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W.G. Sebald: On a Cliff's Edge

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W.G. Sebald: On a Cliff's Edge

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature
of Bard College

by
Joseph Finnie

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J. M. W. Turner, *Funeral at Lausanne* (graphite and watercolor on paper 235 x 337 mm, 1841, Tate).¹

¹ "This almost insubstantial picture, bearing the title of *Funeral at Lausanne*, dates from 1841, and thus from a time when Turner could hardly travel anymore and dwelt increasingly on ideas of his own mortality, and perhaps for this reason, when something like this little cortège in Lausanne emerged from his memory, he swiftly set down a few brushstrokes in an attempt to capture visions which would melt away again the next moment" (W.G Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 109-110).

Sebald: On a Cliff's Edge

Rows on rows, and line by line they crumble,
 They that thought for all time through to be.
 Scarce a stone whereon a child might stumble
 Breaks the grim field paced alone of me.
 Earth, and man, and all their gods wax humble
 Here, where Time brings pasture to the sea.²

In Sebald's 1995 work *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator describes the ruins of the town of Dunwich on the North Sea coast of England. "Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air. If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea towards where the town must once have been, you can sense the immense power of emptiness."³ Characteristic of Sebald's thematic tendencies, he provides a history of how Dunwich became lost to the sea. The primary reason for Dunwich's destruction was the result of hurricane forced storms in which "all night the waves clawed away one row of houses after another."⁴ It is at this point in the narrative that Sebald alludes to the poet Charles Swinburne who wrote of the same shoreline. Although Sebald's narrator is documenting the history of Dunwich and not poeticizing it, such an allusion engages the reader's poetic thoughts. Though Sebald's prose is dense and encumbered with histories, he becomes a poet in the way that he composes his narratives, assembling various, seemingly unconnected, fragments of writing to form a cohesive narrative. Sebald conjures images unexpectedly for the reader and forms a narrative sequence in which scenes seem to drift into and out from one

² Charles Swinburne, *By the North Sea* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880).

³ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 159.

⁴ Sebald, *The Rings*, 158.

another seamlessly. This weightlessness liberates descriptions of the past from their given history and allows them to interact with one another in a way that mirrors the emergence of memories in one's consciousness.

W.G. Sebald's writing seems to have its origin at the shore. Sebald's voice is forever speaking from a cliff's edge overlooking the sea. From such a vantage, Sebald is made witness to the unceasing waves and the cycles of destruction they bring. In his writing, ideas are not fully conceived until they pass through this domain of ruin. From the cliff, Sebald's voice reverberates in the emptiness of the sea. His prose is sustained by the impression of that void, those winds of oblivion. Sebald's writing ultimately rests at this edge, at the limit between fiction and truth, humility and hubris, revelation and hopelessness.

As a professor at East Anglia in the 1970's, W.G. Sebald became familiar with England's coasts. Sebald's gaze would often be directed outward across the North Sea which separates Britain from Europe and toward the country in which Sebald spent much of his life, Germany. German history greatly affected Sebald's identity since his childhood, and as a result Sebald's works are encumbered by the events of the Holocaust. Yet, Sebald's narratives are not exclusively concerned with the tragedies of German history, instead they attempt to understand the individual's experience of being in a world in which all things seem to fall into oblivion; the individual near the shore. Sebald's narrators resemble his life and traverse similar paths. In this intimacy between author and narrator, Sebald seems to speak directly to the reader from the page. The voice that resounds from the pages of Sebald's work is distinctly his in its poignancy, melancholy, and scope.

On a cliff's edge, Sebald confronts time. With time all things seem to recede into the depths of an incomprehensible sea, a depth in which nothing exists. Whereas the people of

Dunwich “accepted the inevitability of the process” of decay, turning their backs to the force of the sea and building in the opposite direction, Sebald’s narratives remain orientated toward the void, not as means of resistance but out of the necessity to comprehend. With a gaze directed off a cliff’s edge, Sebald refuses to believe the world ends at the horizon. Sebald suggests that the inevitable loss of all things is a necessary part of human existence. The sense of loss creates the impulse to collect and recollect. These actions necessitate the movement of the mind and body in space and time. The structures of Sebald’s novels have this movement propelled by the need to collect at their centers. Sebald is first a collector, storytelling follows. Though, looking outward at the sea from an eroding cliff, it appears that time is the ultimate collector. Yet, Sebald would question the stability of time’s capacity to retain what it has claimed. How generous can time be?

Sebald confronts all things at the edge of comprehension with an initial curiosity and the question: “What does it mean?” The twentieth century French poet Francis Ponge transformed commonplace objects with language. In *The Nature of Things*, he devotes a poem to sea shores in which he describes the beach as “rather unkempt and barren / and generally sustaining no more than a trove of debris / endlessly polished and amassed by the devastating force.”⁵ The beginning of Ponge’s poem speaks to the attraction of this devastating force which consumes the thoughts of Sebald.

Almost to its farthest reaches
the sea is a simple thing reiterant wave upon wave.
But in nature,
 without bowing and scraping
the most complex things without some paring down.

⁵ Francis Ponge, *The Nature of Things* (New York: Red Dust, 1995), 26.

This is also
by reason of resentment against their overwhelming immensity
is why man rushes headlong for the outer limits
or intersections of vast things
in order to define them.
For reason caught in web of uniformity
wavers precariously and grows evasive:
a mind in search of ideas
should first lay in a store of images.⁶

⁶ Ponge, 26.

I

Settling in a World of Decay

At the age of 57, W.G. Sebald's death came unsuspectingly caused by an aneurysm while driving near Norwich, England in 2001. During the 1990's, Sebald wrote a series of successful novels including *Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Vertigo*. His death came a month after the publication of his last novel *Austerlitz*. The sense of loss in the wake of Sebald's premature death is a feeling Sebald himself was accustomed to. His prose is haunted by a melancholic tone stemming from the temporality of life and the inescapable process of decay. As a writer, Sebald is not impeded by any sense of hopelessness. Rather, Sebald's narratives are compelled by curiosity and inquire unrestrictedly.

Sebald's narratives resist the notion that things lost to oblivion are irretrievable. To forget and not attempt to remember is a dangerous act in Sebald's view. His novels are testament to a new way of remembering. Rather than rely entirely on historical works to provide the images of the past, Sebald places his narrators in spaces that contain traces of the past and stories of destruction. In doing so, Sebald realizes that things lost to time are not necessarily lost to the world. However, in this effort Sebald is encumbered with the weight of history and ignorance. Sebald understands that the moments of the past, if not empty, are easily misrepresented. He therefore writes of the past with caution, asking questions in place of statements. In addition, Sebald attempts to encounter the past in space so that the past can be experienced through the senses.

The Rings of Saturn

The first novel examined throughout this paper is W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. The novel was published in 1995 and translated into English in 1998. The structure of this

work compared to *Austerlitz*, the second novel included in this paper, is more fragmentary. The sequence of fragments is dictated by the mind of the narrator who chronicles his walking tour of England's eastern coast. Following the traveling narrator through ten sections, various people, places, and ideas are presented—from a hospital room to Sir Thomas Browne, the Battle of Waterloo, and the silk trade. Several photographs accompany the text throughout, creating the effect that one is reading both an authentic documentation of history and a work of fiction. This ingenuous method keeps the reader in a skeptical position, a position Sebald and his narrators share. What is an accurate representation of the past?

As the title suggests, *The Rings of Saturn* is not concerned with the monuments of the past but rather the forgotten peripheral moments. With this form of recollection, the narrator is assuming the identity of the chronicler defined by Walter Benjamin in his essay "On the Philosophy of History." Benjamin's definition reads: "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."⁷ Though the narrator of the novel is consumed by melancholy caused by the destruction present in the world, he does not let this psychological state subdue his curiosity of the minor events of the past. Yet, melancholy cannot be separated from the narrator's descriptions. The narrator's melancholic tone, which brings *The Rings of Saturn* to its gradual end, leaves the reader in a peculiar state of mind. As a result of its ingenuity and haunting revelations, the novel produces excitement in the reader. However, this excitement is suppressed by this sense of melancholy. In the end, what will Sebald's reader be infected by: melancholy or curiosity? It is demonstrated by the narrator that these two feelings are not incompatible.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254.

Sebald uses a piece of silk thread as a metaphor of the mind meandering through the world and text to weave meaning. The significance of the metaphor rests on the delicate quality of silk. It is difficult at times to see the connection between the novel's fragments; accordingly, a silk thread is often imperceptible and easily breaks. However, Sebald repeats the silk motif, along with others, frequently enough to remind the reader that connections are present. As a writer, Sebald acts as a weaver — *The Rings of Saturn* is ultimately held together by a thread of motifs.

Sebald does not let one forget the origin of silk. The silk worm, among other living yet overlooked beings, is discussed thoroughly in the novel. Accordingly, Sebald uses the natural world and inanimate materials as an alternative means to traversing time and history. Furthermore, moments in the novel which contain descriptions of rather uncommon subjects — for instance, a detailed account of the life and death of herring — oscillate between meaning and meaninglessness. In the end, these passages conclude by revealing the remarkable existence of subjects often disregarded. *The Rings of Saturn* develops in this manner. Attentive and sensible, the writing merges the melancholy caused by the fate of destruction with an enthusiasm, on the margin of optimism, to expose the vitality of the world and its infinite recesses.

Austerlitz

Austerlitz, published and translated in 2001, is the second work to be examined alongside *The Rings of Saturn* in this paper. *Austerlitz* is concerned with the same meandering thread of meaning present in *The Rings of Saturn*. Though, the narrative is slightly less fragmentary with the character of Austerlitz and his recovery of his past as the focal point. Through the narrator's repeated encounters with Austerlitz over the course of years, the story

of how Austerlitz discovers his identity unfolds. The majority of the novel consists of the narrator's recollection of what Austerlitz recounts to him during their meetings. In an attempt to escape Nazi rule, Austerlitz was sent as a young child out of Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport train to Britain. A Calvinist preacher and his wife adopted Austerlitz and it is with them in Bala, Wales he grew up rather miserably under the name Dafydd Elias.⁸ Austerlitz's curiosity developed when he was sent to Stower Grange private school.⁹ To escape yet another miserable place, Austerlitz "read everything in the school library."¹⁰ His capacity to imagine was expanded by this reading and as a result Austerlitz's mind "gradually created a kind of ideal landscape" which he could "move into [...] at any time."¹¹ After the woman who adopted Austerlitz died and the preacher was admitted to an asylum, the head master of Stower Grange revealed to the fifteen year old Dafydd Elias that "Jacque Austerlitz" was his birth name.¹² This served as the initial rupture in Austerlitz's life, a fracture that would allow the past to slowly seep back through the crevices of experience. Austerlitz continued his schooling at Oxford and studied architecture.¹³ The role of architecture is indispensable to Austerlitz's journey into the past. It brings into focus Austerlitz's particular visual intelligence, a concept that Sebald explores extensively in the novel. As the narrator continues to encounter Austerlitz, their friendship grows. Austerlitz increasingly has impression of his past

⁸ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 44.

⁹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 59.

¹⁰ Sebald, *Aust.*, 61.

¹¹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 61.

¹² Sebald, *Aust.*, 67.

¹³ Sebald, *Aust.*, 103.

as they emerge in various places he travels. But it is not until he is reunited with his nurserymaid, Vera, that the stories of his origin are shared.¹⁴

II

The Vast Structure of Recollection

In *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, French Historian Pierre Nora posits that memory and history are fundamentally opposed. Nora describes memory as “life,” a “sacred” and “perpetually actual phenomenon” bonded to the present, while history is an “always problematic” and “prosaic” “representation of the past.” Nora continues the dichotomy with the following claim: “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative.”¹⁵ “We speak so much of memory,” Nora claims in this 1989 publication, “because there is so little of it left” in our time.¹⁶ Nora follows the emergence of “lieux de mémoire, sites of memory,” with the diminishing presence of traditional memory, a disappearance which Nora attributes to the increase of historical representation. “Indeed,” Nora continues, “it is this very push and pull [between memory and history] that produces lieux de mémoire—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”¹⁷

¹⁴ ¹⁴ Sebald, *Aust.*, 152.

