.⁴³⁰

"The attempt at metamorphosis to which Kafka returns again and again," runs Sebald's thesis, "is prompted by the resolution to self-destruct." Viewed from the outside, it appears either "as a perversion of so-called natural and social life, or, from the viewpoint of a sovereign

⁴²⁸ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 220.

⁴²⁹ Sebald qtd. in Schütte, *Interventionen*, 220-1. This seems to be a neologism descended from 'psychozoika', which Sebald found in Stanisław Lem's writing. Whether it was a wilful malapropism is difficult to say. As Schütte has recently noted, Sebald's reading of Lem coincided with his turn away from strictly (though no doubt idiosyncratic) critical writing and towards narrative (Uwe Schütte, "Negative Evolution. Zur Rezeption von Stanisław Lem bei W.G. Sebald," *Prace Literaturoznawcze X* (2022): especially 37-41. <https://doi.org/10.31648/pl.7854>). For Sebald 'psychozootica' was useful in designating self-conscious humanity as a transitional phenomenon which would soon bring about its own disappearance. Thus, in a 1997 interview, he spoke of our "living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out of it, and that other world which is generated by our brain cells. And so clearly the fault line runs right through our physical and emotional makeup. And probably where these tectonic plates rub against each other is where the sources of pain are. Memory is one of these phenomena. It's what qualifies us as emotional creatures, psychozootica or however one might describe them. And I think there is no way in which we can escape it" (W. G. Sebald, "Ghost Hunter," interview by Eleanor Wachtel, in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 56). And in 2001 he spoke of how "organic nature is going to vanish ... It's a process of attrition that's gone on for a long time and that organic nature is being replaced through the agency of the psychozootic power, whatever one might call them, i.e., us—it's being replaced by something else, by chemistry, dust, and stones, which function in some form or other. And we don't know what it's going to be. On the whole, the thing evolves under its own steam. There's very little we can do to steer it" (Interview by Joseph Cuomo, 102-3). Taken together, these utterances anticipate those questions of expulsion and inexorability taken up below.

⁴³⁰ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 221.

intelligence, as a natural-historical experiment—that of a being knowingly caught in its own species attempting to break out into a region in which an already condemned life might somehow go on.”⁴³¹ This summary vision of natural-historical development owes no small debt to the work of Rudolf Bilz (1898-1976), a largely forgotten psychoanalyst-cum-paleoanthropologist.⁴³² It could be said that Bilz, characterised by Schütte as a “boundary-flouting outsider,” supplied that iconoclasm which Sebald was reluctant to bring to bear on his subject, or so he claimed.⁴³³ An avowed empiricist bent on scrutinising the archaeological and historical records, nevertheless Bilz’s primary data, practically to the exclusion of all else, were what he perceived to be the fears of his patients.⁴³⁴ In fact he subsumed fear’s various expressions under an “Angst-Formeln”—i.e., a fear formula—and concluded that fear itself is “the basic affective state [die grundlegende ‘Befindlichkeit’] of human subjectivity.”⁴³⁵ For Bilz “the uppermost principle in the existence” of all animals is “Feindvermeidung,” or the avoidance of adversaries, a state characterised above all by suspicion or mistrust (Mißtrauen), to the extent that the latter is seen to be interchangeable with the former.⁴³⁶ This is not the place to recount Bilz’s theory in great detail, though it is seductively simple. What is important in regards to Sebald’s work is a sense of anthropogenesis and natural-historical development

⁴³¹ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 195.

⁴³² According to the one extant biography, Bilz trained as a psychoanalyst in 1920s Vienna, starting with an unsuccessful attempt to study under Freud, who, it seems, preferred to foist Bilz on one of his students. Continuing his studies in Berlin and completing them in Heidelberg, Bilz went on to practise at the University of Mainz’s psychiatric hospital (Sven-Karsten Peters, *Rudolf Bilz: Leben und Wirken in der Medizinischen Psychologie Beiträge zur medizinischen Psychologie und medizinischen Soziologie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004), 27-8). The greater part of his energies, though, were directed towards theorising on a grand scale, to the extent that colleagues and patients would have to draw him away from fixations on individual symptoms to get him to fulfil his basic clinical responsibilities (Ibid, 53).

⁴³³ Schütte, *Interventionen*, 303.

⁴³⁴ “When our paleoanthropological Ur-nature is made transparent, our sentiments, experiences and behaviours take on new hues.” Confronted with such revelations, no-one, wrote Bilz with a certain defensiveness, “can dispute that things are thus revealed in a new light. Wan concepts are suddenly infused with life-blood, just as is life itself” (Rudolf Bilz, *Studien über Angst und Schmerz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 118).

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 118.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 15.

borne of crisis, and of the accommodations thus necessitated.⁴³⁷ In nuce, an era of naïveté, harmony and good health was brought to an end—and with it, humans given a beginning—when our earliest ancestors “fell into a danger zone [in eine Gefahrenzone geraten] on the basis of an evolutionary leap,” as Sebald put it in his 1981 essay on Herbeck (BU 140). In his early essay on Handke, first published in 1975, he cites Bilz in describing the release of Kaspar into the light of the stage as “a shocking and painful transition to surroundings that are qualitatively entirely new, where the ‘originally prestabilised harmony’ is lost, and his inner resources prove inadequate” (CS 58).⁴³⁸ And he adds more detail to the picture in his 1987 paper on Achternbusch, in which he records how “Rudolf Bilz has described the phase in the prehistory of mankind in which, as a result of the exile from the trees, the state of naïve thinking was left behind as an emotional catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, as a first irredeemable loss of nature.”⁴³⁹ As Bilz put it in inelegant, patently Edenic terms, our chimpanzee ancestors abandoned their “jungle-chimpanzee-paradise [das Urwald-Shimpansen-Paradies],” and were “thrown [geworfen]” not merely into the open savannah but into “a state of hopelessness [Hoffnungslosigkeit].”⁴⁴⁰ This shift to an “existence in a treeless state [das Dasein in der Baumlosigkeit]” rid our ancestors of the possibility of upward flight, and as such was of “decisive significance”—a “catastrophe of unimaginable proportions,” in fact.⁴⁴¹ Apparently complex phenomena have a habit of collapsing one into another under Bilz’s penmanship, hence treelessness equals hopelessness equals inescapability (Ausweglosigkeit).⁴⁴²

⁴³⁷ On the sense of humanity subject to a profound and negative mutation, consider also the influence of the French Germanist Pierre Bertaux (1906-86) (Uwe Schütte, “Europäische Peripherien. Sebald, Tübingen, Bertaux,” *Weimarer Beiträge* 68, no. 2 (2022): 305-9).

⁴³⁸ He also cited Bilz extensively in a 1983 essay on Handke, where the talk is of “hypersensitivity, violent fits of temper as sudden, explosive motor reactions, timidity and bashfulness” in subjects shorn of the securities of civilisation, and of schizophrenia understood as “being at the mercy of a paleoanthropological preparedness”—for adversaries, presumably (BU 126).

⁴³⁹ Sebald, “Art of Transformation,” 176.

⁴⁴⁰ Bilz, *Angst und Schmerz*, 291 & 278.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴⁴² He uses the mathematician’s equals sign liberally, apparently without embarrassment.

If this strikes us as an especially disconsolate sense of natural-history as such, and of humanity's place within its course, there are mitigations to be found, though they are slight. As Bilz put it, "if we regard our species as a creature of evolution," then we are also forced to admit that, having traded the supposed harmony of perpetual anxiety and suspicion for an inescapable hopelessness, our ancestors were left with a "deficient inner balance in need of illusions" with which to right itself.⁴⁴³ Hence, given "there was no going back" and as a matter of psychological necessity, our ancestors developed myths.⁴⁴⁴ This, too, Sebald reiterated at length. "Anthropological theory assumes that exposure in a treeless situation where all escape upwards was cut off led to the invention of myths," as he expresses it in the Handke essay (CS 58). And as he put it in the Achternbusch paper of 1987, "an increasingly disturbing lack of meaning has ever since been counterbalanced by a large compensatory production of artefacts and other symbols of meaning, be they technical/purposeful or fanciful/mythopoeic. It is by means of such real or imaginary items that our species, ever more frantically, seeks to establish conditions of relative harmony, knowing all too well that there is no turning back."⁴⁴⁵ Most pointedly of all, perhaps, in regards to Herbeck's minor poetry, he explains that in the present situation, "during which technological progress is already teleologically orientating itself towards catastrophe," the "creative tendency to symbolise and physiognomise which marks the language of the schizophrenic—in diametric opposition to the language of administration—is surely much more the locus of our hopes than ordered discourse" (BU 140).

In Kafka's parables of evolution, Sebald discovers that "every evolutionary step represents a mere stopgap," that "the invention of new forms of life or life support scarcely improve our

⁴⁴³ Bilz, *Angst und Schmerz*, 277-8.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 278. Exactly why our early ancestors did not simply return to the paradise from whence they came is not immediately clear, though Rebecca Solnit has more recently offered an explanation, noting that at the time of Bilz's writing, the prevailing (though now broadly refuted) explanation for the development of bipedalism was "radical climate change," which forced forest dwellers out into the open (Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2014), 34). Solnit also does an admirable job of skewering the various patriarchal justifications for bipedalism, and the contemporary male anxieties beneath them.

⁴⁴⁵ Sebald, "Art of Transformation," 176.

prospects of a homeostatic arrangement with nature,” that “life grows ever more remote from the simple, elegant solutions belonging to the early history of evolution,” before reaching the conclusion that, “compared with the wonder of photosynthesis, the physiological constitution of humans is a primitive, shoddy piece of work [ein primitives Machwerk].”⁴⁴⁶ In light of “the general process of entropic dissociation,” or, if you prefer, natural history’s “inwritten rate of decay [eingeschriebene Verfallsgeschwindigkeit],” which can only be “arrested for a moment here and there,” metamorphosis begins to seem as futile as it is necessary.⁴⁴⁷ In the Herbeck essay cited above, Sebald termed this tendency of historical development the “planless tapering of history [der planlose Ablauf der Geschichte]” (UH 142). “Everything we know as life, in its manifest elaborations, emerges from the effort to counteract entropy, the principle tendency, by the development of ever more elaborate systems.”⁴⁴⁸ Sebald elsewhere conceived of human history in particular as “a catastrophic consequence of an anthropogenesis based from the first on evolutionary mistakes, a consequence that has long been foreshadowed by the complex physiology of human beings, the development of their hypertrophic minds, and their technological means of production” (CS 100).⁴⁴⁹

A *quoi bon la littérature*—to re-pose a question which Sebald posed just a month before his death (CS 247 / 214)—in the face of such “a relentless process of enlightenment, in which the reader is robbed of all those illusions by which humans have through the centuries guarded against bankruptcy of the soul?”⁴⁵⁰ Reason was forged in a “workshop of delusion [Werkstatt

⁴⁴⁶ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 199.

