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W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*: Enlightenment and "The Theater of One's Own Recollections"

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"For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark."
(Sebald, 24)

W. G. Sebald begins *The Rings of Saturn* by having his quasi-autobiographical narrator recount the effect of a year-long tour of Suffolk on England's southern coast. "I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far into the past. . . ." ¹ One year after completing the tour,

the narrator finds himself hospitalized in Norwich recovering from what is ostensibly a nervous breakdown. Exactly one year from that date, he begins to write.

W. G. Sebald's literary odyssey in *The Rings of Saturn* has the markings of a dark and hybrid picaresque--the narration is fragmentary, episodic, and dream-like, characterized by a mood that is "autumnal and uncanny."² At times, it has the look of a Freudian manifest dream that requires explication to reveal the latent dream content hidden in the details of the manifest narrative. The narrative momentum of the work gathers pace as the narrator digresses freely, telling stories and anecdotes, commenting on local history and historical figures, meditating on human and natural history. This seemingly desultory intellectual ramble however, is also a sobering philosophical treatise that is "a palimpsest of natural, human and literary history."³

Sebald's diegetic, digressive narration employs the extended fragment both as a structural metaphor and as a thematic carrier of his melancholic "history of destruction," into which his narrator freely enters.⁵ Yet, from the onset, the narrator, who occupies a strange middle ground between fiction and autobiography, observes as a "spectator on the shore" the shortcomings of the Enlightenment and the deleterious effect of Enlightenment "progress." He observes that the Enlightenment has been both contradictory and imperious in the disposition of its tenets, especially when its master discourse subsumes the voice of other cultures and then legitimizes the imposition its own set of uncontested cultural and epistemological values. Thus, Sebald tells the story of Roger Casement, who recoils from the effect that "Enlightenment" praxis, has on the native population of King Leopold's Belgian Congo. The tropes and images Sebald enlists in making his case attempt to bring to light a perspectival meaning-skein that involves memory,

interpretation, and imagination.⁶ What he manages to create is a carefully considered, intelligent literary quilt work that places lament and nostalgia, outrage and anger, and hope and despair in various proximities to each other. Oftentimes, he vivifies this dream-like narrative technique by fusing the sensibility of the narrator with that of the characters whom he allows to speak in first person. Not only does this fusion reinforce the dream-like quality of this literary and historical summary journey, but also it suggests a specific type of thematic gravity at work that tends to bring human and natural catastrophe within the orbit of each other while nudging the narrator to insinuate himself into the very lives of the characters he delineates.⁷

While the narrator's journey remains a personal odyssey--a review of a life lived in times of unprecedented turmoil--it is at once diachronic and synchronic and carries with it a distinct eschatological tone. Nearly every event and personage that attracts the narrator's attention are connected to and emblematic of the larger and wider movement of history along pathways marked by a troubling ambivalence vis-à-vis the "other" face of the Enlightenment in modern times. Each vignette brings to light evidence of injustice, inhumanity, irrationality, despair, hypocrisy, and intolerance. This concatenation of narrative fragments comprising *The Rings of Saturn* thus provides a compelling literary approximation to the ice and interstellar fragments composing the rings of Saturn.

Although the author-narrator states that his reason for undertaking the tour to the South of England is "to dispel the emptiness that takes hold when [he completes] a long stint of work," he has a less apparent reason for undertaking his walking tour that conflates his sense of finality with the desire to contextualize his life in the larger history of humankind. (3) Nonetheless, what turns up in this process is more and more evidence

of the decline of civilization and the failure of the Age of Reason to shepherd humankind along the path to full self realization and spiritual maturity.⁸ The accompanying sense of loss, sadness and despair is amplified by the narrator's valence capacity to fuse his perspective and mindset with the sensibilities of the various historical figures he writes about in the *Rings of Saturn*. While this fusion of horizons engenders a unique empathy and insight, it brings into question the relationship between the activity of memory and recollection on the one hand and truth claims on the other.⁹ Sebald's language, steeped in tropes of falling away, of slow dissolution and of stillborn promises, carries with it the notion that in bringing to light the significance of select historical moments and personages, albeit fragmentary and selective, he will have established what he argues is the truth of the human and natural condition.

While rumination seems arbitrary at times in *The Rings of Saturn*, it is nonetheless directed. Sebald takes pains to show that the evidence of the human will to destruction has an oblique approximation to geological catastrophe, both which attest to the evanescence of human and natural history. Embedded in this desultory examination of human history is the contention that the seeds planted by the Enlightenment fathers have fallen on fallow ground. He suggests that the state of the Enlightenment in the 21st century has more in common with the state of the Enlightenment at the height of the French revolution in all its violence, destruction and contradictions than it has with the Enlightenment imagined by its conceptual founders.