¹⁵ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8-9.

¹⁶ Nora, 7.

¹⁷ Nora, 12.

To an extent, Sebald upholds the dichotomy between memory and history that Pierre Nora identifies; he remains a witness to the sea of living memory and its dormant shells. Indeed, Sebald narratives seem to be a committed search for these shells existing in liminality. Both novels, *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*, move to discover the latent fragments of the past left behind by the general movement of time but not altogether lost. In order for these narratives to do so, they must continually return to the shores of the world and identify what exists in a liminal state between the past and present; this is the space of recollection. In accordance with Pierre Nora's metaphor likening places of memory to shells on the shore, Sebald frequently returns to the location of the shore in which land and sea meet in order to emphasize the importance of liminality. It is in such a state that the shells of the past exist; not yet claimed by the void of nonexistence but not entirely accessible to the present. In a sense, these pieces of the past remain behind a veil. As shells do not remain whole, Sebald recognizes that the past presents itself in fragments, ruins, and traces. Therefore, sites of memory in Sebald's narratives are liminal spaces that are not entirely intact—they are established by details rather than totalities. In his writing, Sebald searches for memory and not history. Upon finding the shells of the past, Sebald (re)collects them and establishes his own sites of memory.

What are these “sites of memory” discovered in *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*? Nora further defines lieux de mémoire as “simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration.”¹⁸ Additionally, the sites are material, symbolic, and functional. For Nora, a site of memory is “bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a

¹⁸ Nora, 18.

Mobius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile.”¹⁹ Nora’s definition of lieux de mémoire seems purposefully vague. The sites themselves do not conform to a single definition. Rather, sites of memory are formed through the relationships of moving parts. Lieux de mémoire are places of liberation in which things find new correspondences. At these sites, the concreteness of materiality meets consciousness and its abstractions, physical sensation and imagination join, and the individual is given a window into the seemingly infinite network of things past and present. Sebald’s novels revolve around these sites of memory. Most often in the narratives, “lieux de mémoire” are embodied by architectural sites. The plot’s development in both *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn* is dependent on repeated encounters with these sites. In *Austerlitz*, for instance, the main character Austerlitz’s recollection of his past coincides with his experience in a series of places that act as sites. Whether it be the lady’s waiting room of a train station, or an antique bazaar displaying various objects in a window front, the places that Austerlitz encounters offers a kind of memory that space alone harbors. Each one of these places is both “available in concrete sensual experience” and “susceptible to the most abstract elaboration.” Austerlitz recognizes the importance of his senses; he remembers most vividly when his senses override his thoughts. Austerlitz describes this Proustian theory of remembrance to the narrator: “When I felt the uneven paving of the Šporkova underfoot as step by step I climbed uphill, it was as if I had already been this way before and my memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses, so longed numbed and now coming back to life.”²⁰

¹⁹ Nora, 19.

²⁰ Sebald, *Aust.*, 150.

In both of Sebald's narratives, places often abandon their concreteness to become dream-like and take shape as labyrinthine structures. For Sebald, consciousness and space are interlinked. The characters of his novels engage in a constructive relationship with spatial environments. Since space's capacity to remember far exceeds an individual's, space serves to store and remember the majority of things forgotten by the mind. In this way, space functions as an extension of one's memory and sites of memory are made possible.

The source of memory for Sebald does not depend solely on the individual. Rather, places and objects retain pieces of the past in their material existence and, therefore, serve as a source of remembrance alongside the individual. This concept, of course, is wonderfully articulated by Proust. Nora himself sites Proust's madeleine as a particular "lieux de mémoire." For Proust, the attempt to voluntarily remember is futile and instead one must be patient and encounter the past by chance. In *Swann's Way*, the first volume of his magnum opus *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust writes of the location of memory. "The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling."²¹ The past is kept by something similar to Nora's site of memory. Proust continues on to describe the ability of the individual's senses to reveal the past hidden within a site of memory. In the following passage, Proust not only conveys how the "vast structure" of the past survives ruin, but also how one's senses can gain access to such a structure.

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised in time, like souls,

²¹ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 60.

remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.²²

Given this description of the capacity of one's sense of taste and smell, it is clear that a site of memory will most often depend on an immediate interaction of an individual. Pierre Nora concurs, explaining that the transformation of memory from tradition into sites of memory "implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual." Proust along with Sebald exhibit in their novels what Nora deems the "total psychologization of contemporary memory."²³ Consequently, the burden of remembrance is on the individual. It is, perhaps, for that reason that Sebald writes first-person fiction; the world constructed by his stories is a world embedded in the narrator's memory. For Sebald, the individual must not remain passive in this space of memory. Consequently, Sebald activates space and memory through travel. Indeed, if space is an extension of one's memory then one must move through it.

Nora describes this burden of remembrance placed on the individual as a responsibility: "An order is given to remember, but the responsibility is mine and it is I who must remember."²⁴ Nora continues to make the individual's relationship with memory more explicit: "when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals."²⁵ Consequently, an impulse develops in an

²² Proust, 63-4.

²³ Nora, 15.

²⁴ Nora, 15.

²⁵ Nora, 16.

individual to amass a store of objects and form an archive. Nora describes this impulse of the modern self: “we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been [...]”²⁶ For Pierre Nora, modern memory is ultimately archival; its new function is to record.²⁷ Sebald reflects the tendency to archive in his work—text and photographs serve as a collection of places, people, and events. However, Sebald seems aware of the presence of “indiscriminate” archives which Nora believes act as “prosthesis-memory.”²⁸

Austerlitz and *The Rings of Saturn* are deliberate attempts by Sebald to create a new archival form. His resulting narratives, composed from both fact and fiction, accomplish a unique structure that resembles the indiscriminate archive. Yet, Sebald is in the end a storyteller, and consequently, his archive must possess a telos, it must move towards some end. It is the uncertainty of Sebald’s archive, its many beginnings and ends, that makes him a unique storyteller. Sebald recognizes that memory is a part of the labyrinthine structure of individual consciousness and that the mind often remembers indiscriminately. By assembling narratives around individuals, Sebald intends his archival narrative to be convoluted. Yet, Sebald’s narratives are not restricted to function as “prosthesis-memory.” Instead, in observing how recollection takes place and what emotions arise in the process, the reader is offered a rather personal kind of memory; the archive is made intimate and historical distance is lessened. In the end, Sebald recognizes this type of memory exclusively. It appears that the past can only truly surface through the individual.

²⁶ Nora, 13.

²⁷ Nora, 13.

²⁸ Nora, 14.

III

The Collector

Sebald acknowledges the importance of the individual, and views history through the lens of personal memory. In following the impulse to archive, Sebald acts as a collector. To think of remembrance in this way allows one to realize how sites of memory become so significant. In his essay *Unpacking My Library*, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin describes the relationship a collector has with the world. For Benjamin, the collector is able to realize what objects symbolize beyond their functionality. A collector has “a relationship with objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate.”²⁹ It is this ability of the collector, Benjamin continues, that leads to a “profound enchantment” in which individual items are locked “within a magical circle.”³⁰ Thus, in being open to what objects may possess beyond their utilitarian value, the collector is able to exist among his archive of objects as if each object has the potential of becoming a site of memory in itself. However, in accordance with Proust, the act of collecting is not always voluntary; things often enter one’s “magical circle” by chance. Nevertheless, this form of recollection is more true to one’s experience of the world as opposed to historical discourse. The French theorist Roland Barthes recognizes the conflict between lived experience and history. In *Camera Lucida* he asserts: “As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history.”³¹ The enchantment of one’s own archive and its sites of memory supersedes *history*.

²⁹ Benjamin, 60.

³⁰ Benjamin, 60.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 65.

While Sebald understands the importance of the individual collector, he does not elevate the ego above the world. On the contrary, Sebald seems to propose that a form of humility is necessary in forming a proper relationship with the past. He does so by instilling his characters with a sense of melancholy. Melancholia, according to Sigmund Freud, is separate from mourning. In his words, “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”³² Instead of mourning the passing of time and the decay of the world, thereby emptying the world of meaning, Sebald focuses almost exclusively on the meaning left in the world. His characters with diminished egos become more sensitive to encounters with the world and begin to define themselves in relation to these external phenomenon. Through the psychological trait of melancholy a new orientation is given to the self.

As a reader of Sebald, we must enter his magical circle and try to orientate ourselves. Yet, how can we as readers share the same sites of memory present for Sebald’s characters? The least we can do is identify these sites and discern the topography of Sebald’s archive. Resembling an archive in its structure, this paper consists of a collection of particular moments which stand out as significant motifs or sites of memory in both *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*. The presence of Sebald’s voice allows this paper to follow his perspective alongside his narrators. Rather than have an argument removed from Sebald’s position, this paper will consist of a reading of Sebald from the cliff’s edge he inhabits as a writer.

The structures of *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* are similar. Both novels observe much of the same phenomena: time, memory, destruction, and oblivion. For Sebald to pursue these phenomena the way he attends, it necessitates a particular way of seeing or

³² freud 246

comprehending. Sebald resists forming a totalizing view in which the individual assumes a position of omniscience. Consequently, his writing is attempting to follow an alternative way of viewing the world. In order to enter the magical circle of his archive, the reader must understand this alternative way of seeing. Each section of this paper will attempt to *see* with Sebald's eyes of recollection. In the realm of memory, we will discover a new form of history.

To Begin

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where —' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

'—so long as I get *somewhere*,' Alice added as an explanation.

'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'³³

Both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* are narratives which consist of traveling from place to place across England and Europe in a walking tradition that echoes Rousseau.³⁴ Before we follow Sebald's narrators, we must first take the hand of Alice. Without a particular destination in mind, we walk, we read, so long as we get *somewhere*. This child-like disposition opens one to the encounter and allows a reading of Sebald's narratives to conclude at unforeseen destinations. For, Sebald would agree that there is no single path that leads through the fragments of the past. One who begins with a preconceived destination in mind walks with myopic vision. The past remains inaccessible to this traveler. Sebald's narratives follow a thread that does not extend outwardly, it is not initially visible, but when *somewhere* is reached and one looks back upon where they have travelled and what they've encountered the thread is made apparent. The visible thread is contained in the recollecting mind.

This way of thinking follows Marcel Proust's conception of remembrance. For Proust, the past cannot be conjured voluntarily. The past, according to Proust, must be encountered

³³ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (Ann Arbor: Border Classics, 2006), 37.

³⁴ see *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*

by chance in which memories are prompted involuntarily. Whether it be with Marcel's consequential bite of a Madeleine or Alice's accidental fall down a rabbit hole, the vastness of the world is contained, unforeseen, in chance experiences. We take the hand of Alice because in many ways Sebald's characters are walking in a world as strange and illusory as Wonderland in which animals and inanimate objects have a voice. And as Marcel in search of lost time exhibits, remembrance is an imaginary act that often begins as dreams do. The possibility of sites of memory relies on using one's faculty of imagination alongside sense experience in order *to see* beyond the present. This way of seeing is only attained if one walks long enough.

The Hospital Room

As a writer, Sebald uses a visual vocabulary as a means to orientate and disorientate the subject in time and history. The subject must be situated or positioned and therefore the subject must be described in relation to his or her surroundings. There are two separate aspects of orientation in the two novels. The first is orientating the self in the space of the world. This includes a psychological layer of the character's experience. Where the self belongs in a world perceived as unfamiliar and alien is a common question posed in both narratives. The second type of orientation involves situating the self in time. However, describing an individual's place in a larger context like history is recognized by Sebald to be difficult and often problematic. Believing that one has an awareness of their position in history implies they have a vantage over the passage of time itself. We will find that Sebald believes there is little distinction between orientating the self in space and orientating the self in time. The barrier dissolves when visual perception meets memory and imagination.