⁴⁴⁷ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 198 & 200.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁴⁹ He again follows Bilz, albeit implicitly, in conceiving of the course of natural-historical development in a tripartite model of phases (Phasenmodell), or “aggregate states” (Aggregatzustand). Bilz follows the era of naïveté and harmony with those of myth and of modernity (see, in particular, Bilz, *Angst und Schmerz*, 278-91). Sebald’s are those of the essay’s title: animal, human, machine. Passage from one to another is the work of a moment: “the natural-historical moment, in which animal becomes human, and the historical, in which the human becomes apparatus.” So momentary, in fact, that, as Kafka’s stories reveal, the metamorphoses between are so “thoroughly fluid [durchaus fließend]” that they “cannot be apprehended [dingfest gemacht], even by the most determined attention.” (Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 197).

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

des Wahn].” Our ability to work is a “lamentable [unglücklichselig]” one.⁴⁵¹ All that remains to us is “the sheer restlessness of thought such as it is elaborated in the art practised by Kafka,” in which he “attempts to make perceptible the permanence of the crisis and the mutation of humanity it necessitates.”⁴⁵² Considered as an integral part of a larger allegorical scheme, the moth—arch emblem of mutability—provides something of a response, if not a solution. In the various metamorphoses of the silkworm, might transformation, the founding principle of artistic work, be said to offer “the utopic hope of an escape from the existing order,” as Schütte puts it?⁴⁵³ In many respects, it figures at the junction of those vast and apparently intractable natural-historical and aesthetic crises described in broad terms above. In its obscurity and mutability it appears—or, perhaps more accurately, can be made to appear—alternately: docile and productive, and in that regard accommodating to an instrumental, ordered discourse and the scientific-industrial forces which it serves; or evasive and subversive, in which regard it serves as cipher for a means of expression wilfully at odds with said discourse and said forces.

It is with these possibilities in mind that I want to turn to the first moths of *Austerlitz*. With his foster mother dead and his foster father in “the Denbigh asylum” (A 93), the protagonist is in the relative sanctuary of Stower Grange, a remote and near enough anarchic Welsh boarding school staffed by aloof eccentrics. Raised in the reformed faith of Emyr Elias, a Calvinist preacher, Austerlitz has lately given the narrator a first definite suggestion as to his origins, describing how at fifteen he was called to the office of the school’s headmaster, one Penrith-Smith, who, “repeating several times in various ways, in his typically confused manner, that in the circumstances my conduct had been exemplary, truly exemplary,” reveals that he is to be awarded a sixth-form scholarship and, what is more, that his presumed name to that point—Dafydd Elias—is not that which he was given at birth, which was instead “Jacques Austerlitz”

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, 199.

⁴⁵² Ibid, 201.

⁴⁵³ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 309.

(A 93). It is, as it were, the first step back along the path of his prior assimilation into gentile Welsh society.⁴⁵⁴ His earlier feeling, upon reading the story of Moses in his Welsh children's Bible, that "my proper place was among the tiny figures populating the camp" in the Sinai desert begins to appear in its proper context (A 77). At Stower Grange he befriends a younger boy, Gerald, whose family have Austerlitz spend the holidays at Andromeda Lodge, their "country house just outside the small seaside town of Barmouth," which had been transformed into "a kind of natural-history museum" in the nineteenth century by an ancestor of Gerald's who had "made the acquaintance of Charles Darwin, then working on his study of the Descent of Man" in a house nearby (A 111 & 119). Gerald's Great-Uncle Alphonso, who "continued the line of the naturalist Fitzpatricks," on one occasion took Austerlitz and Gerald "up the hill behind the house on a still, moonless night to spend a few hours looking into the mysterious world of moths" (A 125 & 127). In recounting this particular episode, by way of preface, he instructs the narrator as follows:

Most of us, said Austerlitz, know nothing about moths except that they eat holes in carpets and clothes and have to be driven out with camphor and naphthalene, although in truth their lineage is among the most ancient and most remarkable in the whole history of nature. (A 135 / 127, translation modified)

In the image of this ancient group expelled from its home and threatened with extermination by industrial chemicals, we are again confronted with a vivid—not to mention forceful—emblematic arrangement. The moths' efforts to find some relief in the wilderness, so to speak, are typically ill-fated. Austerlitz recalls how Alphonso explained that "in periods of drought,

⁴⁵⁴ It ought to be stressed that Austerlitz's father Maximilian was "one of the most prominent officials of the Czech Social Democratic Party" and his mother Agáta a touring actress, both of whom "had a special fondness for all things French" (A 217). That is to say that they inhabited not a shtetl, but a gentile metropolis. That Agáta's "colourful notion of the ideal world" was inspired by the works of Jacques Offenbach—whose ancestry, according to Siegfried Kracauer's memorable account, "is lost in the darkness of the ghetto," and who reached Paris after a childhood which began in "a street filled with old-clothes shops in the second-hand-dealers' quarter of Cologne, where musty smells mingled with the music that echoed all day long from his father's house"—suggests the altogether provisional and precarious nature of the family's position before the German invasion (A 218; Siegfried Kracauer, *Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (London: Constable, 1937), 10-1).

when no dew had fallen at night for a long time, it was apparently known for them to set out together in a kind of cloud in search of the nearest river or stream, where they drowned” (A 129-30). Yet, for all their afflictions, the moths are seen to express qualities of endurance and evasiveness. On the nocturnal excursion in question, having laid down a white sheet and lighted a lamp, Alphonso allows Austerlitz and Gerald “simply [to] gaze at their wonderful display [einfach nur schauen und staunen] for a long time” (A 136 / 128). Says Austerlitz:

I don't recollect now exactly what kinds of night-winged creatures landed there beside us, perhaps they were China-Marks, Dark Porcelains and Marbled Beauties, Scarce Silverlines or Burnished Brass, Green Foresters and Green Adelas, white Plumes, Light Arches, Old Ladies and Ghost Moths, but at any rate we counted dozens of them, so different in their structure and appearance that neither Gerald nor I could grasp [fassen] it all. (A 136 / 128)⁴⁵⁵

Notwithstanding his forebearer's association with Darwin, Alphonso is a natural-historian in a benign, even anachronistic mould. There is not a little of Browne about him. “Always even-tempered,” he “spent most of his time out of doors, going on long expeditions even in the worst of weather” (A 124).⁴⁵⁶ He laments the exploitation and subsequent dying-off of animal and vegetable life from its once tremendous diversity. “I remember, said Austerlitz, how Alphonso once told his great-nephew and me that everything was fading before our eyes, and that many of the loveliest colours had already disappeared” (A 126). This goes some way to explaining why his young students are unable to grasp the moths in their entirety. He has instructed them thus, and warned them of being overzealous (A 125).

⁴⁵⁵ Bell notes that her English translation omits one kind of moth. “When it came to translating the moth passage of Austerlitz, not quite all the names had precise English vernacular equivalents for the German moth names, and I sent Max my own list of the prettiest names. ... Max, incidentally, decided to leave out the death's-head hawk moth altogether because, he said, it seemed to sound much nastier in English than the German Totenkopf” (Bell, “Translating W. G. Sebald,” 213).

⁴⁵⁶ “When it was fine,” he would sit “on a camp stool somewhere near the house in his white smock, a straw hat on his head, painting watercolours. When he was thus engaged he generally wore glasses with grey silk tissue instead of lenses in the frames, so that the landscape appeared through a fine veil that muted its colours, and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes. The faint images that Alphonso transferred on to paper, said Austerlitz, were barely sketches of pictures—here a rocky slope, there a small bosky thicket or a cumulus cloud—fragments, almost without colour” (A 124-6).

Andromeda Lodge had “some kind of cabinet of natural curiosities in every room” (A 118). Beneath this observation is interpolated a photograph of a display case containing dozens of lepidoptera specimens arranged in neat columns, which is to say that it conforms to the “rigorous taxonomic ordering” of a later mode of collection, rather than that of the early modern Wunderkammer.⁴⁵⁷ I would add that the case in question has a large diagonal crack across the



A little cracked (A 122)

pane of glass through which one views its contents. In this it recalls Sebald’s writing on Tripp, which includes a reproduction of a portrait entitled *Ein leiser Sprung* [*A Little Crack(ed)*], in regards to which Sebald notes that “Tripp makes use of *trompe l’oeil* as just one technique among many, and always ... with the closest possible link to the subject of the painting” (LOG 162). At Andromeda Lodge, regarding what appears on the face of things to be a well-maintained and orderly display—a reduction of “biodiversity to a set of taxonomic labels and resemanticising animals as exemplars of a species,” as Long has it—upon closer inspection we find evidence of neglect on the part of the collectors, which is to suggest a loss of faith in their

⁴⁵⁷ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 40. Of the reference to Darwin, Long adds that “the Andromeda Lodge collection is intimately linked with the young science of morphology ... [which] was imperial in its implications in the sense that it claimed to be able to bring every natural form that had ever existed under its dominion” (Ibid, 39).

enterprise and its methods.⁴⁵⁸ We also find a strange kind of reality effect which, quite against form, serves to undermine any claims to verisimilitude made by the cabinet as an epistemological entity, which visibly fails to contain that which it is intended to circumscribe and to bring to order. The surrounding script acts in concert, all the more so in the case of the German text, which describes “blindworms preserved in formaldehyde [in Formaldehyd eingelegte Blindschleichen]” (A 122 / 128)—a wry nod to the paucity of vision (and perhaps a certain sclerosis of thought) belonging to the collectors as much as their specimens. Fittingly, given the mode of contemplation which he represents, Alphonso is held up as an exception. Austerlitz recalls how “Alphonso told us how each of these extravagant creatures had its own character,” which is to say that they exceed any normalising attempts to reduce them to a set of phenotypical traits (A 129). Yet more revealing are the following remarks:

The trails of light which they seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals, and which Gerald in particular admired, did not really exist, explained Alphonso, but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye, appearing to see a certain afterglow in the place from which the insect itself, shining for only a fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone. It was such unreal phenomenon, said Alphonso, the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world ... that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them. (A 131-2)

To repeat if only to refute once more, the vulgar view of allegorical imagery treats its constituent parts as rigid expressions of qualities which are as transparent as they are void of all but the most base meaning. Cast in this terms, the subsequent taxonomic treatment of the stuff of nature was bound to take precedence, if only for the fact that at least it boasts a utility which the former seems to lack. What the above passage contrives to do—and it is hardly alone in Sebald’s corpus—is to seize those raw materials which the latter has produced, to spring open the cabinet, as it were, and to attempt to return to them something of what was lost,

⁴⁵⁸ Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 43.

namely, something suprasensual which evades systematisation. Necessary to perceive those phantom traces, those unreal incursions into the real, merely physical world, is that mode of perception and apperception described above—above all a sluggish eye, one inclined to detours and delays, we might say, which has no intention of keeping pace with a nature considered to be developing according to discernible and describable patterns (as in the case of a Darwinian morphology). It is a way of seeing which admits its belatedness without hesitation, content to attend to what it can retrieve—physical and metaphysical—from those ascendant modes of perception which have contrived to render it obsolete.