Repeated reference to Sir Thomas Browne, a 17th century physician whom Sebald introduces in section one, focuses the problems and limitations caused by this ideological slippage. Browne becomes a kind of literary touchstone to which Sebald returns at the

end of the *Rings of Saturn*. In many ways, the narrator shares the vision of Sir Thomas Browne.¹⁰ Browne's curiosity and enthusiasm for the empirical method is tempered ultimately by the belief that the Enlightenment has its limitations. Not entirely convinced that the new found science will be able to fulfill its utopic promises, Browne falls into epistemological doubt. The sobering black and white photo of Thomas Browne's skull, resting on a small pile of books places in relief a central concern in his part scientific, part metaphysical work entitled *Urn Burial*, in which Browne wonders how often his bones might be unearthed and re-interred. Browne's epistemological misgivings qualify his Enlightenment enthusiasm while lending voice to the narrator who arrives finally at a similar conclusion.

In the last Chapter of *Rings of Saturn*, Sebald focuses on the once thriving Norwich silk trade (Thomas Browne was the son of a Norwich silk merchant). Again, as he does throughout the work, he unearths connectivities and historical affinities that otherwise remain disconnected. The decline of the silk industry in Norwich becomes the author's Swan song. It serves as an objective correlative bringing to light an Enlightenment project that failed to materialize. This section shadows into a literary gloaming by returning once again to Thomas Brown and his pronouncements in *Urn Burial*.

Sebald's thought-movement throughout *The Rings of Saturn* attempts to extract meaning from the disparate events, characters and historical moments he examines by looping them together in such a way as to argue both necessity and coincidence. Section V provides a good example how this process proceeds. The narrator recounts a BBC documentary about Roger Casement once highly decorated by King Leopold for his

managerial prowess in the Congo but who was executed in 1916 for treason against England. As the narrator begins to fall asleep he states, nonetheless that he “hears every word of the Casement documentary but is unable to grasp the meaning.” Hours later he can only recall the mention of Joseph Conrad and the statement that Conrad made about Casement, that he was the only person of integrity whom he (Conrad) encountered in the Belgian Congo. So the narrator pursues the line back to see how the Conrad-Casement connection came to be, an example of Sebald’s technique of “digressive association.”¹¹ He attempts to separate the tightly woven meaning threads in order to identify the overarching episteme informing them. However, both stable meaning and Enlightenment ideals prove to be elusive. The story of Conrad’s parent’s bears this out. We see them as victims of intolerance and injustice--Conrad’s beautiful and talented mother dying at age 32, his father incarcerated nearly his entire life as a result of his advocacy for Polish freedom. This fragmented still life expressed as prose poetry brings the tragedy and sadness of these lives in view while placing the residual dignity of his parent’s lives in relief to the grim and empty silence of forgetfulness. When Conrad’s father is finally released from prison, he burns all his manuscripts and jettisons his idea of fomenting a revolution for Polish freedom as he watches a floating piece of still glowing manuscript rise, then float back, black and cold to the floor--the same color that the Polish are forbidden to wear in public when grieving.¹⁴

Despite the very intense but perspectival light to which Sebald subjects his objects of inquiry, he manages to elucidate only a part of the phenomenon under review. There is always a sense of unaccounted for liminal meaning space between the fragments he cites. By journey’s end, Sebald’s narrator comes to see history as a complex and mostly

incomprehensible ravel of odd coincidence and natural catastrophe that he experiences as loss, disorientation, and incredulity. This is especially apparent in Roger Casement's abhorrence of the Enlightenment practices of the Belgian overlords in the Congo, or in the sudden ideational pan to the huge panorama of the Battle of Waterloo in Brussels, disconnected from the grim reality of that battle, or in Casement's final indictment and execution for treason in attempting to support the Easter uprising.

The gauzy black and white and grey photos Sebald uses throughout *The Rings of Saturn* reinforce the ideas of evanescence, dissolution, and recidivism by suggesting an indistinct grayness associated with a kind of obscuring fog through which we attempt to understand human and natural history. In section V, we see a poor quality black and white reproduction of the Battle of Waterloo depicting waves of soldiers as smudgy, indistinguishable lines and dots.¹² The narrator listens to an account of the battle which concludes by noting that "no clear picture emerged" how the battle actually went. He reads that the victory was celebrated by the planting of trees in the shape of a Napoleonic three cornered hat and a Wellington boot, but finds no explanation how 50,000 human beings and 10 thousand horses met their deaths on the battlefield in a single day. A similar grey smudgy photo of Roger Casement, hat in hand, accompanied by a guard to the Old Bailey and to his execution in 1916, appears on page 130

Sebald looks at and into human and natural catastrophes with the same intensity and bafflement as did Thomas Browne, who is among the audience at Dr. Tulp's anatomy lesson in Amsterdam, memorialized later in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy lesson*. Browne observes a white fog-like mist rising from Dr. Tulp's incision, which he believes is the same internal fog that ". . . clouds our brains when asleep and dreaming." (17) Sebald's

narrator recalls a similar fog-like state of awareness as he awakens from his hospital ordeal: “I gazed out at the indigo vastness and down into the depths . . . But in the firmament above were the stars, tiny points of gold speckling the barren wastes.” (17) Redolent of Plato, Browne concludes that “all knowledge is enveloped in darkness . . . We study the order of things but never grasp their innermost essence” (19). Sebald’s narrator shares this belief as he struggles nonetheless to extract the elusive truth of human existence from the ore of human history.