The first vantage point described in *The Rings of Saturn* occurs in the first pages of the novel. The narrator is reflecting on his time spent hospitalized in Norwich. This time in the hospital is chronologically the last episode of the narrator's year long walking tour of England. The narrator's encounters the previous year which the majority of the novel recounts left the him "in a state of almost total immobility."³⁵ The narrator's psychological break was the result of the "paralysing horror" caused by confrontations with the "traces of destruction" present even in the most remote places. Seemingly on the brink of psychosis, the narrator is no longer capable of physical movement. In order to resist receding into oblivion, the narrator must affirm that some semblance of reality remains intact. It is from this necessity to reaffirm the

³⁵ Sebald, *The Rings*, 3.

existence of reality that the first vantage point over the world described in the novel is provided. There remains in the narrator's depressive state an imperative *to see*.

The only vantage point the narrator has in his eighth floor hospital room is through the frame of a window. "Indeed," the narrator explains, "all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window."³⁶ After freely walking the English countryside, the narrator is left confined to a single room and to a single view of the world. After realizing the encompassing nature of destruction, the narrator now must resist the decay of his own mind. "Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting [...]."³⁷ This pictorial view offered by this window is ultimately one of melancholy; the narrator is unable to reconcile his existence with a world of constant destruction. The "black netting" draped over the window serves to symbolize loss. But does anything remain? Is the ground still there or has it all "vanished" into the sky?

The attempt to reach the window in his paralyzed state reminds the narrator of Kafka's Gregor Samsa.

"[...] contriving to slip over the edge of the bed to the floor, half on my belly and half sideways, and then to reach the wall on all fours, I dragged myself, despite the pain, up to the window sill. In the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the glass. I could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out

³⁶ Sebald, *The Rings*, 4.

³⁷ Sebald, *The Rings*, 4.

of his room, no longing remembering (so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him. And just as Gregor's dimmed eyes failed to recognize the quiet street where he and his family had lived for years, taking Charlottenstraße for a grey wasteland, so I too found the familiar city, extending from the hospital courtyards to the far horizon, an utterly alien place.³⁸

Here, the vantage is not a point of liberation. While we often think of vantage points as a way to free one's vision from limitation, the narrator's particular vantage forms a kind of boundary. The narrator is removed entirely from the scene he overlooks. The once "familiar city" becomes "alien" not from a change in the city itself but from a change within the narrator. This vantage point is an intimate one; it is founded on melancholy and projects the narrator's melancholy outwardly through the window. Even the gardens below are "cheerless gardens."

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 multistorey car parks rose up like immense boulders.³⁹

The world from such height resembles a "maze." That is the only understanding such vantage offers. That the maze which is often unrecognizable in close quarters exists, but there is no solution. The structure of the maze or labyrinth recurs in *The Rings of Saturn*. This particular maze is constructed of a "sea of stone" or "field of rubble," it is the maze of destruction, the aftermath of a bombing. Soon the cliff on which the narrator's feet rest will give way and the ruin will claim him too. The narrator's description continues after an ambulance passes by:

³⁸ Sebald, *The Rings*, 4-5.

³⁹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 5.

I could not hear its siren; at that height I was cocooned in an almost complete and, as it were, artificial silence. All I could hear was the wind sweeping in from the country and buffeting the window; and in between, when the sound subsided, there was the never entirely ceasing murmur in my own ears.⁴⁰

The narrator is “cocooned,” he is in-between two separate states but what metamorphosis is he a part of? Is he migrating from life to oblivion? Sanity into madness? On the contrary, he is metamorphosing into a collector, the “murmur” in his ear represents the presence of his memory. This murmur is becoming louder, at least, this is what the reader can construe; for, the narrator is beginning to tell us more and more.

As the narrator is coming to from a dosage of drugs administered to him in the hospital the night before he does not feel cured.

It was not until dawn, when the morning shift relieved the night nurses, that I realized where I was. I became aware of my body, the insensate foot, the pain in my back; I heard the rattle of crockery as the hospital’s daily routine started in the corridor; and, as the first light brightened the sky, I saw a vapour trail cross the segment framed by my window. At the time I took that white trail for a good omen, but now, as I look back, I fear it marked the beginning of a fissure that has since riven my life.⁴¹

With a gained awareness of his location and the sensation of his body, a coming to which echoes Proust, the narrator looks out the window once more to orientate his state of mind. At first he views the “white trail” across the sky as a sign of a better future, however, the narrator immediately revises this sign for the reader. Here, we see the changing perspectives seen from

⁴⁰ Sebald, *The Rings*, 4-5.

⁴¹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 18.

this hospital window. At first, in the present, the sign seemed a “good omen” but upon reflection the meaning of the sign was altered by the narrator to become a bad omen, “the beginning of a fissure.” Upon reflection the narrator recognizes the sign for what it is.

The passage continues describing the source of the vapor trail. “The aircraft at the tip of the trail was as invisible as the passengers inside it.”⁴² The source and cause of the trail is unseen. The narrator then mentions the seventeenth century English writer Sir Thomas Browne. The narrator recalls Browne’s thoughts: “The invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us remained an unfathomable mystery for Thomas Browne too, who saw our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond.”⁴³ This insight extends human ignorance beyond merely knowing what things are to not being able to know the causes of things. If our world is “a shadow image” as Browne suggests, than we only perceive effects. In this dim light, we are not only ignorant of knowledge but captive to the destructive mechanisms of nature. The fissure that the narrator speaks of, then, exists between cause and effect. Does one have the agency to decide where one is going?

⁴² Sebald, *The Rings*, 18.

⁴³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 18.

Pigeons

Orientation: (*Zoology*) the faculty by which birds and other animals find their way back to a place after going or being taken to a place distant from it (as in homing pigeons and migratory birds).⁴⁴

The zoological definition of orientation is of particular interest to the narrators in these two works. Countless times the narrators pause to meditate on the abilities of animals and insects to navigate the world. Sebald reveals that memory functions in several ways. Animals remember their own history and origin in a peculiar way—a primal memory. Animals are able to sense natural forces and alter their movement accordingly. Do humans have the capacity to remember and move in this way?

In conversation with the narrator, Austerlitz recalls his schoolfriend Gerard's curiosity of flight. Gerard's study of ornithology led him to conclude that pigeons had the greatest aptitude for flight, "not just for their speed in traveling very long distances but for their navigational abilities, which set them apart from all other living creatures."⁴⁵ According to Gerard, a pigeon infallibly finds its way home. Austerlitz recounts Gerard's words to the narrator: "To this day no one knows how these birds, sent off on their journey into so menacing a void, their hearts surely almost breaking with fear in their presentiment of the vast distances they must cover, make straight for their place of origin."⁴⁶ What causes these birds to move so devotedly to their destination? Though it is impossible to know whether their hearts truly tremble with fear, the pigeon is a symbol of persistence in the same world Sebald's characters attempt to navigate. For a bird to fly until it reaches its destination or dies of

⁴⁴ Oxford English Dictionary Online, (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ Sebald, *Aust.*, 113.

⁴⁶ Sebald, *Aust.*, 114.

exhaustion along the way is an incredible gesture towards life. As living beings they share the same innate sentiments for home as humans do.

Do we share a similar mechanism like that of the pigeon to orientate ourselves? If our consciousness and the ability to remember is indeed that very mechanism, what distances must it cover in time and how must it traverse space in order to reconnect the self with a point of origin? If we are taking the same kind of journeys as other living beings, as Sebald insinuates, then each time these stories pause to elaborate on the nature of animals, it does so out of companionship. Humans and animals exist under the same mysterious confines of space and time. Both, seem to use the past and a sense of home as a means of orientation.

Nocturama

The beginning of *Austerlitz* establishes vision as a force in the world. Four photographs of eyes are present in the space of two pages. What appears to be a Lemur, Owl, and two sets of human eyes are gazing out from the page to the reader who has now been transformed into the viewer. The peculiar exchange of gazes between the reader and the page is an ingenuous way of engaging the reader's eyes, as if to remind him or her what it means *to see*. The photographs belong to a passage in which the narrator is describing his experience looking at nocturnal creatures in a zoo. The relationship between the animal gaze and the human gaze is described in the following passage:

Otherwise all I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking.⁴⁷

Not only does this passage describe a likeness between certain humans and animals, it describes an intent of the eye. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator speaks of Thomas Browne's belief that "all knowledge is enveloped in darkness."⁴⁸ The narrator of *Austerlitz* posits that we attempt to "penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking." An "inquiring gaze," one that is seeking out of curiosity, penetrates the darkness to a further degree. While Sebald emphasizes the similarity of the human and animal gaze, with the ability to see in the dark these nocturnal animals possess a trait that humans lack. When viewing this fact in relation to Thomas Browne's metaphor, we are prompted to ask what

⁴⁷ Sebald, *Aust.*, 4-5.

⁴⁸ Sebald, *The Rings*, 19.

knowledge animals possess that humans fail to see. Sebald seems to insist that in our pursuit of knowledge forever enveloped in darkness, there may be creatures more knowing than the human. Moreover, what we are unable to see may be able to see us clearly. This ghostly, unseen presence is a theme throughout Sebald's work.

Shortly after this scene, the narrator sees Austerlitz for the first time. Austerlitz possesses the inquiring gaze. When we are first introduced to Austerlitz in the waiting room of an Antwerp train station, the narrator remarks on his distinctive behavior. Austerlitz is "the only one who was not staring apathetically into space, but instead was occupied in making notes and sketches obviously relating to the room where we were both sitting [...]." ⁴⁹ We later learn that Austerlitz is primarily interested in architecture, devoting much of his time studying the built environments of Europe. The narrator observes that "when he was not actually writing something down his glance often dwelt on the row of windows, the fluted pilasters, and other structural details of the waiting room." In resisting an apathetic disposition, Austerlitz exposes himself to this world of objects. His curiosity and awareness of space allows him to form a complex relationship with the world. That is, by spending time contemplating the nature of objects, by looking and thinking, Austerlitz's begins to penetrate the darkness which surrounds his past and the past.

However, a limit of comprehension remains; we may look at the eyes from the Nocturama but we cannot communicate with them. Near the end of *Austerlitz*, Adela, Austerlitz's friend, recognizes this inability. Austerlitz recalls her words upon seeing a group of fallow deer. "Marie particularly asked me to take a photograph of this beautiful group, and as she did so, said Austerlitz, she said something which I have never forgotten, she said the

⁴⁹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 7.

captive animals and we ourselves, their human counterparts, view one another *à travers une brèche d'incompréhension*.”⁵⁰ Through a breach of misunderstanding, a barrier between human and animal is both formed and broken. Perhaps, recognizing this threshold, knowing that one will at times stumble in the dark, is enough to retain a valuable relationship with the world.

⁵⁰ Sebald, *Aust.*, 264.

Great Uncle Alphonso: Seeing Through a Veil

When one sees, one is viewing their representation of the world. This is most evident when one attempts to recreate what they see in the form art. Turning back to *Austerlitz*, we find a method of painting that imbues vision with a sense of loss. Speaking to the narrator, Austerlitz recalls how Alphonso, the Great Uncle of Austerlitz's friend Gerard, painted with water color the landscape at his lodge.

When he was thus engaged he generally wore glasses with gray silk tissue instead of lenses in the frames, so that the landscape appeared through a fine veil of muted colors, and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes. The faint images that Alphonso transferred onto paper, said Austerlitz, were barely sketches of pictures — here a rocky slope, there a small bosky thicket or cumulus cloud — fragments, almost without color, fixed with a tint made of a few drops of water and a grain of malachite green or ash-blue.⁵¹

While painting, Alphonso purposefully obscures his vision. By diminishing the vividness of the world and instead creating an image more soft and muted, Alphonso is able to emphasize how he sees. Alphonso sees a world of loss, declaring to Austerlitz at the time “that everything was fading before our eyes, and that many of the loveliest colors had already disappeared.”⁵² Perhaps the veil that seemingly hinders Alphonso's vision produces a certain kind of clarity. His method of painting forms an image with a comprehensible sentiment. Alphonso realizes the burden and impossibility of representing the world as it is in all its complexity; he understands that we are seeing in darkness. By alleviating the necessity to depict the world in

⁵¹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 88.