Comparisons with early modern modes of observation and of collection only take us so far, however. Benjamin has it that Nature “remained the great teacher” for writers of the Baroque, yet it appeared to them not “in bud and bloom,” as it did for those of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but instead “in the overripeness and decay of its creations ... looming before them as eternal transience: in that alone did the saturnine gaze of those generations recognise history.”⁴⁵⁹ Perceptible in *Austerlitz* is at once an intensification and an exhaustion of that process of transience and decay. By Alphonso’s reckoning, it has been some time in the making. Moths discovered during the day, he explains, tend to be “in a death-like state when you find them, and have to coax and quiver themselves back to life” (A 134 / 130).⁴⁶⁰ He goes on:

Their body temperature will then be thirty-six degrees, like that of mammals, and of dolphins and tunny fish swimming at full speed. Thirty-six degrees, according to Alphonso, has always proved the best natural level [ein Pegel ... der sich in der Natur immer wieder als der günstigste erwiesen habe], a kind of magical threshold, and it had sometimes occurred to him, Alphonso, said Austerlitz, that all mankind’s misfortunes were connected with its departure at some point in time from that norm, and with the slightly feverish, overheated condition in which we constantly find ourselves. (A 134-5 / 130-1)

⁴⁵⁹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 190 (translation modified).`-b

⁴⁶⁰ Like Kindt’s corpse, the moths are “totenstarr.” Both are reanimated in the narrative, though they still hover somewhere between life and death.

Other than a pronounced despair, what is striking about this passage is its sweep. Aside from the norm itself, all else is cast in the broadest of terms: “always ... a kind of ... all mankind’s misfortunes ... at some point in time ... constantly.” Doubtless there is occasional truth to Peter Fritzsche’s line that Auschwitz and World War II function together as a “dramatised hinge forever separating the rich lives before and the lonesome ones afterward,” especially in this, Sebald’s last completed narrative work.⁴⁶¹ But if that caesura at times renders its pre-history in colours of plenitude, which indeed it does, every bit as often it casts its impoverishing pall backwards as well as forwards, to the extent that human history as such becomes pre-determined by misfortune.

iii. Assimilation, accommodation, distance

I’ve always been interested in invertebrates, in insects, and very much in moths. ... Butterflies flit about in daylight, moths hide in darkness. You only see them when, for instance, they get into a house. Then they sit absolutely still in a fold of curtain or on a whitewashed wall, for days on end, until all life has gone out of them and they fall to the floor. ... Perhaps that is what we should do, instead of bustling about going to see the doctor and causing trouble to everyone around us. The idea of transformation, metamorphosis, in terms of turning from a pupa into a beautiful winged thing, doesn’t particularly appeal to me. It strikes me as rather trite. To me the wonderful thing about these insects is the way they perish.⁴⁶²

We cannot speak of metamorphosis and endurance of suffering, such as they are handled in Sebald’s work, without broaching the subject of Jewish assimilation in Europe prior to the NS-Zeit. In light of the extent to which it shaped Sebald’s writing, from his early critical monographs, through numerous essays, and onto his major narrative works, it is a subject which has attracted relatively little critical scrutiny. In an essay first conceived in 1974 and only

⁴⁶¹ Peter Fritzsche, “Sebald’s Twentieth-Century Histories,” in *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 297.

⁴⁶² Sebald, Interview by Sarah Kafatou, 34-5.

published a decade later, Sebald described the principles of tolerance and emancipation first propounded during the Enlightenment as borne of self-interest and as tending towards their own negation.⁴⁶³ “Their only yardstick is ... bourgeois society,” whose “inherent tendency is to conceive of itself not as means, but instead as goal and end of an improved world.”⁴⁶⁴ In light of “the intransigence of bourgeois society in the face of all that which strikes it as nonidentical” (MZ 16), as he put it elsewhere, outsiders are required to demonstrate “a readiness for self-negation” in order to take part (which is not to say an equal part).⁴⁶⁵ Tolerance, then, is in fact “a form of persecution.”⁴⁶⁶ In even the most philanthropic projects can be seen the dim outlines of that which was to follow, that is, “a sober statecraft” bent on “erasing Judaism and expanding bourgeois society.”⁴⁶⁷ Regarding the position of the Jews in Austria, he writes in the early 1980s that:

Reforms which were previously enshrined in law, such as the right to buy land, were in the Vormärz period and even after 1848 variously abolished or else curtailed. In spite of such setbacks and although it took until 1897 for a total legal emancipation of Jews, in the course of this decade stamped with a general liberal optimism, the external and internal condition of Jews—as good as untouched by the vagaries of history for centuries—changed a great deal. (UH 40)

Yet, the sense that they might finally be at home was “an illusion created by the glow or afterglow of imperial tolerance,” or merely “another station on an endless odyssey [Irrfahrt]” (UH 133). The illusion is produced and reproduced by German idealism broadly conceived, whose claims to provide an intellectual and affective tabernacle under which Jews might shelter

⁴⁶³ In the course of which, unsurprisingly, he acknowledges his debt to Adorno and Horkheimer’s negative dialectic.

⁴⁶⁴ W. G. Sebald, “Zweideutigkeit der Toleranz,” 29. “‘Petty bourgeois’ was another of Max’s favourite terms of opprobrium” (Sheppard, “Dexter – sinister,” 445).

⁴⁶⁵ Sebald, “Die Zweideutigkeit der Toleranz,” 29.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 32.

“after their long journey through the wilderness” contain a “pathetic promise of freedom and justice” (UH 50-1). In fact, that “naïve belief in progress”⁴⁶⁸ always implied loss and ruin:

The desire for a new, bourgeois home carried with it a mourning for the old, renounced world, as well as a certain unease that a new dispersal was set in motion with the opening up of the Ghettos which for so long were the only possible abode. (UH 40-1)

This impossible bind is suggested by the case of Austerlitz at Stower Grange, which, notwithstanding its quasi-feudal bearing—“there were all kinds of forms of major tyranny and minor despotism, forced labour, enslavement, serfdom” etc.—is undoubtedly meant for the cultivation of the indigenous bourgeoisie (A 82). Penrith-Smith advises that he publicly maintain his Welsh name—“as far as the other boys are concerned ... you remain Dafydd Elias for the time being”—even as he remains Jacques Austerlitz in respect to the British educational bureaucracy. He should write the latter on his examination papers, “which would determine our subsequent careers ... or else your work may be considered invalid” (A 93-4).⁴⁶⁹ It is that “bourgeois perspective, under which a Jew remains a Jew, even and precisely where he is no longer allowed to be a Jew,” as Sebald put it in his essay on Becker (more of which below).⁴⁷⁰

These essays are given their nostalgic accent by certain gestures—for example, back to the “uninhibited quality of Jewish religious practice,” or to “the Hassidic tradition’s great trove of experience and wisdom, such as was later conveyed to naïve western readers by Martin Buber” (UH 43 & 49). A similar register can be heard in the last part of *Die Ausgewanderten*, in passages of the journal said to have been written by the mother of Max Ferber, and in which

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 46.

⁴⁶⁹ Though, it must be said, that his adopted, “gentile” surname is an anglicised Hebraic one, and that his birth, “Jewish” forename is a thoroughly French-gentile one, given him, to compound the irony and confusion of the situation, on account of his mother’s reverence for Jacques Offenbach. His birth surname is, appropriately, culturally indeterminate. Austerlitz claims, somewhat implausibly, never to have “come upon another Austerlitz, not in the telephone books of London, or Paris, Amsterdam or Antwerp.” He does add, however, that “a neighbour who describes herself as a passionate reader told me that in Kafka’s diaries she found a small, bow-legged man of my own name who, as Kafka recorded, had been called in to circumcise his nephew” (A 95-6).

⁴⁷⁰ W. G. Sebald, “Jurek Becker,” 229.

she describes her childhood first in Steinach and then in Kissingen. Steinach is characterised as a rural idyll, and the descriptions of the Jewish High Holy Days are especially affectionate (DA 300-1 / 200-1).⁴⁷¹ Kissingen seems to Luiza “in retrospect to have marked the first step on a path that grew narrower day by day and led inevitably to the point I have now arrived at” (DA 208). The “decisive factor in giving up farming, moving from backwater Steinach, and finally establishing a position in middle-class life” was Luiza’s father, a stabler, winning of a contract “as supplier and provisioner to the army” (DA 208). The point Luiza had now arrived at—the point of her writing the memoirs—is 1939-41. Having sent their son Max to England, the subsequent attempts of his parents, Luiza and Fritz, to secure their own emigration “had necessarily grown more complex with every week that passed – and, as his mother had clearly understood, impossible to carry out” (DA 192). That is, Luiza assigns her father’s bourgeois ambitions a determining role in the path to their destruction. And Max’s later sense of Manchester and his place within it does nothing to undermine that determinism: “Throughout the nineteenth century, the German and Jewish influence was stronger in Manchester than in any other German city; and so, although I had intended to move in the opposite direction, when I arrived in Manchester I had come home, in a sense, and with every year I have spent since then in this birthplace of industrialisation, amidst the black façades, I have realised more clearly than ever that I am here, as they used to say, to serve under the chimney” (DA 192).

⁴⁷¹ There is even some sense of German-Jewish symbiosis, as Stuart Taberner has suggested (Stuart Taberner, “German Nostalgia? Remembering German-Jewish Life in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*,” *The Germanic Review* 79, no. 3: 185 and passim, <https://doi.org/10.3200/GERR.79.3.181-202>). Luiza and her brother attend a Catholic school, for instance, and nowhere is there a suggestion that they experience anti-Semitism in their teachers or their gentile classmates (or even suspect such sentiments to exist). In this connection, it is worth recalling a later essay on the works of Gottfried Keller, in which Sebald wrote that it is “a particularly attractive trait in Keller’s work that he should afford the Jews—whom Christianity has for centuries reproached with the invention of money-lending – pride of place in a story intended to evoke the memory of a pre-capitalist era,” namely a passage in *Der grüne Heinrich*. “This good-natured smile on the part of the Jewish traders at the credulity and foolishness of the unenlightened Christian folk, which Keller captures here, is the epitome of true tolerance: the tolerance of the oppressed, barely endured minority towards those who control the vagaries of their fate. The idea of tolerance, much vaunted in the wake of the Enlightenment but in practice always diluted, pales into insignificance beside the forbearance of the Jewish people” (LOG 98).