Yet, there are idyllic Enlightenment moments in the *Rings of Saturn* in which human dignity and human worth, spiritual high-mindedness and romance come together suggesting that the Enlightenment has not failed entirely in realizing its higher goals. The story of Charlotte Ives and the Vicomte Chateaubriand bears this out. In the context of visiting an old cemetery, the narrator author resurrects a story in which learning and love, respectability and integrity, order and harmony create an idyll. The émigré Chateaubriand fleeing from the excesses of the French Revolution is taken in by an English country pastor. He so ingratiates himself with the family that he is invited to marry the pastor’s daughter Charlotte after several years of tutoring her in everything from Italian literature to the topography of the Holy Land. As the narrator fuses in perspective and sentiment with a much older Chateaubriand who having returned to France becomes a diplomat, the single hybrid character speaks at length both of the importance and futility of writing.

“How often this has caused me to feel that my memories and the labors expended in writing them down are all part of the same humiliating and at bottom contemptible business . . . Perhaps that is why it appears to me

that this world which I have very nearly left behind is shrouded in some peculiar mystery.” (255)

When Chateaubriand says finally “je suis marie,” he must leave Charlotte Ives, the pastor’s daughter and return to France. Only later does he remark that “recapitulating the past can have only one end, the hour of deliverance.” (257)

While Enlightenment theory radicalized the era of monarchs and aristocracy and undermined Church authority by questioning the legitimacy of dogma, it also looked to the future unlike the Renaissance which looked to the past. Initially in its early stages, the Enlightenment remained exuberantly rational, empirical and optimistic. The idea of a Newtonian universe governed by rationally comprehensible laws, accessible to human understanding via the scientific method assured Browne as it did other thinkers of his time that the cosmos was intelligently conceived and benignly directed. Yet, Browne, in a Platonic mood and still very mindful of human limitations, strikes a posture of epistemological humility when he says: “What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world. We study the order of things, but we cannot grasp their inner most essence. It befits our philosophy to be written small.” (19).

The author-narrator plays at arranging the “order of things” in *The Rings of Saturn* and is likewise stymied by the incomprehensibility of much of human and natural history. While he gives the reader the impression that he stumbles upon various historical events and personages in his walking tour of Suffolk, he also suggests that any venue would yield the same information. His subsequent commentary, which is often reservedly polemical, remains open-ended yet somehow conclusive—the pattern of

thematic resonances bears this out. Whether the topic is Swinburne, the Celestial King, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, the Battle of Waterloo or the silk trade in Norwich, each dreamy digression ends in orbit around the theme of Enlightenment disinheritance. There is no philosophical rapprochement with the high ideals of early Enlightenment, no reconciliation with the violence and destruction of human and natural history. The author-narrator's paraphrases Thomas Browne in this regard: "The iniquity of oblivion blindly scatters her poppy seed and when wretchedness falls upon us one summer's day like snow, all we wish for is to be forgotten." (24) The last observation in the book complements and completes this thought. Sebald connects the silk trade of Norwich to Thomas Browne, to the Dutch practice of covering mirrors and canvases with silk ribbons so as not to disturb the parting soul in its final journey of liberation.

Like Saturn's rings--distant, silent, composed of broken moons and ice fragments held in thrall by the gravity of the gaseous inhospitable planet--Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, composed of historical and cultural fragments seems to drift in orbit around a consciousness that shares Thomas Browne's vision that the Enlightenment is not the final philosophical word in our understanding of human and natural history.

Endnotes

1. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999), 3. Hereafter all references to this text will be cited in the text.
2. Mark McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 2-3.
3. McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, 3.
4. Merle Robin, "Random Sights, Curious Patterns," *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 1998.
5. Maya Barzilai, "Melancholia as World History: W. G. Sebald's Rewriting of Hegel in *Die Ringe des Saturn*," in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, eds. Anne Fuchs & J. J. Long (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2007) 75.
6. Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, "Charcoal: The Phantom Traces of W. G. Sebald's Novel-Memoirs," in *Monatshefte*, Vol.94, No.3 (Fall, 2002), 376.

7. See Peter Morgan, "The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W. G. Sebald's Prose Narratives," in *German Life and Letters* 58.1(2005): 75-92.
8. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "So ... What *Is* Enlightenment? An Inquisition into Modernity," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.20, No. 3 (Spring, 1994) 536.
9. See James K. Chandler, "About Loss: W. G. Sebald's Romantic Art of Memory," in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102.1 (2003): 235-262.
10. Barzilai, "Melancholy as World History," 76. See also Barbara Hiu, "Mapping Historical Networks in *Die Ringe des Saturn*," in *The Undiscover'd Country: W. G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. Markus Zisselsberger (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2012) 287.
11. J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald—Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 137.
12. J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald—Image, Archive, Modernity*, 46.