⁵² Sebald, *Aust.*, 88.

all its intricacy, the world as it is, Alphonso represents the world as it is to the human subject; a world whose shape and color is more tender and faint. Moreover, Alphonso represents a world affected by a melancholic sense of loss. This way of *seeing* is similar to that of Rembrandt who lacks “Cartesian rigidity.” When we remember, when our memory represents the images of the past, what tissue covers our eyes? How vague and colorless are the fragments of our past?

Waterloo Panorama

The narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* finds the idea that one could have a vantage over history to be entirely misled. Visiting the site of the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium, the narrator explores the Waterloo Panorama, a large rotunda in which the entire Battle of Waterloo is depicted by an artificial three-dimensional landscape encompassed by a one hundred and ten by twelve yard painting. The building was designed by architect Franz Van Ophen in 1911 and the painting it houses was done by Louis Dumoulin in 1912. The experience of standing on the raised platform in the middle of this monument is described by the narrator as “being at the centre of events.”⁵³ This phrase should sound problematic for the reader. For, as the title suggests, *The Rings of Saturn* is concerned with the peripheral fragments of history. To be at the center of an event is viewed by Sebald as being in a falsely constructed position. The narrator perpetuates this sentiment. “This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was.”⁵⁴ Thus, the vantage provided by representing history is ultimately highly constructed. Seeing “everything at once” without duration, without an understanding of how time passed through the events of the past, excludes the individual from *that* time. Instead, one is left viewing the past with the sense of being outside of and disconnected from *that* time. Furthermore, the belief that one has a perspective over the totality of an event disregards the nature of peripheral causes and effects which often appear as trivial fragments and are excluded from the whole picture.

⁵³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 124.

⁵⁴ Sebald, *The Rings*, 125.

This “falsification of perspective” which attempts to “see everything at once” is first described by the narrator while visiting the Hague gallery in Amsterdam. He pauses to study Jacob van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*.

The flatland stretching out towards Haarlem is seen from above, from a vantage point generally identified as the dunes, though the sense of a bird’s-eye view is so strong that the dunes would have to be veritable hills or even modest mountains. The truth is of course that Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above earth. Only in this way could he see it altogether [...].⁵⁵

For both historians and artists there is a desire for a perspectival overview. The desire is warranted, falsifying the perspective is often not. The attempt to seize something “altogether” or “at once” is an attempt to unite all detail into a single image; such a large scale image cannot contain this amount of detail. Sebald is not against an imagined perspective but it must not assume a false vantage point in which one believes they have an overview. Instead, he insists that we imagine in fragments. From the perspective of Ruisdael’s painting, the details of Haarlem are left out. The only things being depicted by the pictorial overview are landmark buildings and the makeup of the landscape; the majority of the painting consists of sky. Sebald believes that if we attempt to represent the past from an omniscient vantage “some distance above the earth” we will remain ignorant. Imagining in fragments insists that one views a scene altogether but not at once.

One fault of the Waterloo Panorama is in its attempt to visually depict the battle and make the viewer appear to be in the middle, close to the event while in reality a vast distance

⁵⁵ Sebald, *The Rings*, 83.

separates the subject from the event. A pictorial representation attempts to show the viewer precisely how an event looked. For the narrator, “no clear picture” of the event emerged from the scene. Only when he “had shut [his] eyes” did he see “a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters.”⁵⁶ It is as though the act of closing the eyes allowed the imagination to reanimate the past. To provide an image of how things were inhibits the mind thinking otherwise. Sebald’s work relies on the imagination as a means of orientation and as a means to establish a new vantage point. As the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard proposes, the imagination “is rather the faculty of *deforming* images provided by perception; it is above all the faculty of liberating us from first images [...]”⁵⁷ If the first images of the past provided to us are indeed misrepresentations, perhaps the only way of escaping such false images is by deforming them, by closing our eyes and imagining. The aim of Sebald’s texts is to provide a more sensible image of the past by keeping the image incomplete, in fragments. The breaking of preconceived images and notions is precisely what Sebald accomplishes by engaging the imagination with fragments. If we fail to use any extent of our imagination when viewing history, if we fail to read it like a Sebaldian narrative, then we are left with images provided to us by others.

For instance, these preconceived images are described by Austerlitz when speaking of his schoolfriend Hilary:

All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-

⁵⁶ Sebald, *The Rings*, 126.

⁵⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie* (Connecticut: Spring Publications, 2014), 75.

trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse's eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable Emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen still amidst the turmoil of battle. Our concern with history, so Hilary's thesis ran, is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.⁵⁸

For Hilary, "set pieces" of history arrest our gaze. "We keep staring" at "stock and trade" images and fail to look "somewhere as yet undiscovered." The argument of Hilary's is similar to Bachelard's. If the "preformed images" that Hilary speaks of are "imprinted on our brains," how does one escape an image so engrained? For Bachelard, this is the opportunity for the imagination to "deform" the imprinted image, liberate us from "the stock and trade spectacle of history," and give us the will to look elsewhere.

Moving away from visual perception, the narrator attempts to describe how the battle might have been through an auditory description. Before him then was nothing but "silent brown soil." The absence of the past brings with it an absence of sound. Here, Sebald emphasizes the silencing force of time passing and how rare it is to hear the past. The narrator imagined what the fields would have sounded like the night after the battle: "the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans."⁵⁹ Recreating the sounds of history is a difficult endeavor. The absence of sound signifies the absence of the bodies producing the sound, and from there the absence of many other things. Yet, imagining a detail like the groans of the

⁵⁸ Sebald, *Aust.*, 71-72.

⁵⁹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 125.

dying soldiers provides a new image often left out historical summaries. Presently, the Waterloo Panorama includes “a soundtrack of clashing swords, cavalry charges, cannonballs, bugles and the cries of the infantry.” According to the official website of the memorial site, this audio is meant to “plunge visitors into the heat of the battle.”⁶⁰ Once more, the panorama is attempting to place the spectator at the center and “into the heat of the battle.” Yet, all that is given by the audio is the stock and trade sounds of war: clashing, galloping, explosions, trumpets, and the eager cries of men. This is contrary to what the narrator imagines. The narrator does not hear any glorious sounds of battle, instead he imagines sounds of death which are to him the ultimate consequence of war. To the narrator, the silence of Waterloo is the silence of the corpse. Standing in the Waterloo Panorama is not positioning oneself at the center of anything but rather, quite literally, on top of the battle. The narrator questions, “Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?”⁶¹ If our ultimate vantage point is on a mountain of death, what can we do from such a position? Where are the shoulders of our ancestors in such a pile of bones?

If it is not the duty of a historian to provide answers to these questions, then where does the burden lie? Sebald as a writer provides these questions, but is he in a position to answer them?

⁶⁰ The Memorial 1815, (<http://www.waterloo1815.be/index.php?page=the-panorama>).

⁶¹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 125.

Sunlight and Shadow

Austerlitz recounts a time in which he and his friend Adela would watch the fading sunlight on the walls while staying at Andromeda Lodge. He describes to the narrator, “[...] we usually stayed in the ballroom for a little while, looking at the images cast on the wall opposite the tall, arched windows by the last rays of the sun shining low through the moving branches of hawthorn, until at last they were extinguished.”⁶² Images “cast” on a wall opposite to a source of light evoke Plato’s allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. Plato describes the inability of humans to perceive the truth. Whether one is chained to the walls of a cave and subject to observe only the shadows of objects, or one is experiencing the world illuminated by the sun, one remains a prisoner to their senses. As those captive in the cave believed the shadows they saw as reality, the reality of the world in sunlight is not entirely accessible—there remains a truth hidden behind the veil of phenomenon. This logic is perpetuated by Sebald in both texts. It conforms to the conviction of Thomas Browne spoke of by the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*. Browne believed that “all knowledge is enveloped in darkness.”⁶³ Sebald uses Austerlitz’s experience in the ballroom to play with Plato’s theory which describes the limitations of human perception.

Austerlitz describes to the narrator the scene of fading sunlight on the wall. Rather than be a passage of melancholy and human fault, Austerlitz’s recollection is of beauty and imagination.

There was something fleeting, evanescent about those sparse patterns appearing in constant succession on the pale surface, something which never went beyond the

⁶² Sebald, *Aust.*, 112.

⁶³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 19.

moment of its generation, so to speak, yet here, in this intertwining of sunlight and shadow always forming and re-forming, you could see mountainous landscapes with glaciers and ice fields, high plateaux, steppes, deserts, fields full of flowers, islands in the sea, coral reefs, archipelagos and atolls, forests bending to the storm, quaking grass and drifting smoke. And once, I remember, said Austerlitz, as we gazed together at this slowly fading world, Adela leaned towards me and asked: Do you see the fronds of palm trees, do you see the caravan coming through the dunes over there?⁶⁴

The patterns cast on the wall were “evanescent” and “something which never went beyond the moment of its generation.” The impermanence of the patterns is a phenomena that is considered throughout Sebald’s work. While Sebald often writes of the enduring nature of the past through memory, he also reminds the reader of the continual destruction of the physical world. The patterns on the wall serve as a miniature exhibition of this interaction between conception and destruction. The “forming and re-forming” sunlight and shadows consists entirely of movement without pausing to form a lasting image. The imagination of Austerlitz and Adela is what seizes upon the fleeting patterns to form representations of landscapes. The scene, then, is an “intertwining of sunlight and shadow” and imagination. These imagined landscapes will quickly erode but will linger in the imagination’s capacity to remember.

Austerlitz and Adela, captives to what their eyes perceive, transcend their limitation by imagining images out of obscurity. They become creators of the reality they chose to see projected on the wall and consequently possess their own logic of perception. Similar to their distinct order of memories, each individual has a unique way in which their daydreams form. Let’s return to Adela’s question: “Do you see the fronds of palm trees, do you see the caravan

⁶⁴ Sebald, *Aust.*, 112.

coming through the dunes over there?" The passage ends with this question, a question the narrator describes being "still imprinted on [Austerlitz's] memory."⁶⁵ What do we see? And what can we share? We all remember moments uniquely and we all see things in the light of a particular imagination. Are we each in our own cave? How can we reconcile the unifying vision of history with the particularities of imagination?

While speaking of his childhood home in *The Poetics of Space*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes the difficulty in relaying to others what one remembers and imagines. Bachelard writes: "All we can communicate to others is an orientation toward what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity. In this respect, we orientate oneirism but we do not accomplish it."⁶⁶ In the moving light on the wall, Austerlitz and Adela retain their secret visions separately. It is not as simple as asking whether the other sees the "fronds of palm trees;" Austerlitz never reveals whether he did. This is what is problematic when dealing with the past, one's secrets have no objective way of representing themselves to others. Sebald's archive functions according to Bachelard's theory as a means of orientation toward an incommunicable secret. Perhaps, a problem with history is in its commitment to objectivity and its neglect to properly orientate.

⁶⁵ Sebald, *Aust.*, 112.

⁶⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 13.

Dunwich Heath: Dream, Maze, Vantage Point

As we recall, from the vantage of the hospital room window the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* remains disorientated in an “alien” world. The narrator describes “that maze of buildings” below. We should return to the concept of the maze which is central in Sebald’s writing and important for this thesis. The vantage of the hospital window does allow the narrator to recognize the labyrinthine structure of the world. By perceiving a maze, the narrator apprehends both the complexity and potential insolubility of the world. The maze is another visual construct Sebald reiterates throughout the narrative. Sebald introduces the construct of the maze and vantage point once more while the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* dreams. The narrator returns via a dream to the Dunwich Heath in England, a place in which he priorly became disorientated while walking. Once more the narrator was lost “walking the endlessly winding paths” of the heath. Exhausted, the dreaming narrator “gained a raised area where a little Chinese pavilion had been built.”