In the terms reiterated by Sebald across a number of essays, the assimilation of Austrian and German Jews is rendered in reproachful terms. In an essay on the so-called Ghettoesgeschichten of the nineteenth century, it is described as “transformation through bourgeois education [bürgerliche Bildung]” (UH 46). “Impelled by the ambition, legitimated by Jewish tradition, to overmatch one’s teacher as quickly as possible, the student devoted to reading and learning is able—which Kafka sketched in ‘A Report to an Academy’—to attain the educational level of the average European in the shortest time” (UH 50).⁴⁷² Further, “the ability to give up on one’s wishes and foreswear happiness,” prized as characteristically Jewish virtues by Leopold Kompert (1822-1886), one of the authors to whom Sebald turns his hand, is “in reality none other than the no less wonderful efficacy of that bourgeois reason committed to memory from birth, whose fruits we recognise as tractability and dull heroism” (UH 46). The “sentimental transfigurations of the Jewish family” found in these tales are uttered so frequently “precisely because they are that aspect of the Jewish ethos which can be readily accommodated to the bourgeois order” (UH 43). Sebald is unsparing in his criticism of the ethnographic novel in general, which, “as it diligently works out that which is ‘characteristic,’ it plays a suspect mediating role between the scientific study on the one hand and the crass caricature on the other” (UH 42). The Ghettoesgeschichte plays the most suspect role of all, in that it served as “an integral part of the ideal process of Germanisation [ideelle Germanisierungsprozess] which in the course of the bourgeois century so little became a political reality in Eastern Europe, to the

⁴⁷² Indeed, Sebald made precisely the same point in regards in his essay on Kafka’s ‘Evolutionesgeschichten’ (Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 195). Austerlitz follows a similar pattern. His inspired history teacher André Hilary marks an essay of his “with a triple-starred A, giving it back in person and not, as he put it, along with everyone else’s pathetic efforts. He himself had published various articles in historical journals, and said he could not have written such a perceptive piece in so comparatively short a space of time” (A 103). Under Hilary’s tutelage, Austerlitz “far outstripped the rest of my year in our final examinations” to the extent that he is “provided with a generous scholarship” (A 104). The latter allows him “to go on my own way into freedom [ins Freie],” that is, to study at Oriel, Oxford, just as did his teacher (A 108 / 104). Upon the death of Elias in 1954, Hilary “undertook the task of winding up his meagre estate and then set on foot the process of my naturalisation [Einbürgerung], which in view of the fact that Elias had obliterated [getilgt] every indication of my origin involved a good deal of difficulty” (A 109 / 105). I note “getilgt” (liquidated as much as obliterated) and “Einbürgerung” (borne of Bürger, burgher, bourgeois) because together they more emphatically associate the process of bourgeois assimilation with the destruction of Europe’s Jews.

regret of the growing number of geopoliticians, that the vision was put into practice with violence a few generations later” (UH 58). Sebald here shows much the same willingness to implicate assimilated Jews in their later oppression as he did in his *Sternheim* book, where he upbraided the latter for having “repudiated his origins directly as well as indirectly—in the concealment and repression of the experience of alienation—such that the failure of his assimilation is evident in the falsity of his production, which is a concession to those very conditions whose intolerance demanded adaptation” (KO 50).

“Ordnung” is something of a refrain. “The mind is, as we have learnt in the interim, the seat of bourgeois order’s authority [Ordnungswaltung]” (UH 43). “Ordnungswaltung” is a compound practically all Sebald’s own. He was apparently fond of its capacity to describe that especially malign quality of European systems of thought such as began to emerge in the seventeenth century and come to fruition in the eighteenth; he also put it to use in his essay on Peter Weiss, specifically in the aforementioned passage regarding his and Rembrandt’s anatomies.⁴⁷³ The same composite is suggested by Sebald’s description of the final destruction of Eastern Europe’s Jews as having been practised by a German army “mordend mit wahrem Biedersinn” (UH 59)—that is, murderous with a genuine Biedermeier (taken to mean essentially bourgeois) mentality. Joseph Roth’s writing—included in the *Ghettogesichte* essay, somewhat anachronistically, as an exception to the rule—prompts the conclusion, familiar above all from Sebald’s essay on Kafka’s “Evolutionsgeschichten,” that “through the

⁴⁷³ “The ritual performed on the victim in Weiss’s picture,” he writes, “derives from inspiration of a more recent kind which, in the spirit of the general maintenance of order [Ordnungswaltung], aims for the fullest possible identification and labelling [Identifizierung und Rubrizierung] of all the separate parts of a corporeality increasingly seen as subversive” (CS 134 / NHD 177). In the interests of Anglo-German mediation, we might here call upon the powers of Primo Levi, by no means out of place in the present context. Reflecting upon a professional correspondence, dated 1967, with Dr Müller, lately his overseer in the laboratory at Buna-Monowitz—from which, “on clear days the flames of the crematorium [at Auschwitz] were visible”—Levi dwells upon Müller’s stated desire to meet “im Sinne der Bewältigung der so furchtbaren Vergangenheit.” Levi “later found out that this is a stereotyped phrase, a euphemism in today’s Germany, where it is universally understood as ‘redemption from Nazism’; but the root *walt* that it contains also appears in the words that express ‘domination,’ ‘violence,’ and ‘rape,’ and I believe that translating the expression with ‘distortion of the past’ or ‘violence done to the past,’ would not stray very far from its profound meaning” (Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken, 1984), 221-2).

so-called progress of civilisation and the growth of justice and order, much greater injustices and misfortunes befall us than those that are natural, which we suffer in any case” (UH 63).

It is perhaps the major unresolved contradiction of Sebald’s career that he was so feted for his unusual attentiveness and tact on the subject of Jewish suffering, at least insofar as his narrative writing is concerned, at the same time as he was regularly excoriating German-Jewish writers in his critical prose.⁴⁷⁴ First there was his academic work on Sternheim and Döblin, then there were polemics trained at Hermann Broch (1886-1951) and Jurek Becker (c. 1938-97). To characterise Sebald as having waged an “area-bombing campaign” against German letters, as Sheppard once did, is even more apt than it was intended, for there is an indiscriminate quality to Sebald’s critical fire.⁴⁷⁵ One postgraduate student at UEA who had “quite a few chats with Max about modern European drama” in the early 1970s “asked him why he had written a book about an author whom he clearly detested,” namely, Sternheim. “The reply was along the lines of ‘because these people are so awful’ followed by a belly laugh.”⁴⁷⁶ Doubtless ‘these people’ could be taken to comprise the gamut of post-war German writing—and, indeed, Germanistik—which Sebald took to be guilty of significant political, ethical and aesthetic failings in respect to the destruction of the immediate past. However, it is also suggestive, I think, of Sebald’s pronounced aversion to the work of those assimilated Jewish writers who had succeeded in surviving the destruction.⁴⁷⁷ Far from being accorded

⁴⁷⁴ See, for instance, Arthur Williams, “‘Das Korsakowsche Syndrom’: Remembrance and Responsibility in W.G. Sebald,” in *German Culture and the Uncomfortable Past: Representations of National Socialism in Contemporary Germanic Literature*, ed. Helmut Schmitz (London: Routledge, 2001), especially 75-84.

⁴⁷⁵ Sheppard, “Dexter – Sinister,” 445.

⁴⁷⁶ Unnamed postgraduate student qtd. in Turner, “At the University,” 120.

⁴⁷⁷ The exceptions are Jean Améry and, to a lesser extent, Primo Levi, whom he always treated in terms inclining towards reverence, though their having committed suicide meant that they were considered belated victims. Revealing is Sebald’s description of Améry’s decision to end abruptly a speaking tour in order to travel to Salzburg, there to commit suicide. “This in certain respects demonstrative manner of taking the road into the open [den Weg ins Freie zu gehen] had not a little to do with the solution of the insoluble conflict between Heimat and exile” (UH 142-3). The strange euphemism for suicide seems to be an allusion to Arthur Schnitzler’s *Der Weg ins Freie* (1908), which treats extensively with the subject of Austrian-Jewish assimilation.

concessions on account of their impossible situation, or sympathy in light of persecutions endured, these writers were often subject to an even harder line than their gentile counterparts.

The “unresolved aesthetic antimony” besetting Sternheim’s work is the “formal expression of one solitary phenomenon: failed assimilation” (KO 48). “The fear and the insecurity which must have dominated Sternheim’s nature express themselves simultaneously in his frequent and seemingly unmotivated aggression and brutality towards that class [the bourgeoisie] within which he would so gladly have triumphed, and in the exaggerated concern for the significance and recognition of his own person” (KO 60). Sebald’s diagnosis soon descends into a pathological litany: “From this accumulation of symptoms—fear and insecurity borne of a feeling of exclusion, attempts at self-affirmation by the most primitive arrogance and self-praise, stereotypical reproaches of other individuals and groups, continuous upending of rationalistic mechanisms of thought into irrational conclusions—emerges clearly the syndrome of a neurosis with a pronounced schizoid character, whose structural identity with the pattern of late-bourgeois ideology cannot help but catch the eye” (KO 61).

Döblin is treated with a little more in the way of concessions. “It is altogether understandable that in spite and because of the negative experiences [of anti-Semitism] which he must have encountered—in the street, in school, during his studies, and as a medical registrar—Döblin avoided such a caustic theme in his literary and public utterances” (MZ 74). “More irritating,” were those anti-Semitic remarks made by Döblin in private correspondence and in certain essays. These leave Sebald in no doubt that he “belonged to that majority who believed that there was a direct correlation between the degree to which they denied Jewish tradition and their success in the contemporary culture industry” (MZ 74-5). Even Döblin’s scarcely credible work ethic seems “determined by the efforts of an outsider to legitimate himself in the bourgeois consciousness, and the epic novels which he came up with at regular intervals appear as a foreigner’s tribute to the power which had taken him in” (MZ 76).