And when I looked down from this vantage point I saw the labyrinth, the light sandy ground, the sharply delineated contours of hedges taller than a man and almost pitch black now—a pattern simple in comparison with the tortuous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain.⁶⁷

A dark, underexposed photograph of the labyrinth is situated below the previous passage. The maze’s pattern is “simple in comparison with the tortuous trail” behind the narrator because its path is “sharply delineated” as opposed to the patternless paths of the heath. A maze never represents chaos, rather, mazes promote a patterned logic. The maze in this dream, provides

⁶⁷ Sebald, *The Rings*, 173.

the narrator with an outward representation of his anatomical interior. The pattern of the maze is a “cross-section” of the narrator’s brain. This could be interpreted as both a representation of the complex biological network of the brain and a depiction of the intricacies of the conscious mind.

As the dream sequence continues the narrator gains an omniscience only possible in dreams. The passage that follows is an epiphanic overview for both the narrator and the reader. The scene utilizes the full extent of the imagination. Sebald conjures images of a ruinous world in a painterly fashion, composing a theater of destruction. Acknowledging the scope of what is being seen, the extent of destruction, and how sound operates in this passage aids the reading of it.

Beyond the maze, the shadows were drifting across the brume of the heath, and then, one by one, the stars came out from the depths of space. Night, the astonishing stranger to all that is human, over the mountain-tops mournful and gleaming draws on. It was as though I stood at the topmost point of earth, where the glittering winter sky is forever unchanging; as though the heath were rigid with frost, and adders, and vipers and lizards of transparent ice lay slumbering in their hollows in the sand. From my resting place in the pavilion I gazed out across the heath into the night. And I saw that, to the south, entire headlands had broken off the coast and sunk beneath the waves. The Belgian villa was already teetering over the precipice, while in the cockpit of the lookout tower a corpulent figure in captain’s uniform was busying himself at a battery of searchlights, the beams which, probing the darkness, reminded me of the War.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Sebald, *The Rings*, 173-174.

From the vantage of this dream, the narrator is exposed to a new night. This night does not envelope all things in darkness rendering them imperceivable. Instead, the narrator perceives the breadth of night and views stars from “the depths of space.” This establishes the scope of the narrator’s gaze. As he recalls, “I gazed out across the heath into the night.” The narrator is now looking *into* the night in a similar manner to the penetrating gaze of a philosopher. However, the narrator’s gaze at this moment is one sustained by imagination. The imagination of the dream places him “at the topmost point of earth” and provides him a composition of fragments below. From such heights “the glittering winter sky is forever unchanging.” This evokes the writing of Thomas Browne earlier in the novel. “There is no antidote, he writes, against the opium of time. The winter sun shows how soon the light fades from the ash, how soon night enfolds us.”⁶⁹ Looking below to a landscape seemingly “rigid with frost,” the narrator is exposed to the “winter sun” that Browne speaks of which carries with it the realization of the nearing end. With “headlands” breaking “off the coast” and “the Belgian villa [...] already teetering over the precipice,” the beams from searchlights reminds the narrator of “the War.” This connection integrates the accelerated destruction of World War II with scenes of natural erosion, reminding the reader that humans are also responsible for the decaying conditions of the world.

In this dream, the narrator is entirely open to experiencing the scene of destruction; he is made a witness and sees the unfolding whole. “Although in my dream I was sitting transfixed in the Chinese pavilion, I was at the same time out in the open, within a foot of the very edge, and knew how fearful it is to cast one’s eye so low.”⁷⁰ The dream allows the

⁶⁹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 24.

⁷⁰ Sebald, *The Rings*, 174.

narrator to exist in a dual state: he is both “sitting” transfixed and standing “within a foot on the very edge.” These two positions in space allow the narrator witness more than if he were not dreaming. The dream also does not deprive the narrator of an emotional response. He “knew how fearful it is to cast one’s eye so low.” Yet, the dream keeps him there. From the height of this edge things appear at a smaller scale. Birds appeared the size of “beetles,” fisherman the size of “mice,” and a father and her dying daughter “tiny, as if on a stage a mile off.” This change of scale establishes a series of similes. The similes allow the scene of destruction to encompass more than what is seen. It is understood that while the birds are fleeing the obliteration so too are the unseen beetles, seen only by measurement. Below the cliff from which the narrator stands lay “shattered ruins of a house.” The broken objects once within, and “the strangely contorted bodies of the people who had lived there and who, only moments before, had gone to sleep in their beds,” communicates the extent of this devastating scene. Even the intimate, familiar home is claimed by the sea of oblivion. And the narrator who had recently gone to bed is warned of his fate while he sleeps.

One of the more curious aspects of this dream is the mention of sound amongst the visual theater of events. As we recall from the vantage of the hospital room, the narrator “could not hear” the ambulance’s sirens but was “cocooned” in “artificial silence.”⁷¹ The description of sound in the dream sequence differs from the “artificial silence” of the constructed hospital room in that the sound in the dream is a result of a vast height without artificial enclosure. Therefore, the silence the narrator is met with from the vantage point in his dream is more genuine. The majority of the scene below the narrator is inaudible. The “murmuring of the surge that chafed the countless pebbles could not be heard so high.” Nor

⁷¹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 4-5.

could the “solitary old man [...] kneeling beside his dead daughter,” reminiscent, as the narrator makes clear, of King Lear and his daughter Cordelia. There was “no last sigh, no last words were to be heard, nor the last despairing plea: Lend me a looking-glass if that he breath will mist or stain the stone, why, then she lives. No, nothing. Nothing but dead silence.”⁷² The absence of sound is preceding and signaling to the narrator the near absence of all things. The void below was consuming all things and the void itself has no voice. Nothing has a voice that can escape destruction altogether, not even the plea of Shakespeare. This particular silence is fittingly described as “dead silence,” for, the silence is the result of death. The only thing that is heard by the narrator was “softly, barely audibly, the sound of a funeral march.”

Appropriate for the scene, the sound of the funeral march cues the final images of the end.

Yet, the dream does not end in darkness. “Now night is almost over and the dawn about to break.” However, this dawn does not bring with it new beginnings. Instead, it illuminates “contours of the Sizewell power plants, its Magnox block a glowering mausoleum [...] upon an island far out in the pallid waters.”⁷³ The dawn reveals a modern world of nuclear power plants that attempt to harness the destructive force of the world. Yet, the full force of destruction cannot be controlled. As opposed to the dream ending with a future orientated vision of ruin, it ends imagining the world “a long, long time ago.” This retrospection of a prehistoric world exceeds any powerful image of the future by revealing the extent to which things change in time. This is the scope of the narrator’s dream, from the depths of outer space, to the dead silence of the earth, the final perspective provided by the dream’s vantage is one of the past. The distant power plants are positioned “where one

⁷² Sebald, *The Rings*, 174-5.

⁷³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 175.

believes the Dogger Bank to be, where once the shoals of herring spawned and earlier still, a long, long time ago, the delta Rhine flowed out into the sea and where the green forests grew from silting sand." The dream ends with this idyllic image of the past in which humans were not a part of. There is ruin that comes from time passing and ruin that originates from human action. The vantage of the dream allows the narrator to experience both the significance and insignificance of the human species. Only from the imagined perspective of the dream could the narrator witness these various fragments composed to represent the transition from beginning to end without seizing on an image of totality. The world of the dream comes to neither a full beginning nor a complete ending.

While dreams are often thought of as incoherent narratives, this particular dream of the narrator is remarkably clear. Dreams are another instance in which there is a certain kind of logic to a rather chaotic series of events. The narrator hypothesizes the origin of the clarity of dreams earlier in the novel.

I suppose it is submerged memories that give to dreams their curious air of hyper-reality. But perhaps there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer. A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience?⁷⁴

The narrator describes the space of a dream as a nebulous theater in which the dreamer is the sole maker and recipient of the experience. This sole point of origin makes dreams strangely coherent. If the main components of a dream are memory and imagination, than the

⁷⁴ Sebald, *The Rings*, 80.

interaction between the two seems to form “clearer” images. The narrator speaks of the dreaming mind imagining a larger scale of things, making “a pond become a lake.” If this is the case when interacting with memory, then dreams have the potential to reveal fragments of “submerged memories” that would otherwise remain hidden to the waking mind.

Llanwddyn: Uncanny Depth

“Down there the sea-folk live.”⁷⁵

Austerlitz recounts a time to the narrator in which he travelled with the Calvinist preacher that housed him as a child. The preacher, Elias, brings Austerlitz to the waters of the Vyrnwy reservoir. Around a hundred feet below the surface rests the village of Llanwddyn, Elias’ childhood home. “And not just his own family home,” Austerlitz tells the narrator, “but at least forty other houses and farms, together with the church of St. John Jerusalem, three chapels, and three pubs, all of them drowned when the dam was finished in the autumn of 1888.”⁷⁶ At the time, Elias showed Austerlitz several photographs of his childhood home now submerged under water. Two of these photographs are presented in the passage alongside the text. From them, Austerlitz conceived of a “subaquatic existence of the people of Llanwddyn.”⁷⁷ He recounts to the narrator:

I imagined all the others—his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relations, their neighbors, all the other villagers—still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes open far too wide.⁷⁸

Austerlitz’s fiction stems from actual documentation of the townspeople in the form of photographs. The reader can partake in this fantasy because they too are able to look at two photos. Here, photography functions as a creative source rather than a matter of fact depiction; the still image is animated by the imagination. The ability of photography to give

⁷⁵ Hans Christian Andersen, *A fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen* (University of Southern Denmark, 2014).

⁷⁶ Sebald, *Aust.*, 51.

⁷⁷ Sebald, *Aust.*, 52.

⁷⁸ Sebald, *Aust.*, 51-2.

the viewer a sense of intimacy with what they are viewing promotes imaginative engagement. The people and things in the photographs, Austerlitz tells the narrator, “became as familiar to me as if I were living with them down at the bottom of the lake. At night, before I fell asleep in my cold room, I often felt as if I too had been submerged in that dark water, and like the poor souls of Vyrnwy must keep my eyes wide open to catch a faint glimmer of light far above me [...]”⁷⁹ Austerlitz’s exposure to photographs allows him to form a sense of familiarity with Vyrnwy to such an extent that he places himself “living with them down at the bottom of the lake.”

Yet, what truly allows Austerlitz to envision the ongoing existence of the town of Llanwddyn is the substance that it is submerged in. The town is not only submerged in water but is also submerged in time. And this time shares many similar qualities as water. Time has preserved pieces of Llanwddyn. As the flood of water failed to fully destroy the town so to has the passing flood of time. Both substances, time and water, keep things intact beneath their surface. What is submerged is perceptible because it sits at the depths of a transparent fluid. As Austerlitz looks beneath the surface of the lake, he is simultaneously looking into the past. Both time and water are transparent. This transparency of time, the ability to see beyond a surface or veil a past world that is no longer accessible creates the uncanny sense that the past is still present. Austerlitz pulls the past so far into the present that he cannot help but imagine the past in motion. “Sometimes,” he tells the narrator, “I even imagined that I had seen one or other of the people from the photographs in the album walking down the road [...]”⁸⁰ Here, the past and present are intertwined. Submerged under the water’s of time for Austerlitz is not

⁷⁹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 52-3.

⁸⁰ Sebald, *Aust.*, 53.

what is lost rather what is still living. In this sense, Austerlitz is in a state of “subaquatic existence.” He meanders the depths of time in hopes of rediscovering the places and people of his own childhood. We’ve seen what the heights of vantage points offer, but what of these depths?

Perhaps time is more like a lake than a river. Instead of constantly sweeping things along in its flow, it preserves things in its motionlessness. However, time, like water, is not always transparent, its surface is not always calm, and the past does not always remain visible. Yet, there are lakes of time and they offer a view of things past. The recount from Austerlitz allows the reader to form a view of history; at times the past can be seen through an undulating surface separating one’s current existence from the past. What is at the depths still lives but remains alive in an uncanny existence through the imagination and documentation of the present. One cannot help to imagine, like Austerlitz, existing with others in past moments. A “subaquatic existence” in which the past is as familiar as the present resists loss through a remembrance supplemented by imagination. Yet, is submerging oneself in order to experience the past a dangerous endeavor? Is there a possibility of drowning in time and becoming lost to the present? When one attempts to go back in time, they cannot do so without returning for present air. Only resurfacing provides a sense of time’s affect on the self.

Iver Grove

After walking for a long while in a park, Austerlitz and his friend Hilary reach a large abandoned house. Surveying the old building further, Austerlitz tells the narrator, it seemed “as if a silent horror had seized upon the house at the prospect of its imminent and shameful end.”⁸¹ The owner of the home, James Mallord Ashman, approached Austerlitz and Hilary outside. Noticing their curiosity, the owner willingly shared more details about the house. With the name Iver Grove, the house was completed in 1780 by one of Ashman’s ancestors. James Ashman, the current owner, lacked the wealth to restore the house after it had been turned into a convalescent home during the war years. As a result, James moved to Grove Farm which belonged to the same estate.

When James Ashman finished giving Austerlitz and Hilary a brief tour of Iver Grove, they entered the billiards room. James’ ancestor, Austerlitz tells the narrator, would play “frame after frame of billiards against himself.” And as James reveals, since the ancestor’s death “on New Year’s Eve, 1813, no one had ever picked up a cue in the games room, said Ashman, not his grandfather nor his father or himself.”⁸² Austerlitz described the room to the narrator, recalling all of the objects untouched by time:

And indeed, said Austerlitz, everything was exactly as it must have been a hundred and fifty years before. The mighty mahogany table, weighted down by the slate slabs embedded in it, stood in its place unmoved; the scoring apparatus, the gold-framed looking glass on the wall, the stands for the cues and their extension shafts, the cabinet full of drawers containing ivory balls, the chalk, brushes, polishing cloths, and

⁸¹ Sebald, *Aust.*, 103.

⁸² Sebald, *Aust.*, 105.

everything else the billiard player requires, had never been touched again or changed in any way.⁸³

The collection of objects, unmoved and unchanged, provides an answer to the following question Austerlitz previously asked the narrator: “In what way do objects immersed in time differ from those left untouched by it?.”⁸⁴ The answer is better formulated with the full extent of Austerlitz’s description of the billiards room.

The inside shutters had always been kept closed, and the light of day never entered the room. Evidently, said Austerlitz, this place had always remained so secluded from the rest of the house that for a century and a half scarcely so much as a gossamer-thin layer of dust had been able to settle on the cornices the black and white square stone flags of the floor, and the green baize cloth stretched over the table, which seemed like a self-contained universe.⁸⁵

Objects outside of time lose their existence as physical phenomena. An object’s previous function is left in the world of interaction, outside of time the object serves no purpose. In the text, a photograph covering a full two pages is placed in the middle of passage. In the photo, a close up of the billiards table is shown with a single white ball sitting near a single black ball. Along with the reader’s awareness of how long the objects have been untouched, the size of the photograph in the text adds a sense of weight to the otherwise common objects. The billiards balls are exhibited as specimens from another world. They belong to 1813, that is their present. Upon Austerlitz’s encounter, the billiards balls lose their initial function and become sites of memory.

⁸³ Sebald, *Aust.*, 105.

⁸⁴ Sebald, *Aust.*, 100.

⁸⁵ Sebald, *Aust.*, 107-8.

Austerlitz then describes the space of the billiards room in relation to the outside world of time passed. "It was as if time, which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as if the years behind us were still to come [...]." ⁸⁶ He questions: "Why does time stand eternally still and motionless in one place, and rush headlong in another? Could we not claim, said Austerlitz, that time itself has been non-concurrent over the centuries and the millennia?" ⁸⁷ This suggests that the modern convention of time as a continually ticking clock fails to measure time accurately. For Austerlitz, time is not quantifiable and is rather constituted by sense within the individual. This becomes problematic when considering historical discourse. Austerlitz's friend considers how a historian might react to the feelings evoked by the billiards room. Austerlitz recalls: "Hilary remarked on the curious confusion of emotions affecting even a historian in a room like this, sealed away so long from the flow of the hours and days and the succession of generations." ⁸⁸ The confusion stems from the enchantment of the room as a site of memory. The room transcends the distance of history with memory and submerges the individual in the past as if it was the present.

⁸⁶ Sebald, *Aust.*, 108.

⁸⁷ Sebald, *Aust.*, 100.

⁸⁸ Sebald, *Aust.*, 108.

Herring

The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* recalls a flickering short film from his schooldays in the fifties. The film displayed the fishing of herring off the English coast at night. “Everything happened as if in a black void, relieved only by the gleam of the white underbellies of the fish, piled high on the deck, and of the salt they were mixed with.”⁸⁹ Once more, the scene is unfolding in Thomas Browne’s conception of the shadow world. We recall Browne theory: “what we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance.”⁹⁰ The only perceptible feature of the Herring in this film is the “isolated” light produced by the “gleam of the white underbellies.” The rest is “a black void,” an “abyss of ignorance.” We see the movement of the herring but not that which moves it. “The routes the herring take through the sea have not been ascertained to this day. It has been supposed that variations in the level of light and the prevailing winds influence the course of their wanderings, or geomagnetic fields, or the shifting marine isotherms, but none of these speculations has proved verifiable.”⁹¹ The herring wanders in the shadow world with the source of their movements hidden behind the veil.

The mystery of herring continues with a phenomena that occurs after their death. The narrator explains: “An idiosyncrasy peculiar to the herring is that, when dead, it begins to glow; this property, which resembles phosphorescence and is yet altogether different, peaks a few days after death and then ebbs away as the fish decays.”⁹² This post-death phenomena exhibits a continuation after death. The glowing reaction of the dead herring seems to resist

⁸⁹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 53-4.

⁹⁰ Sebald, *The Rings*, 19.

⁹¹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 55.

⁹² Sebald, *The Rings*, 58.

death as a final end. Instead, it reveals a series of interactions that go beyond death. As the routes of the herring remain unexplainable so too does this phenomena. The narrator continues: "For a long time no one could account for this glowing of the lifeless herring, and indeed I believe that it still remains unexplained." This segment on herring is a probing of Sebald which aims to emphasize the mystery of living things. Moreover, it substantiates the claim that the causes of things remain hidden by a veil and that things past are not altogether lost.

Janine Dakyns

Paper Universe: The Logic of Disorder

In part one of *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator introduces his academic colleague Janine Dakyns, a lecturer in Romance languages. The narrator recalls the “paper universe” that existed in Janine’s office. The room’s surfaces from the carpet to the height of bookshelves were covered with “multiple layers” of lecture notes, letters, and various other documents. The disorder was so extensive that Janine was “reduced to working from an easychair drawn more or less into the middle of her room.”⁹³ The way in which Janine navigates her “paper universe” from such a position provides a depiction of the collector’s world. While Janine has the ability to exist in the chaos of her collection, her impulse to archive everything poses a risk. If Janine’s piles of paper grow too high, she risks being consumed by her own collection.

Continuing to emphasize the amount of paper, the narrator imagines the scene of Janine’s office as a natural landscape:

On the desk, which was both the origin and focal point of this amazing profusion of paper, a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys. Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing imperceptibly towards the centre of the room.⁹⁴

This imagery does more than belabor size. It forces us to imagine Janine at the center of such precarious landscape. With this in mind, Janine is not only a collector but a traveller. The

⁹³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 9.

⁹⁴ Sebald, *The Rings*, 8.

same risks of becoming lost apply to her in addition to one wandering “mountains and valleys.” Yet, a compass will not assist Janine in her office. What instrument then, does Janine use to navigate her collection of paper?

The narrator recalls comparing Janine to the subject in Dürer’s *Melancholia* surrounded by a puzzling assortment of objects. “I remarked that sitting there amidst her papers she resembled the angel in Dürer’s *Melancholia*, steadfast among the instruments of destruction [...]” Janine opposed the idea that she was a part of an incomprehensible scene. The narrator remembers her responding “that the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended toward perfection. And the fact was that whatever she might be looking for amongst her papers or her books, or in her head, she was generally able to find right away.”⁹⁵ Janine is challenging the idea that spatial chaos is indicative of an internal confusion. The disorder of the “paper universe” is not an outward representation of an illogical mind. Rather, Janine is able to find what she is looking for because she possesses the logic of the creator. The one who collects and constructs forms an intimate relationship with the array of objects they archive. From an outsiders perspective, one that cannot inhabit the system of papers, there remains no perceptible logic to the mess. Janine alone holds a key to everything’s location. Does Sebald hold similar keys to his narratives? Is there a possibility of truly understanding his archive?

This logic of the collector can be extended to the one who recollects. We then return to Gaston Bachelard’s claim that one can never communicate oneiric memory directly and can only provide a kind of orientation. Memories are arranged in one’s consciousness like Janine’s papers in space. The logic of a collection of memories is not orderly, memories do not always

⁹⁵ Sebald, *The Rings*, 9.

arrange themselves chronologically. Rather, one's memories touch and overlap each other like a pile of paper. Only the one who has experienced the creation of a memory can recall it in relation to myriad others. While Sebald emphasizes the intimacy of the individual in relation to his or her memories, he may not be suggesting an impossibility of communication. Perhaps being led to the window rather than having keys to the door is sufficient to understand another's past.

Given that *The Rings of Saturn* is a representation of the narrator's memory, it is fitting that the sequence of the narrative feels at times to be in no particular order when reading. The reader is removed from the logic of the narrator's mind. Without much guidance, the reader is easily disorientated in the narrator's memories. This effect seems to be consciously designed by Sebald who is concerned with the way in which memory operates. In becoming lost in the narrator's recollections, the reader is able to further identify their position as a voyeur into the mind of the narrator. Realizing the cause of disorientation allows the reader to understand that it is not only the content of what the narrator is recounting that provides an insight into the narrator's consciousness. How the content is arranged sequentially is also a reflection of the narrator's mind. The arrangement of the archive and not just its contents provides orientation.

It is clear that Sebald views a certain degree of disorder as positive. From this perspective, a particular aspect of how history is represented becomes problematic. The majority of historical texts follow an order that is either chronological or tightly ordered around a pointed thesis. After discussing the individual prospering in a world of chaos, how contrived is the logic prescribed to a series of historical events by a scholar for the sake of order? Furthermore, by a scholar who has not lived to experience the events he is discussing

and is therefore removed from the possibility using the logic of memory. Sebald is far from using the passage of time to dictate the contents and order of the *The Rings of Saturn*. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Sebald views chronological depictions of history as highly constructed fabrications. This is not necessary a result of what the chronologies include, but it is a result of what chronologies are forced by their logic to exclude. Why do we remember our past in one way and study the world's past in a contrasting manner? Perhaps, it is not the information which historical chronologies convey that is problematic, but the limitation of chronologies to tell a story.

Looms: The Labor of Knowing

In describing a history of silk manufacturing, *The Rings of Saturn* narrator uses the loom to illustrate the melancholic relationship between humans and instruments of production. Often, one's life is confined to these instruments. The narrator describes the extent of people made captive to the loom. He remarks: "a great number of people, at least in some places, spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages."⁹⁶ Accordingly, many lives are spent laboring, inseparable from the structures of creation. This "symbiosis," the narrator claims, points to the fact "that we are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented."⁹⁷ Thus, the interaction between human and instrument is imperative; we depend on external mechanisms to perpetuate life.

The narrator associates "weavers" with "scholars and writers." Each engage in a labor of creation and are subjected to suffering.

That weavers in particular, together with scholars and writers with whom they had much in common, tended to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it, is understandable given the nature of their work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created. It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of their working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Sebald, *The Rings*, 182.

⁹⁷ Sebald, *The Rings*, 283.

⁹⁸ Sebald, *The Rings*, 283.