Broch, whose earlier conversion to Catholicism did not spare him a period of detention at the hands of the National Socialists prior to his gaining asylum in the United States, is nevertheless accused by Sebald of certain aesthetic, hence ethical “deficits” (UH 124). The narrator of his *Bergroman* (1953), for instance, is guilty of “inner emigration,” which implies “passive resistance,” which in turn is equivalent to “passive collaboration,” none of which is “anywhere illuminated or even grasped” by the author himself (UH 121).⁴⁷⁸

Sebald dates his reservations regarding Becker back to abortive efforts to read the latter’s work in the 1970s. Though Sebald claims to have hoped to revise his opinion, re-reading “rather led to a confirmation and a bolstering of my prejudice conceived twenty years ago.”⁴⁷⁹ Despite or because of Becker having spent the early years of his life in the Łódź ghetto, his work is guilty of an “acute lack of feeling re-ignited by the stuff of the past.” It seems to Sebald that it suffers under a “memory embargo,” not unlike that “curious blindness to experience” which he considered to have stifled any worthwhile literary engagement with the area bombing of German cities (NHD 20).⁴⁸⁰ One passage consists of a series of reproachful questions concerning perceived stylistic failures: “What is it ... What are we to think ... What does it mean when ... Or when ...?”⁴⁸¹ The insistence recalls Sebald’s *Sternheim* book, in which he amasses great lists of quotations which are presented on the page uninterrupted, one after the

⁴⁷⁸ Alfred Andersch was also accused of “an internal emigration,” which was “in fact a case of adapting to the prevailing circumstances, a procedure which deeply compromised him” (NHD 118). Sebald’s most scathing attack was directed at Andersch’s decision to separate from his wife, Angelika, “who was of a German Jewish family,” ostensibly “to protect her from the consequences of the Nuremberg Laws,” though in Sebald’s opinion purely for reasons of personal advancement. This episode constitutes “the most important omission” from Andersch’s autobiographical novel, *Kirschen der Freiheit* (1952) (NHD 119). “Were the flaws in his work merely a matter of occasional stylistic infelicities, or symptoms of a more deep-seated *malaise*? “Accepting the author’s declared intentions, they became accomplices in a stratagem of concealment” (NHD 115). Written at a time when Sebald was well established in the (English) academy, Schütte describes him as having “installed [Andersch] as a monument to post-war literature” in an effort which served to implicate contemporary Germanists of the ’68 generation (cast as a nest of uncritical enablers) alongside the fellow travellers of NS-Germanistik, i.e., those whom he had excoriated when at the threshold of the academy (Uwe Schütte, “Weil nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf: Anmerkungen zu W. G. Sebalds Essay über Jurek Beckers Romane,” *Sinn und Form* 60, no. 2 (March/April 2010), 238).

⁴⁷⁹ Sebald, “Jurek Becker,” 226.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

other. Indeed, it isn't difficult to detect in these works of Sebald much of that 'aggression and brutality' which he claimed to have detected in Sternheim.

When Sebald broaches aesthetic questions in regards to assimilation—and often these are a distant second to sociological and psychological concerns—two characteristics emerge with some regularity. Both have a bearing on the present discussion and are reducible to a common term: accommodation. “The special worth of literature—in particular that which is unsuccessful—consists in its allowing us to conceive of certain accommodation-manœuvres executed often unconsciously,” as Sebald put it in his essay on Broch (UH 122). Firstly, this stems from a disembodied narrator, who serves to conceal the involvement (aesthetic, hence ethical and political) of the author. “In [Sternheim's] novels—with the exception of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929)—he is nowhere to be grasped as narrator, always remaining in the background, and functions as a mere writing medium. His physiognomy as an author never clearly emerges from the many thousands of pages on which he worked, and instead melts away into the perpetually circulating material” (MZ 72). Becker, for his part, “holds himself wholly apart from the stories which he narrates.” What strikes Sebald as “a thoroughgoing defect” is “not only the factual, but the emotional absence of the author.”⁴⁸² And “the spurious [vorgeschoben] narrator” of *Jakob der Lügner* (1969), “survivor of the ghetto and of deportation, who assumes the position of author in a manner commensurate with the difficulty of his office—nowhere does the text make this apparent because the narrative ‘I’ remains a pallid figure.”⁴⁸³ Nowhere in any of his books, in fact, does Becker take up an “exposed position. The radical nature of subjective reaction, the uncompromising nature of Levi or Améry are apparently alien to him. He holds himself scrupulously apart from it all; his thoughts and his feelings remain judiciously guarded.”⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² Ibid, 227.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 228.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, 230.

This failure, concentrated in the figure of the tactless narrator but borne of a diffidence (at best) on the part of the author himself, has its corresponding effect on the material and symbolic content of the works. “The assimilation [Bewältigung] of the mass of stuff and the whole heap of details” in Döblin’s novels “almost exceeds comprehension.” He trusts only the “train of his writing and not the weight of carefully placed words” (MZ 72). As a consequence of Sternheim’s aversion to literary devices which might conceal or compromise reality, “he repudiates the simile even as he uses it. Mostly this is engineered by an ellipsis of the conjunction ‘like’ [wie], by which the simile loses its appearance as such and assumes an attitude of directness.” Taken together with similes consisting of abstractions, these methods produce “the appearance of compactness and density, by means of which Sternheim doubtless felt affirmed in his practice.” Sebald, on the contrary, recognises its chief characteristic as “imprecision without contour, which is but poorly concealed by a formalistic compactness. The metaphor proceeding from a hypostatized simile conveys no concrete content—quite the contrary—only an undifferentiated image, a feeling which is nowhere demonstrative and in actual fact inarticulate” (KO 77). Broch, guilty of similar narrative failings to Sternheim, is guilty of similar symbolic ones, too, having produced a veritable “arsenal of hollow abstractions” in his work (UH 124).

This question of accommodation, considered in aesthetic terms, is essentially one of distance and proximity. These authors run aground because of failures of positioning, by Sebald’s account. That those failures are a result of their consignment at the margins of a society treating them with ever more hostility, with all the precarity and irresolution thus implied, is certainly acknowledged—indeed, it provides much of the impetus for his critique—though its mitigating value appears slight. As to distance, these authors are insufficiently invested in their works. This fact is betrayed by their featureless and absent narrators, who are in themselves symptoms of ethical and political compromise and aesthetic vulgarity on the part of their authors. Becker

refuses to expose himself, Broch disappears into an inner emigration. As to proximity, these authors seem to Sebald to demonstrate a discomfiting intimacy in respect to the materials which populate their narratives. Here are Döblin's masses of stuff and of details, there Sternheim's direct compactness. All of this Sebald attributes to their no less discomfiting assimilatory zeal.

iv. Author, narrator, butterfly man

With every metamorphosis one starts a new life; it is incredibly easy, in this state of mind, to open up escape routes via flights of the imagination.⁴⁸⁵

With the above concerns in mind, and in an effort to draw again nearer to the stated subject of the present chapter, I would like to consider *Die Ausgewanderten*, which seems, at least on occasion, to fulfil those injunctions of Sebald's described above. As Bartsch has shown, Sebald's second major work of narrative prose emerged as one half—the other being *Schwindel. Gefühle*.—of what was first intended as a solitary prose project.⁴⁸⁶ As Sebald put it quite presciently in a funding application intended in support of that work, “you can imagine that a project of this sort can develop—or, indeed, overdevelop—in many directions.”⁴⁸⁷ So it proved, as the third part of *Die Ausgewanderten*—that concerning Ambros Adelwarth and that which concerns us here—grew out of what was intended merely as a small fraction of the last part of *Schwindel. Gefühle*.⁴⁸⁸ The basis for the character at the centre of this narrative was a brother of Sebald's uncle, a man named Stehmer, whereas Ambros Adelwarth is the great uncle of the book's narrator. The name ‘Adelwarth’ belonged to Sebald's maternal great grandmother.⁴⁸⁹ The photograph of Ambros in “Arab costume” given the narrator by his Aunt

⁴⁸⁵ Sebald, “Herbert Achternbusch,” 181.

⁴⁸⁶ Bartsch, “Potting Shed,” especially 100-3.

⁴⁸⁷ Sebald qtd. in Bartsch, “Potting Shed,” 132.

⁴⁸⁸ Bartsch, “Potting Shed,” 102-3.

⁴⁸⁹ Mark M. Anderson, “A Childhood in the Allgäu: Wertach, 1944-52,” in SM, 27-30.

Fini in the course of his visit to New Jersey (DA 137 / 94), where Ambros had lived after his retirement, is in fact one of Stehmer which Sebald first saw during his own visit to the state, which roughly coincided with the narrator's first. (He makes a second visit some three years later, which Sebald did not.)⁴⁹⁰ As Schütte has it, perhaps in this text above all, "the boundary between fact and fiction figures as a most porous membrane."⁴⁹¹ In much the same spirit, of the later reproduction of two pages of a journal said to belong to Adelwarth (DA 194-5 / 132), Ulrich von Bülow writes that this "falsified document points to the paradoxical relationship between author and narrator. On the one hand, Sebald suggests they are one and the same by means of numerous 'authentic' citations, and so enters into an 'autobiographical pact' with the reader. On the other hand, however, this pact is consciously broken by an act of falsification of which only the author—but not his narrator—is aware. This ambivalent play on identity and difference is perfectly encapsulated in the narrator's remark that the handwriting in the journal appears to him at once strange and familiar."⁴⁹² That is to say that, in this case at least, Sebald is true to those admonitions in his work on assimilated German-Jewish writers, rather demonstratively exposing his implication as author in the production of the text, and in the business of the narrator in particular. This is doubly pronounced during the narrator's second trip to the United States, whose primary purpose is to visit the site of the sanatorium in which Ambros spent the final years of his life. Previously he had worked for many years as "personal attendant to"—and likely lover of, though the text is allusive on that subject—Cosmo Solomon, an eccentric, globetrotting scion of a wealthy Jewish-American banker. The outbreak of the First World War plunges Solomon into an agitated melancholy. Though his condition temporarily improves with the armistice, a period of convalescence at a grand hotel in the Canadian Rockies fails to have the intended effect. "When darkness fell he would lie down on

⁴⁹⁰ Sheppard, "A Chronology," 630-1.

⁴⁹¹ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 173.

⁴⁹² Ulrich von Bülow, "The Disappearance of the Author in the Work: Some Reflections on W. G. Sebald's *Nachlass* in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach," in SM, 248.

the floor, draw his legs up to his chest and hide his face in his hands. It was in that state that Ambros had to take him home and, a week later, deliver him to the Samaria Sanatorium at Ithaca, New York, where that same year, without saying a word or moving a muscle, he faded away” (DA 98).