This passage identifies a significant point of Sebald's: that of difficulty. It requires a degree of effort, commitment, and suffering for one to understand the world and its history. While it is imperative for the narrator to move, he must also "sit bent over" and write to comprehend. Since such demanding work results in melancholy, as the narrator describes, the task of knowing the past, therefore, involves sacrificing one's own well-being. Sebald's novels themselves are evidence that it is not easy to gain knowledge. Things do not reveal themselves to an apathetic individual who does not strain "to keep their eye on" patterns of meaning. For Sebald, the act of understanding the world and history is an act of labor.

As it is difficult for the characters to maintain a relationship with the past, all of whom suffer from fits of melancholy, it is also difficult at times for the reader to follow the "complex patterns" that Sebald has woven. *The Rings of Saturn* is structured in a way that deliberately subjects the reader to moments of confusion. The reader is forced to "keep their eye on the complex patterns" in the narrative and must weave their own thread of meaning. The narrators of both novels, along with the main character Austerlitz, are all burdened with an anxiety caused by the uncertainty of their knowledge. All of them share a "feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread." The reader too is forced to question whether they have hold of the meaning the text intends.

The description of the weavers strapped to their looms provides a series of lessons that detail what Sebald believes is imperative in maintaining a relationship with history. Therefore, we should review them once more sequentially. The first lesson is that a symbiosis with an instrument is necessary to sustain oneself. In the case of history, one must engage with reading books as well as writing them to elucidate patterns of meaning. Secondly, the act of knowing is laborious and requires sacrifice. One must strain their eyes *to see*; the past will not be

recovered by idleness. In the endeavor *to see* the patterns of history, a form of melancholy arises that one must have the will to cope with. The last lesson present in this passage concerns the inevitable uncertainty that is a consequence of seeking knowledge. One who is “engrossed” in what they study will be followed, “into their dreams,” with the anxiety inducing possibility that their conclusions are false and their theories are misguided.

Gustave Flaubert

“Why are we here? What hurricane has hurled us into this abyss? What tempest soon shall bear us away towards the forgotten planets whence we came?”⁹⁹

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator speaks of two former academic colleagues of his, both of which died weeks apart from each other. The narrator describes Michael Parkinson to have been a modest academic who seemed to the narrator dedicated and happy before his unexpected death. “[Michael] was found dead in his bed, lying on his side already quite rigid, his face curiously mottled with red blotches.”¹⁰⁰ The cause of Michael’s death, as causes tend to be in this novel, was unknown. Michael’s death greatly affected his colleague and friend Janine Dakyns. The narrator explains that Janine “was so unable to bear the loss of the ingenuous, almost childlike friendship they had shared, that a few weeks after his death she succumbed to a disease that swiftly consumed her body.”¹⁰¹ The narrator recalls Janine’s “profound understanding of the nineteenth-century French novel” and her particular fascination with Gustave Flaubert whom she thought to be “the finest of writers.”¹⁰² The introduction of Flaubert and his thoughts is relevant following the descriptions of how both Michael and Janine were overcome by death. Flaubert believed that “sand conquered all.” The narrator recalls Janine describing how “time and again [...] vast dust clouds through Flaubert’s dreams by day and by night.”¹⁰³ Similar clouds pass through Sebald’s narratives;

⁹⁹ Gustave Flaubert, *The Dance of Death*, 1838.

¹⁰⁰ Sebald, *The Rings*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 7.

¹⁰² Sebald, *The Rings*, 7.

¹⁰³ Sebald, *The Rings*, 8.

there is a persistent fear of being consumed by time and ignorance. Yet, do these “dust clouds” serve to obstruct or bring clarity to one’s thoughts? How did Flaubert continue to write amidst these unsettling clouds?

According to Janine, Flaubert feared the deterioration of his mind and work into falsehood. The narrator recounts Janine’s description of an incapacitated Flaubert:

Janine had taken an intense personal interest in the scruples which dogged Flaubert’s writing, that fear of the false which, she said, sometimes kept him confined to his couch for weeks or months on end in the dread that he would never be able to write another word without comprising himself in the most grievous of ways.¹⁰⁴

Flaubert’s fear was overwhelming to the extent of debilitation. A similarly debilitating cloud of fear apprehends the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*. A few pages prior to the description of Flaubert, the narrator tells of a “paralysing horror” resulting from confronting “traces of destruction.” This horror left the narrator confined to a hospital room with a similar hopelessness and dread as Flaubert. Such a connection draws more attention to the presence of clouds drifting throughout Sebald’s narrative which bring with them the possibility of paralysis and consequently an end to walking.

As Sebald fears misrepresenting history, Flaubert fears the validity of his work. The narrator continues Janine’s description of Flaubert’s anxiety:

Moreover, Janine said, he was convinced that everything he had written hitherto consisted solely in a string of the most abysmal errors and lies, the consequences of which were immeasurable. Janine maintained that the source of Flaubert’s scruples was to be found in the relentless spread of stupidity which he had observed

¹⁰⁴ Sebald, *The Rings*, 7.

everywhere, and which he believed had already invaded his own head. It was (so supposedly once he said) as if one was sinking into sand. This was probably the reason, she said, that sand possessed such significance in all of Flaubert's works.¹⁰⁵ Part of the difficulty of recognizing ignorance is discerning whether one is in fact separate from it. For Flaubert, there is no hope of escaping "stupidity" after it has begun to spread; one slowly sinks into its sands. It is similar to Thomas Browne's account of ignorance mentioned later in the novel. Browne believed that "all knowledge is enveloped in darkness."¹⁰⁶ In both Flaubert's and Browne's depictions, one is being engulfed by ignorance. Whether it be the onset of darkness or the slow sinking into sand, the struggle to resist ignorance takes place in ignorance.

Analogous to the weavers of silk on a loom Sebald describes near the end of the novel, one who is absorbed in their work will be followed by the possibility of a mistake, "pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread."¹⁰⁷ This same fear possesses Flaubert; he is tormented by the potential errors and lies present in his writing. It seems that this fear is inevitable in a creative act and, if one is not entirely overcome by it, the acknowledgement of one's possible errors exhibits humility. Perhaps, it is a result of this humility that allowed "the nineteenth-century French novel," as Janine understood it, to possess "a certain private quality, wholly free of intellectual vanity" and be "guided by a fascination for obscure detail rather than by the self-evident."¹⁰⁸ Janine describes the presence of these characteristics in Flaubert. "In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter

¹⁰⁵ Sebald, *The Rings*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁶ Sebald, *The Rings*, 19.

¹⁰⁷ Sebald, *The Rings*, 283.

¹⁰⁸ Sebald, *The Rings*, 7.

gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains."¹⁰⁹ The scale and weight of something as small as a grain of sand can be made immense if one realizes what it means to the world.

¹⁰⁹ Sebald, *The Rings*, 8.

The Moth: Thresholds

“He was little or nothing but life.”

In her 1942 essay “The Death of a Moth,” Virginia Woolf exhibits a willingness to observe a creature that is often overlooked.¹¹⁰ Sebald commits a similar amount of attention to the unlikely subject of the moth. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the central figure of the silkworm is a step away from its metamorphosis into a moth. Sebald describes the immeasurable impact that these worms, being the source of the tradable material silk, have had on the course of history. Sebald’s obsession with moths carries over into *Austerlitz*. In conversation with the narrator, Austerlitz speaks of the mysterious qualities of moths. “Most of us,” Austerlitz tells the narrator, “know nothing about moths except that they eat holes in carpets and clothes,” while in truth, “their lineage is among the most ancient and most remarkable in the whole history of nature.”¹¹¹ In a narrative centered on Austerlitz’s history, his concern with the exceptional history of something as small as a moth displays a degree of curiosity that mirrors that of Woolf’s. By urging the reader to recognize how little is known about the moth, Austerlitz engages the attention of the reader and makes him or her more receptive to the peculiarities of the insect. The forces of life and death are more discernible when they affect a creature as small and weightless as a moth. Through Woolf’s and Austerlitz’s accounts of moths in the world, life and death reveal themselves on a less definitive spectrum. That is, while death is the ultimate fate of the moth, it is not uncommon for moths to exist in a liminal state, neither alive nor dead. This state of existence reveals the primary threshold Sebald is concerned with:

¹¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Death of a Moth, and Other Essays* (Australia: University of Adelaide: 2016).

¹¹¹ Sebald, *Awt.*, 90.

the passing of things between life and death, never entirely lost to the doors of memory. The character of Austerlitz, perhaps unconsciously, likens the moth to memory.

Austerlitz recounts witnessing a spectacle of moths at Andromeda Lodge with his schoolfriend Gerard and Gerald's Great-Uncle Alphonso. Austerlitz recalls the scene for the narrator: "Soon after darkness fell we were sitting on a promontory far above Andromeda Lodge, behind us the higher slopes and before us the immense darkness of the sea [...]."

Austerlitz assumes the position of a spectator that is once more at a height.

[...] No sooner had Alphonso placed his incandescent lamp in a shallow hollow surrounded by heather and lit it than the moths, not one of which we had seen during our climb, came flying in as if from nowhere, describing thousands of different arcs and spirals and loops, until like snowflakes they formed a silent storm around the light [...].¹¹²

The emergence of the moths "as if from nowhere" aligns with the way Sebald organizes space throughout his narrative. For Sebald, everything that is not immediately perceptible remains in existence hidden behind a veil; memories function in a similar way. That which is not alive cannot be assumed dead in a world where "nowhere" exists. The emergence of the moths into the light displays a reawakening of life; the moths are recalled from a oblivion by the energy of life. Woolf describes the moth touched by vitality: "It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life."¹¹³ The movements of the moths, which Austerlitz also observes, sketch patterns in space. The "arcs and spirals and loops" they create

¹¹² Sebald, *Awt.*, 90.

¹¹³ Woolf, *The Death of a Moth*.

elevates their spectacle by incorporating a spatial choreography of vitality. The energy of life is expressed in their sweeping movements. Here, we observe the effect that life's force has on a being as small as a moth. Decked with "a tiny bead of pure life," the moth is taken by motion.

The threshold between existence and nonexistence for the moth is detailed more precisely by Alphonso. Austerlitz recalls his words: "Most of them are in a deathlike state when you find them, and have to coax and quiver themselves back to life, crawling over the ground and jerkily moving their wings before flight."¹¹⁴ Here, we are provided an image of the moth lacking in vitality. The moth rests close to the void; they exist in a state of oblivion, a "deathlike state," far removed from life. Yet, even something so distant from life can return. This is the realization that Sebald insists upon; the amount distance separating a moment of the past from the present is not necessarily indicative of the moments absence. The memories that sleep in the unconscious can "coax and quiver themselves back to life." As Austerlitz will experience, there are instances in which the past returns through thresholds.

Austerlitz recalls Alphonso letting him "simply gaze at the wonderful display for a long time."¹¹⁵ Austerlitz admits to the narrator that he does not remember exactly what types of moths were present that night. Though, he speculates and provides an index of names which proves his fascination with the moth species. "Perhaps they were China Marks, Dark Porcelains and Marbled Beauties, Scarce Silver-lines or Burnished Brass, Green Foresters and Green Adelas, White Plumes, Light Arches, Old Ladies, and Ghost Moths [...]."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Sebald, *Awt.*, 92.

¹¹⁵ Sebald, *Awt.*, 91.

¹¹⁶ Sebald, *Awt.*, 91.

Austerlitz follows this index of names with a list of the numerous patterns and colors he observed on the moths.

Some had a plain basic hue, but when they moved their wings showed a fantastic lining underneath, with oblique and wavy lines, shadows, crescent markings and colors you could never have imagined, moss green shot with blue, fox brown, saffron, lime yellow, satiny white, and a metallic gleam as of powdered brass or gold.¹¹⁷

Austerlitz's description contrasts with the common image of the moth. Moths are usually imagined as ghostly nocturnal creatures. Instead, Austerlitz points to the subtle and beautiful qualities present in moths. In their movement back to life, the moths bring with them colors which for the human would otherwise remain lost to oblivion. One could "never have imagined" the colors of the moths and therefore can only experience them directly through sight. Is it possible to reanimate the colorless fragments of memory in this way? Can we not simply imagine but actually begin to perceive memory in a new way? Regardless, the depiction of emergence here is one of vibrancy. That which emerges comes into a more forceful existence compared to that which remains in place. This is why a memory recalled after a long period of time often returns highly animated.