Ambros later retires to a house in Mamaroneck left to him by the Solomons. “After Christmas ’52,” recalls the narrator’s Aunt Fini, who visited Ambros regularly at that time, “he fell into such a deep depression that, although he plainly felt a great need to talk about his life, he could no longer shape a single sentence, nor utter a single word, or any sound at all. He would sit at his bureau, turned a little to one side, one hand on the desktop pad, the other in his lap, staring steadily at the floor” (DA 103). As Schütte has it, a once “polyglot cosmopolitan has been transformed into a mute wreck.”⁴⁹³ Fini calls one day to find that Ambros is gone. “In the mirror of the hall stand he had stuck a visiting card with a message for me, and I have carried it with me ever since. Have gone to Ithaca. Yours ever – Ambros” (DA 103).⁴⁹⁴ The Ithaca sanatorium is led by a Professor Fahnstock, another emigrant, who “had been trained at an asylum in Lemberg, immediately before the First World War: at a time, that is, when psychiatry was primarily concerned with subduing those in custody, and keeping them in safe detention” (DA 113).⁴⁹⁵ Under Fahnstock’s care, such as it is, Ambros willingly submits to aggressive shock treatment, “known as the block method, a course of treatment advocated by the German psychiatrist Braunmühl, which not infrequently involved more than a hundred electric shocks at intervals of only a few days” (DA 112). The facts of Ambros’s case are relayed by Fahnstock’s former protégé, Dr Abramsky, whom the narrator discovers in the vast, wooded

⁴⁹³ Schütte *W. G. Sebald*, 195.

⁴⁹⁴ A reproduction of the calling card appears here in the text, bearing the same handwriting as is found in the journal entries which are later to appear, i.e., Sebald’s. Not incidentally, the narrator has already confessed to being an adequate forger himself. In the Paul Bereyter story, he recalls having done most of his schoolfriend Fritz’s work. “It was very easy to do, and to do seamlessly [sozusagen nahtlos berwerkstelligen], as it were, chiefly because Fritz and I had the same, incorrigibly sloppy [schweinish] handwriting (as Paul repeatedly observed, shaking his head), with the one difference that Fritz could not write quickly and I could not write slowly” (DA 47 / 31). Of course, there is nothing seamless about Sebald’s forgery, as I and others have stressed in different ways.

⁴⁹⁵ Foucauldian notes are not difficult to discern here.

grounds of the former sanatorium, which is now in an advanced state of decay. Abramsky describes the treatment meted out to a willing Ambros as coming close to “torture or martyrdom” (DA 111).

Ambros sat at his bureau, consumed by the need to relate the facts of his life though unable to do so, provides an effective model of the predicament felt by exiled writers confronting the events of an apparently irrevocable past. The difficulty is greatly intensified when that effort necessitates looking at or across the major conflagrations of the twentieth century, as is the case for Ambros in the 1950s. Not for nothing does Schütte describe him as having lived the very “paradigm of a homeless [heimatlos] existence.”⁴⁹⁶ As a German emigrant confidante of an assimilated, though marginal, Jewish-American, his reticence also attests to the challenge confronting Sebald as a (lapsed) Catholic German writer of Jewish lives—a challenge which he no doubt surmounted, though whether he transcended it remains a matter of debate.

There is a second model for that predicament, although he is a more cryptic and elusive one. The narrator’s Aunt Fini describes how, looking out upon the sanatorium grounds during a visit to Ambros, “a middle-aged man appeared, holding a white net on a pole in front of him and occasionally taking curious jumps. Uncle Adelwarth stared straight ahead, but he registered my bewilderment all the same, and said: It’s the butterfly man, you know. He comes around here quite often” (DA 104). This butterfly man is of course modelled on Vladimir Nabokov, whose memoirs *Speak, Memory* (1951) were especially prized by Sebald.⁴⁹⁷ The narrator earlier describes seeing photographs of Henry Selwyn, subject of the first part of the book, “in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and a butterfly net” (DA 15). One of these “resembled, even in detail, a photograph of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad, that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before” (DA 16). A mountain-top photograph of Nabokov

⁴⁹⁶ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 103.

⁴⁹⁷ See, again, that list of his favourite books produced in 2000 (SM 264).

with his butterfly net duly appears in the text. In the part dedicated to Paul Bereyter, Mme Landau mentions “that she had been reading Nabokov’s autobiography on a park bench on the Promenade des Cordeliers when Paul, after walking by her twice, commented on her reading, with a courtesy that bordered on the extravagant” (DA 43). And in the book’s last part—that of Max Ferber/Aurach—Luiza Lanzberg describes her first “outing” in Kissingen with Fritz, a Viennese horn player, during which they “overtook two very refined Russian gentlemen, one of whom (who looked particularly majestic) was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies and had lagged so far behind that they had had to wait for him. This warning can’t have had much effect, though, because whenever we happened to look back we saw the boy running about the meadows with upraised net, exactly as before” (DA 213). She later describes the moment that Fritz proposes marriage, “in the middle of a carefully worked out reminiscence of our first outing,” and of how she immediately “saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net; I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful red admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation.” Luiza’s father “claimed that the proposed attachment was bound to cut me off from the Jewish faith,” though it is not the Jewish faith, nor Jewish traditions, which she wishes to flee, but instead the Christian, bourgeois culture into which she has been unwillingly assimilated by her enterprising father (DA 214). Her misery in the latter recalls a characteristically severe passage in Sebald’s *Döblin* book, in which he casts the ghetto as an enforced captivity that is “mere antechamber to the true hell of the gentile world” (MZ 17). That Fritz dies suddenly before they have had a chance to marry only goes to show that Luiza misreads the portents of the butterflies, whose talent for metamorphosis promises only a momentary and deceptive reprieve from the powers which so oppress her—much as Sebald was at pains to show in his works on German-Jewish writers.

The narrator's second visit to Ithaca is, as we have seen, purely fictional, in the sense that there is no record, so far as I am aware, of Sebald ever having visited that city, much less the site of a former sanatorium. That makes certain remarks which he made in regard to the butterfly man appear curious. In an interview given in 1993, he explained that figure in the following terms:

The Nabokov appearances have to do with my understanding of literature. With these texts it is at basis a question of realism. I believe, however, that realism only functions properly when it surpasses itself [über sich selbst hinausgeht] here and there—that is, when the text has mysterious facets which have no place in a realistic text. What's more, I believe that the realistic text should allow itself to venture towards allegorical narration, should allow itself to intensify [verdichten] in allegories. For that reason there must be half palpable, half abstract figures (like the butterfly-catcher), who have a definite, not entirely transparent function. (UDE 107)

The moment in which realism “surpasses itself,” taken to mean the appearance of so-called “mysterious facets,” is in fact the moment in which it *leaves* the realms of realism proper and enters that of allegory. I am hardly the first to make such a suggestion in this context. Oliver Sill was quick to identify “the butterfly hunter Nabokov” as an “allegorical figure who binds together the life stories of the four emigrants.”⁴⁹⁸ To this Schütte adds that the butterfly man is an “allegorical figure ... symbolising remembrance.”⁴⁹⁹ In light of the preceding pages, however, it would be more accurate to say that the butterfly man participates in an allegorical scheme—that he is one of a number of emblems arranged on a stage conceived by Sebald, almost programmatically, in terms taken from Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. “With decay, and with it alone, historical occurrence shrinks and withdraws into the setting,” as it says in a well-known passage of that work, and by the time of the narrator's visit, the sanatorium is doing just that.⁵⁰⁰ “Nowadays,” says Dr Abramsky, “I place all my hope in the mice, and in the woodworm

⁴⁹⁸ Oliver Sill, “‘Aus dem Jäger ist ein Schmetterling geworden’: Textbeziehungen zwischen Werken von W. G. Sebald, Franz Kafka und Vladimir Nabokov,” *Poetica* 29, no. 3/4 (1997): 598.

⁴⁹⁹ Schütte, *W. G. Sebald*, 301.

⁵⁰⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, 190.

and deathwatch beetles. The sanatorium is creaking, and in places already caving in, and sooner or later they will bring about its collapse” (DA 112). Against this backdrop are arrayed figures familiar from the chapter just past, figures which recur, in shifting guises, across Sebald’s oeuvre. Again we find the torturer (Fahnstock) and the martyr (Ambros).⁵⁰¹ Abramsky—son of Abraham—precisely accords to the figures of Sternheim, Döblin, Becker et al. whom we encountered just a few pages previous. In his eagerness to advance within the bourgeois medical milieu, he overzealously imitates the manner and the methods of his (presumed gentile) mentor. Such objections as he had were “(alas) none too forceful” (DA 112). The consequence is that he becomes complicit. “When Fahnstock began to believe ... that he had discovered a psychiatric miracle in the block or annihilation method, and when he, who had never had the slightest scientific ambition, increasingly became caught up in a kind of experimental mania and even planned to publish a paper about Ambrose, then, and only then, did it dawn on me that his fanatical interest as well as my own vacillation were, in the end, merely proof of our appalling ignorance and corruptibility” (DA 114-5).

“The absolute prevalence of the real over the fictive which reigns throughout Döblin’s novels,” wrote Sebald, “appears as a sign of resignation” (MZ 112). Döblin was guilty of “an emigration of the ‘I’ into the object,” which is cast in terms of betrayal (MZ 113). So great was his need to assimilate, that in his work “the artistic principle of mimesis” carries over into the biological one, which in turn “corresponds to a resigned identification with fate” instead of a “rebellious insurrection” (MZ 112). Sebald forces the point somewhat. Only a page later he

⁵⁰¹ Much as is the case in the Breendonk passage discussed at length above, the lines between perpetrator and victim are not so definite as they first appear, particularly if we remember that Ambros was earlier responsible for Cosmo’s failed treatment. It is worth recalling Sebald’s essay on Tripp here, too. Sebald described Tripp’s portraits of the residents at Weissenau “as studies of the echoing void in the heads of humankind,” but even those of “respected incumbents of positions of economic and political power ... share a secret affinity with the definition arrived at in Weissenau,” namely that of “the human individual [as] an aberrant creature, forcibly removed from its natural and social environment. The obverse of this depiction, of a race growing ever more monstrous in the so-called process of civilisation, are the deserted landscapes, devoid of all human presence, and in particular the still lifes, in which, far removed from the world of events, only the motionless objects are left to bear witness to the former presence of a strangely rationalistic species” (LOG 158). Note, again, the shades of Bilz’s paleoanthropological vision here.

writes that “in mimesis, identification is substituted for a critical stance. By such a means a person can furtively approach a nature foreign to them—so as not to be recognised as ‘other’ before it, or in order that they might devour it all the more easily” (MZ 113-4). Mimesis, like mimicry, “in the last analysis, is directed towards death” (MZ 115). His bearing as writer had its exact counterpart in the behaviour of his contemporaries. In his Sternheim book, Sebald described the nineteenth century as having culminated in an “unholy folie circulaire of assimilation and anti-Semitism. Jewry reacted to this development on the one hand with an unconditional mimetic adaptation to the moral fundamentals and behaviours of the late bourgeoisie, which sociology termed ‘acculturation,’ and on the other hand with the reinvigoration of a national, traditional consciousness through Zionist teachings” (KO 49). He leaves unanswered the question as to whether the latter was a viable alternative.

It is with such terms in mind that we should regard the emblematic figures of butterfly (or, indeed, moth) and butterfly man, in which coalesce a number characteristics belonging to the emblem. To repurpose the terms of that interview cited moments ago, they exist in an opaque, half-abstract form. The stuff of reality, whether that of nature or literature, is given precedence in the sense that it provides the emblematic material, which is handled in such a way that its mystery is intensified, its meaning cogent though unclear. That is what lends it a half-graspable character, which the author does his best to honour, lest he is guilty of a regressive over-identification with the objects of his attention. In a sense, the furtive quality which Sebald levels at Döblin, *inter alia*, is instead given over to the emblem, which drifts in and out of sight.

The butterfly and the moth, as we know, are emblematic expressions of metamorphosis and mimesis, which in turn are conceived of by Sebald as social and aesthetic phenomena of questionable efficacy, no doubt attributable to a sense of natural-historical development which precludes flight. The butterfly-catcher-writer functions as a correlate to these, as one assuming a wilfully, defiantly marginal posture. He seeks to rescue and to redeem his quarry, though he

cannot quite dissociate himself from the questionable methods of his contemporaries—Fahnstock’s ambition to write a paper or tract (Abhandlung) about Ambros is given as the very culmination of ignorance and corruptibility (DA 169 / 115). And, indeed, he is always to be found chasing *after* the objects of his concern. At the very end of his life, Ambros “failed to appear for treatment for the first time.” Abramsky relates how, “when I asked why he had not appeared at the appointed time, he replied (I remember his words exactly): It must have slipped my mind whilst I was waiting for the butterfly man” (DA 115).

v. Aesthetics of endurance and rebellion

What the historical monograph is unable to accomplish is the production of a metaphor or allegory of a collective historical process. But it is in metaphor [Metaphorisierung] that history first becomes approachable to us empathetically. (UDE 85)

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the emblem was being treated with outright contempt by the early proponents of Neo-Classicism. Having first acted as the emblem’s most effective hawkers, it was Germans who sounded its death knell, among them Winckelmann and Goethe.⁵⁰² The emblem has remained a figure on the aesthetic fringe ever since. Perhaps this, too, helps to explain Sebald’s apparent predilection, in light of his sustained efforts to occupy a remote position with respect to the mainstream of German letters, not to mention his avowed interest in “minor” literatures, and in those authors who, as Uwe Schütte put it, “stand outwith or even beneath that which in the general view ranks as ‘Literature.’”⁵⁰³ The German Trauerspiels of the middle to late seventeenth century are monuments to a late flowering of

⁵⁰² Praz describes the decline as an unrelenting process of debasement: “The emblematisers made common counters out of many a *thesaurus* of learning, mostly for the sake of interior decoration and of the entertainment of polite society, providing elegant devices for plasterers, embroiderers and fashionable topics of conversation and posies for courtiers and ladies, until, after the XVIIth century, their further debased counters became a plaything for the nursery” (Praz, *Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, 207).

⁵⁰³ Uwe Schütte, “Für eine ‘mindere’ Literaturwissenschaft. W. G. Sebald und die ‘kleine’ Literatur aus der österreichischen Peripherie, und von anderswo,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 40, no. 4 (2007): 94.

emblematic expression, as grandiose as it was tenuous. By Benjamin's reckoning, what began life as a private, scholarly *divertissement* migrated onto the stage to bear witness to a terrible malaise. The following Gryphius-penned preface provides ample testimony:

As our fatherland once more finds itself entirely buried in its own ashes, transformed into a theatre of vanity, I am bound to present to you, in the shape of the various *Trauerspiels* to follow, the transience of human affairs. Certainly not because I have nothing else more pleasant to hand for you, but because, at such a time as this, I feel neither inclined nor permitted to produce anything else.⁵⁰⁴

"In the *Trauerspiel*, monarch and martyr do not escape immanence," wrote Benjamin.⁵⁰⁵ Theirs is a world strewn with ruin upon ruin and corpse upon corpse, the stage which they inhabit shorn of earthly hope. "There is no Baroque eschatology," as Benjamin puts it.⁵⁰⁶ Political and theological reaction produced a climate in which "nothing was more alien ... than expectation of an end time." It is an age "to which all apocalyptic tendencies are foreign."⁵⁰⁷ To this Benjamin adds the following elaboration: "The painters of the Renaissance know how to keep the sky high, whereas in the paintings of the Baroque the cloud mass moves darkly or luminously toward the earth." It is "a world that was denied immediate access to the beyond."⁵⁰⁸ It is difficult, in light of such remarks, not to draw comparison with Sebald's description of Tripp's "deserted landscapes, devoid of all human presence," the obverse of his portraits, which depict "a race growing ever more monstrous in the so-called process of civilisation" (LOG 158). It is also worth recalling that allusive remark in his letter to Adorno, such that "in many instances the 'solace' of the classical *Trauerspiel* consists solely in that the

⁵⁰⁴ Gryphius, *Gesammelte Werke*, 96.

⁵⁰⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, 51.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 66. As Panofsky writes: "Baroque art ... brought forth the modern landscape in the full sense of the word, meaning a visualization of unlimited space captured in, and represented by, a section of it, so that human figures became debased to a mere "staffage" and finally could be dispensed with altogether. In the North, even the quasi-architectonic features of the scenery itself could be subdued or suppressed in favour of extensions as such, the picture showing nothing but the endless horizontal plain or ocean, and the sky occupying four-fifths or five-sixths of the area of the picture" (Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 51).

longer the dénouements last, the longer the conclusion is concealed.”⁵⁰⁹ As Benjamin wrote in a passage now well-worn by subsequent citation, in the Trauerspiel “history finds expression not as eternal life but as a process of incessant decline ... ‘History’ stands written on nature’s countenance in the sign-script of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of natural history which is brought onstage in the Trauerspiel is actually present as ruin.”⁵¹⁰ Alongside the extant ruins of antiquity, the Baroque dramaturge could count those of the Thirty Years War.⁵¹¹ Sebald, for his part, spent the early part of his life amidst the rubble left behind by the Allied area bombing of German towns and cities. “You might have a few buildings standing intact and between them an avalanche of scree that had come down ... And people didn’t comment on it ... It seemed to me the natural condition of cities ... houses between mountains of rubble.”⁵¹² These ruins were, in fact, doubly transient, in that the so-called ‘economic miracle’ of Germany’s post-war reconstruction saw them cleared away with an alacrity verging on the

⁵⁰⁹ Sebald, “Briefwechsel (1967/68),” 16.

⁵¹⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, 188.

⁵¹¹ The epoch to which the Baroque Trauerspiel stands as monument was one of concatenated political, economic and religious crises (see, in particular, Eric Hobsbawm, “The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century,” *Past & Present* 5 (May, 1954): 33-53; Eric Hobsbawm, “The Crisis of the 17th Century – II,” *Past & Present* 6 (Nov., 1954): 44-65). In the German speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire, the crisis was manifest most terribly and spectacularly in the conflagration now known as the Thirty Years War (1618-48), which “exceeded all other early modern European conflicts in violence, duration, and the extent to which outside powers became involved” (Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, “Germany and the Seventeenth-Century Crisis,” *Historiographical Review* 35, no. 2 (1992): 439). Accounts of the period, not to mention those of Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book, tend to dwell upon the tumult, at the expense of that strange fixity which succeeded it. The very magnitude of the conflict was such that the intervening powers—predominately Habsburg Austria and Bourbon France, though with notable incursions from the north, particularly that of Sweden’s Gustavus Adolphus—“accelerated the expansion of their own state structures” and their presumption of “control over almost all aspects of behaviour and belief” (Ibid, 440). Sebald’s sense of that conflict seems to have been shaped in large part by his early reading of Döblin and Brecht. Of the former, he wrote the following in his PhD dissertation: “The experience of the ravaging of the whole of nature and the senselessness of human suffering which he underwent as an army doctor in Lorraine during the First World War, finds a cryptological expression in his terrible panorama of the Thirty Years War, the novel *Wallenstein* (published in 1918), as if the experience were no longer communicable in a more direct way” (Winfried Georg Sebald, “The Revival of Myth: A Study of Alfred Döblin’s Novels” (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 1973), 15). The last remark prefigures a central thesis of his air-war lectures. In an essay published just a year earlier, he wrote of how, “in the Berliner Ensemble production of *Mother Courage* the heroine marched against a revolving stage through the devastated lands of the Empire with no hope of ever changing her situation.” Sebald saw the same dynamic played out in Kafka’s *Castle*, that is, “a progression directed against its own teleology” (W. G. Sebald, “The Undiscover’d Country: The Death Motif in Kafka’s *Castle*,” *Journal of European Studies* 2 (1972): 24).

⁵¹² Sebald, “Crossing Boundaries,” 161.

incomprehensible. In his air-war lectures, Sebald would add to this constellation of images the smoke of Auschwitz, casting the scene of his early childhood in the following terms:

I see pictures merging before my mind's eye – paths through the fields, river meadows and mountain pastures mingling with images of destruction – and oddly enough it is the latter, not the now entirely unreal idylls of my early childhood, that make me feel rather as if I were coming home, perhaps because they represent the more powerful and dominant reality of my first years of life. I now know that at the time, when I was lying in my bassinet, as it was called, on the balcony of the Seefeld house and looking up at the pale blue sky, there was a pall of smoke in the air all over Europe, over the rearguard actions in East and West, over the ruins of the German cities, over the camps where untold numbers of people were burnt. (NHD 71)

Franz Loquai puts it well when he describes Sebald's literary visions of destruction as those "of a civilisation given over to ruin, of a ruined nature which has reclaimed its territory," and as "corresponding not to an apocalyptic vision, nor to some stylishly cultivated mood for the end-times ... but visible reality," in which the wanderer thinks to have found himself "already traversing the ruins of a disintegrated world."⁵¹³ And indeed, Sebald was averse to Döblin's indulgence in apocalyptic imagery above all else, which he described as reminiscent of "the whole chaotic wave of Expressionism which pre-occupied the artistic consciousness of the period, with its simultaneous will to destruction and hope of regeneration," as he put it in his PhD dissertation.⁵¹⁴ Nor were these failings confined to that period, for, in the intervening years, "the notion of the end of the world has degenerated into sectarianism and cheap adventism. Nor can there be any doubt as to the delicious shivers with which the existentialists among the academic establishment have grazed these fields."⁵¹⁵ The subject of this earlier critique is reconstituted almost a decade later in Sebald's essay on the "literary description of total destruction," which provided the substance, though not the tone, of his later air-war

⁵¹³ Loquai, "Beinhaus der Geschichte," 250.

⁵¹⁴ Sebald, "Revival of Myth," 15. Even the ready availability of this text in English (kostenlos, what's more) has not encouraged many English language critics to venture beyond the usual Sebald monographs.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, 16.

lectures. In Hermann Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* [*The City Beyond the River*] (1947), the bombing is rendered in "Döblin-esque, pseudo-epic style," the novel guilty of assuming a mythologising tendency whose inheritance includes some of "the most questionable aspects of expressionist fantasy."⁵¹⁶ I think that Loquai's tenses are off, however, for Sebald largely depicts not a "disintegrated" world, but one whose disintegration again and again finds new impetus, though that is not to say that it is uniform in space or in time. According to this sense of history, as remarkable as the extent of the destructive process is its inexhaustibility. It is not, as some have argued, characterised by apocalyptic imagery or an 'Endzeitstimmung'—in fact, these are found wanting.⁵¹⁷ "The specific shock" wrote Sebald apropos to Joseph Roth's writing, though he might well have been describing his own, "derives from the insight into the age of time and into a life that has survived itself."⁵¹⁸ As I have already noted, Sebald was inclined to explain this sense of history with concepts borrowed from physics.⁵¹⁹ In a paper first prepared for a lecture given in Aachen in 1983—again something of the preacher at his pulpit can be heard—he described Jean Paul as depicting the countryside as viewed from a balloon in such a way as to render a "terrible contrast to the idyllic transfiguration of nature, borne by its inner dynamic to the point at which the universe appears before the gaze of the heretic as the creation of a madman." It is a world whose "constitution is subordinated to the concept of entropy" (BU 174). "What we recognise as life, in all its manifest excrescences," wrote Sebald in the essay on Kafka's *Evolutionsgeschichte*, "all that emerges from the effort to counteract the principle tendency of entropy by the development of ever more elaborate

⁵¹⁶ W. G. Sebald, "Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte: Versuch über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung mit Anmerkungen zu Kasack, Nossack und Kluge," *Oribs Litterarum* 37 (1982): 348-9.

⁵¹⁷ See, for example, Peter Morgan, "The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W. G. Sebald's Prose Narratives," *German Life and Letters* 58, vol. 1 (January, 2005): 76 and passim.

⁵¹⁸ Sebald, "Unknown Region," 36.

⁵¹⁹ That Sebald's appropriation of the concept was tendentious is in keeping with his long-standing and free-handed use of concepts belonging to the natural sciences. Sven Meyer, for one, has noted Sebald's less than exacting recourse to the work of Rupert Sheldrake, a biologist already held in low esteem by the main part of the academy (Sven Meyer, "Keine Kausallogik: Zum Zusammenhang in W. G. Sebalds Schreiben," in *Über W. G. Sebald: Beiträge zu einem anderen Bild des Autors*, ed. Uwe Schütte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 23-5). Of course, this eccentricity would have served to endear him all the more to Sebald.

systems.”⁵²⁰ In this tendency to “analogise historical events with natural occurrence,” he bears a striking similarity to Lohenstein as he appears in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book.⁵²¹ Sebald, too, is at times guilty of “cutting short incipient ethical reflection ... compelling resolution of historical-ethical conflicts into demonstrations of natural history.”⁵²²

I stress ‘at times’ because, in a body of work as vast and heterogenous as Sebald’s, it is wrong, as many have done, to ape the author himself in drawing summary, overdetermined conclusions in regard to his aesthetics and his corresponding vision of natural-history. Not for nothing do the more nuanced responses to Sebald’s œuvre repeat derivatives of ‘pauschal,’ that Austro-German word most often used by financial sorts to describe lump sums. Schütte writes of Sebald’s “sweeping [pauschale] ... value judgements [Werturteile]” in regard to German post-war literature.⁵²³ Hoffmann writes that Sebald’s essay on Becker shows him “formulating those same sweeping judgements [Pauschalurteile] which he would often accuse Germanistik” of making.⁵²⁴

Of course, Sebald offers alternatives to that apparently irremediable, inescapable entropic vision described above. In light of the preceding chapters, and in drawing the present study to a close, I will describe two of these, which are, I think, quite interdependent. The first consists of a determined, sometimes overbearing authorial presence, which is a direct riposte to that accommodating stance Sebald so loathed, above all in Becker and in Broch. A posture which appears altogether crass in these polemics is tempered in narrative, where its substance is given

⁵²⁰ Sebald, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen,” 198. Again, this notion of historical development as such does not lend itself well to that view of Fritzsche’s, namely, that of the “dramatised hinge forever separating the rich lives before and the lonesome ones after,” as the point at which “history has come to an end,” and, somewhat paradoxically, the post-war period as one of “unrelieved, extraordinary disintegration” (“Twentieth-Century Histories,” 297-8). Indeed, there is little to suggest that Sebald accorded the specific depredations of the twentieth century a unique place in his sense even of Germany and Austria’s pasts, which he once described in the following terms: “Our history is a history of shame. Indeed, it is not only the history of the Second World War, but the debacle of the Weimar Republic, the absurdity of the Kaiserreich, the provincialism of the Biedermeier period—it goes back to the Thirty Years War” (UDE 188).

⁵²¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 178.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 178-9.

⁵²³ Schütte, “Ein anderes Bild,” 10.

⁵²⁴ Hoffmann, “Polemik,” 156.

over to Sebald's narrator, invested with much from the author's biography, who rehearses the same positions in view of the reader—albeit furtively—and made to bear their weight. So great is that weight that he is often laid low in the process. Were Gombrich not so persuasive in explaining the confusion of functions in the emblem, I might suggest that this corresponds to the first, representative [darstellend] half of Schöne's emblematic Doppelfunktion, by which things are posed before the reader's eyes, sometimes quite forcibly. The second half, perhaps needless to say, is much subtler. Its basic outline is suggested by a strange word which Sebald ascribed to Kafka's prose: "Entziehungskur," which is to say a course of withdrawal, or an abnegation.⁵²⁵ There is a correspondence here with the concept of metamorphosis which has just occupied our attentions. In an interview given in 1992, Sebald ventured the following remark in connection with the work of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822): "Whoever is afraid tries to make himself as small as possible because that which is small escapes attention. That is the case in fables of metamorphosis into imperceptible beings, of miniaturisation into something tiny—a perspective which brings with it the chance of deliverance [Rettung]" (UDE 73-4). Hence Sebald's solution to the impossible assimilatory bind is as follows:

As the artist qua artist positions himself outside of society, so the Jewish artist positions himself outside of his assimilation milieu. Even in cases in which an assimilation was de facto accomplished generations earlier, the inheritance of Exodus, apparently submerged but in fact still present as archetype, can be mobilised and crystalised in artistic production ... The aesthetic-ethic overcoming of such unholy tension as obtained from the compulsion towards a secondary assimilation, which in essence pertained exclusively to the person of the artist, led to the emergence of a literature in which the reality of the late bourgeois age was most vividly portrayed, perhaps because the personal experience of its authors—of having lived through alienation—elevates itself to a paradigm of the era in aesthetic form. (KO 49)

⁵²⁵ Sebald, "Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen," 200. It was, by Sebald's reckoning, a riposte to "cathartic descriptions of all consuming catastrophe, such as were common in the first half of the century," i.e., those practised by the likes of Döblin (Ibid, 201).

In an essay of Canetti's which was well known to Sebald, the former describes Kafka's metamorphoses—esthetic and actual—in the following almost reverential terms:

Most astounding of all is another method he practices, with a sovereign skill matched only by the Chinese: transformation into something small. Since he abominated violence, but did not credit himself with the strength to combat it, he enlarged the distance between the stronger entity and himself by becoming smaller and smaller in relation to it. Through this shrinkage he gained two advantages: he evaded the threat by becoming too diminutive for it, and he freed himself from all exceptionable means of violence; the small animals into which he liked to transform himself were harmless ones.⁵²⁶

In his essay on Canetti first published in 1983, Sebald described the latter's esthetic ideal as "that of the teacher, whose good fortune is determined ... by the learning never coming to an end. If the despot remains always on the same spot, then the student [der Lernende] is always on the move." He goes on to say that "the central activity of the student is not in fact writing, but instead reading," and, "so long as the process of learning does not seize up, the knowledge which the student gathers up is not property, not education [Bildung] and not power." In this regard, Canetti, by Sebald's reckoning, "stands in a long Jewish tradition, in which the ambitions of the writer are directed not upon the work which he creates, but instead upon the elucidation of script. The literary form which this illumination serves is, for Canetti too, demonstrably the excursus, the commentary and the fragment" (UH 101). This chimes with Sebald's late remark that although his "diffuse" research was a prerequisite for his writing, the former would likely outlast the latter (UDE 212-4).⁵²⁷ Perhaps no more cogent a description of that second dialectical part of Schöne's Doppelfunktion could be found than the above remarks on Canetti, or at least not in Sebald's oeuvre. Certainly I do not propose to formulate one, but only to stress, once more, the insoluble association between this manner of scholarly

⁵²⁶ Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Schocken, 1974), 89-90.

⁵²⁷ He again compared his pursuits to those of a dog, "here and there, up and down, sometimes slow and sometimes fast" (UDE 214).

contemplation and interpretation and that habit of demonstrative confrontation, an association which corresponds to that no less soluble one of image and script. When one predominates unduly, the effect is often crass. When the two exist in a tense and oscillating relation, they give to Sebald's works their most emblematic and compelling passages.

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Abbreviations

Works by Sebald

- KO *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelminischen Ära* (1969)
MZ *Der Mythos der Zerstörung im Werk Alfred Döblins* (1980)
BU *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (1983)
UH *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (1990)
NN *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht. Photographien von Thomas Becker* (1988) / *After Nature* (2002)
SG *Schwindel. Gefühle.* (1990) / *Vertigo* (1999)
DA *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier lange Erzählungen* (1993) / *The Emigrants* (1996)
RS *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt* (1995) / *The Rings of Saturn* (1998)
LOG *Logis in einem Landhaus: Über Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser und andere* (1998) / *A Place in the Country* (2013)
A *Austerlitz* (2001) / *Austerlitz* (2001)
YN *For Years Now: Poems. Images by Tess Jaray* (2001)
LL *Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch* (1999) / *On the Natural History of Destruction: With Essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry and Peter Weiss* (2001)
CS *Campo Santo* (2003) / *Campo Santo* (2005)
U *Unerzählt: 33 Texte und 33 Radierungen / Unrecounted: 33 Texts and 33 Etchings* (2003)

Where both German and English editions are cited, the German page reference precedes the English. Except where otherwise noted, first editions are cited throughout.

Other works

- SM *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald—A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (2011)
UDE »Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis«: *Gespräche 1971 bis 2001*, ed. Torsten Hoffmann (2011)

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