As the moths return to life, Austerlitz recalls Alphonso explaining, "their body temperature will then be thirty-six degrees Celsius [...]. Thirty-six degrees, according to Alphonso, has always proved the best natural level, a kind of magical threshold [...]."¹¹⁸ After the description of the moths on the threshold of death, Alphonso now provides a threshold for

¹¹⁷ Sebald, *Awt.*, 91.

¹¹⁸ Sebald, *Awt.*, 92.

life, “thirty-six degrees Celsius.” According to Alphonso, “all mankind’s misfortunes were connected with [a] departure” from this “magical threshold.”

The concept of particular thresholds for life and death is present in a large part of Sebald’s writing, particularly in relation to the life and death of the past. Alphonso’s notion of the “magical threshold” introduces the necessity to consistently remain at the level of a threshold, any distance from it will be the cause of “misfortune.” The threshold Alphonso is describing is a state of equilibrium for the body. If we contemplate the concept of the equilibrium in relation to the past and present, many questions arise as to the possibility of such a state. We would describe an individual who clings to the past and refuses to confront the present as imbalanced. The description would apply to one who avoids the past altogether. Yet, this implies the existence of a point of equilibrium in which an individual’s thoughts exist in an ideal state between the past and present. If such a state exists, it is likely that Sebald would view it as an impossible position to hold. Furthermore, he may renounce the benefits of life at equilibrium. Sebald’s characters must sacrifice their well-being in order to be at the threshold of oblivion and witness that which coaxes and quivers back to life. For, as seen with the moth, one can witness more of life from that which emerges and becomes. Austerlitz and the two narrator’s have indeed departed from any “magical threshold” and as a result they are all inflicted by some “misfortune.” Though without this sacrifice, without removing oneself from a sense of contentedness, fragments emerging from the past will not have the lamplight of human perception and will remain uncollected, potentially lost forever.

The Moth: Phantom Traces

Continuing to concentrate on the vitality a being as small as a moth can possess, Virginia Woolf describes an apparition of light in the wake of the moth's movements. "As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible." Austerlitz experiences a similar illusory trail of light originating from the movement of the moths at Andromeda Lodge. Yet, Austerlitz explains:

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 the fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone.¹¹⁹

This is a potentially devastating moment for not only Austerlitz but for the human's capacity to perceive. For, the "sluggish reaction of the human eye" deceives the mind by producing traces of light that did "not really exist." If Austerlitz's recollection of his past depends on his perception, in what instances does Austerlitz mistake something as a trace that in reality "had already gone?" Yet, these illusions produced by the fault of human perception are felt to be the most meaningful. Austerlitz continues to explain to the narrator:

It was such unreal phenomena, said Alphonso, the sudden incursion of unreality into the the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape spread out before us, or in

¹¹⁹ Sebald, *Awt.*, 92.

the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.¹²⁰

If we consider Alphonso's words, our "deepest feelings" are products of faulty perception. Yet, is the perception of "unreal phenomena" truly a fault? While the eye may be flawed and "sluggish," our consciousness may be functioning precisely as it should be. That is, our mind allows "unreality into the real world" as a means to indicate significance. If the reality the human perceives is augmented by illusions produced by consciousness, than one is able to experience internal effects outwardly. And perhaps, while this outward phenomena is "unreal" to the world, it remains the true reality of the human. The illusory traces that Austerlitz perceives may be the only way of recovering the past.

The Moth: Compassion

In her essay "The Death of a Moth," Virginia Woolf exhibits a level of compassion and thoughtfulness concerning a creature often ignored. Woolf observes that even the moth is touched by the grand energy of life and that it too experiences the loss of it. Woolf's description of the destructive force of death that arrests a moth in a windowsill provides new words to the same force which haunts Sebald's prose. Sebald and Woolf do not exclude such small creatures from the forces of destruction and as a result of a shared fate the moth becomes a companion to the human.

Shortly after Woolf observed the moth flying in the windowsill with life, she notices the moth begins to struggle. "He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried

¹²⁰ Sebald, *Awt.*, 92-3.

to fly across it he failed.”¹²¹ After several attempts, the moth “slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the windowsill.” Out of pity for the moth, Woolf attempts to aid it with a pencil only to realize how powerless she is in combating death.

The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

As the irreversible onset of death takes over the moth, Woolf is left in a position from which she can only observe the process.

One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One’s sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely.¹²²

The moth demonstrates a natural impulse towards life. Its effort is magnified in the face of the infinite force of death. As Woolf writes, death is indiscriminate. Today it takes the life of a

¹²¹ Woolf, *The Death of a Moth*.

¹²² Woolf, *The Death of a Moth*.

moth and tomorrow, with the same effortless act, death consumes an “entire city” and “masses of human beings.” Inevitably, death seizes the moth in the windowsill.

The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. [...] The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.¹²³

Thus, the essay concludes. The moth is left in an embrace with the power of death. When one is able to be a removed yet intimate witness of death, as Woolf near her windowsill, one has the opportunity to contemplate the event without fear. Woolf realizes how life and death are equally curious. “Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange.” In reading “The Death of a Moth,” one cannot help to wonder what kind of windowsill they will end up in a position as helpless as the moth. While the essay arouses existential questions, the lone figure of the moth persists as the resonant focal point. Life and death remain extraordinary and meaningful to the frequently overlooked moth. And if we liken the moth to memory, we hope our memory has the same compulsion for life as the moth.

Austerlitz’s observations of moths are intriguing when put alongside Virginia Woolf’s insights. Austerlitz reveals to the narrator the special role moths retain in his life: “But I always found what Alphonso told us at the time about the life and death of moths especially memorable, and of all creatures I feel the greatest awe for them.”¹²⁴ Austerlitz describes to the narrator the poor condition he often discovers moths in during the summer months.

¹²³ Woolf, *The Death of a Moth*.

¹²⁴ Sebald, *Awt.*, 93.

In warmer months of the year one or other of those nocturnal insects quite often strays indoors from the small garden behind my house. When I get up early in the morning, I find them clinging to the wall, motionless. I believe, said Austerlitz, they know they have lost their way, since if you do not put them out again carefully they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grieve even after death, held fast by the tiny claws that stiffened in their last agony, until a draft of air detaches them and blows them into a dusty corner.¹²⁵

Here, we are given a less dynamic image of a moth receding into death compared to Woolf's essay. The motionlessness of the moths fixed to the walls is similar to the "death-like" state described by Alphonso. However, these moths are unable to "quiver" themselves back to life and they often subside fully into the state they resemble. In contrast to the great effort that the moth Woolf observed gave in resisting the death, the moths clinging to Austerlitz's walls are incapacitated by something other than death. These moths are like dormant memories.

Austerlitz is not primarily concerned with the force of death affecting these moths. Instead, Austerlitz meditates on what may be the cause of these moth's paralysis; he concludes that the moths are not only "lost" but that "they know they have lost their way." The moth's awareness of their lost state seems to render them immobile. "Sometimes," Austerlitz tells the narrator, "seeing one of these moths that have met their end in my house, I wonder what kind of fear and pain they feel while they are lost. As Alphonso had told him, said Austerlitz, there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life."¹²⁶ Austerlitz,

¹²⁵ Sebald, *Awt.*, 93-4.

¹²⁶ Sebald, *Awt.*, 94.

therefore, proposes that it is the “fear and pain” which stems from knowing they are lost that prevents these moths from seeking a way back to familiarity. What if these moths fear becoming more lost—of aimless, panicked flight? Austerlitz ends his story of moths which began at Andromeda Lodge in a state of speculation. That is the great extent one can do when imagining the thoughts and feelings of animals. Yet, Austerlitz is confident that the human is not the only conscious being in the world. Austerlitz concludes with the following thought: “We are not alone in dreaming at night [...] perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night.”¹²⁷

And so, the vignette of the moth provides another example of living beings traversing the world. The risk of becoming lost and disorientated is present for anything partaking in a movement from one place to another. The places one ends up can be far removed from what one is familiar with. In traveling, Sebald’s characters experience alien places. To resist the body and mind becoming dormant, a constant “quivering” must compel the traveler. Most importantly, Woolf and Sebald emphasize a necessity for compassion. If things are left unconsidered, whether it be other living beings or the events of the past, then life is not fully acknowledged.

¹²⁷ Sebald, *Awt.*, 94.

Antikos Bazaar

Walking the streets Terezín in the Czech Republic, Austerlitz is filled with an uncanny sense of abandonment. The deserted town consisted of “silent façades” from which “not a single curtain moved behind their blind windows.”¹²⁸ The many gates and doors gave Austerlitz an impression at the time, so he tells the narrator, that they were “obstructing access to a darkness never yet penetrated.”¹²⁹ A window-front of an Antikos Bazaar, a shop filled with various objects, captures Austerlitz’s attention. He recalls to the narrator that the shop resembled some sort of “curious emporium.”¹³⁰ He provides further description:

Of course I could see nothing but the items in the windows, which can have amounted to only a small part of the junk heaped up inside the shop. But even these four still lives obviously composed entirely at random, which appeared to have grown quite naturally into the black branches of the lime trees standing around the square and reflecting in the glass of the windows, entered such a power of attraction on me that it was a long time before I could tear myself away from staring at the hundreds of different objects [...].¹³¹

Here, Austerlitz is describing the enchantment of a collection. The indiscriminate archive of objects had accumulated so naturally that it became integrated into the reflections of the world on the glass window. The attraction Austerlitz feels toward this magical circle of things suggests that the collection holds a secret it wishes to disclose. With his “forehead pressed against the cold window” Austerlitz describes looking at the collection “as if one of them or

¹²⁸ Sebald, *Auw.*, 189.

¹²⁹ Sebald, *Auw.*, 190.

¹³⁰ Sebald, *Auw.*, 194.

¹³¹ Sebald, *Auw.*, 195.

their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions [he] found it impossible to ask in [his] mind.” He questions: “What was the meaning of the festive white lace tablecloth hanging over the back of the ottoman, and the armchair with its worn brocade cover? What secret lay behind the three brass mortars of different sizes [...]”¹³² These questions are prompted by the power objects possess in relation to one another. The collection itself enchants each individual object.

Austerlitz ends his description of these objects by placing them in relation to the passage of time.

They were all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils, and mementoes stranded in the Terezín bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them.¹³³

The objects are both preserved pieces of the past and new pieces of the present; as timeless objects, they are eternally present. The passage ends with Austerlitz seeing himself among the collection of objects. He is stepping into the magical circle of the collection and, in a sense, is becoming a part of the collection. While objects gain something in relation to one another, the secrets that they hold will ultimately be revealed in relation to the individual.

¹³² Sebald, *Au.*, 195.

¹³³ Sebald, *Au.*, 197.

Conclusion

If Sebald rejects a totalizing view of the world, than what position is the critic in to formulate a definitive thesis on Sebald's work? The first lesson any critic will learn when studying Sebald is a need for humility. This is principle for Sebald, without humility one will lack the will to attempt to see in the darkness that envelopes knowledge. From a position of hubris, the world becomes constrained to a single view and the past becomes limited to a definitive historical account. Sebald's narratives which consist of a multitude of fragments are rewritten by the hubristic critic to comprise of a single, intact conclusion. Thus, the critic must renounce his inclinations for conclusiveness and follow Sebald's search for an alternative to totality. Therefore, the search itself is what can be critiqued as long as the critic is able to meander, with Sebald's characters, to the edge of the known world. Sebald continually questions phenomena and his work rarely concludes with specific answers. On the contrary, his writing responds to questions with further questions. The critic, then, must consider the questions themselves and clarify why Sebald asks them; if they are not indicative of a solution, what do these questions point to?

Upon reuniting with his nurserymaid, Vera, from childhood, Austerlitz learns of a question he would often ask. Vera recalls how she would read to Austerlitz his favorite book about the changing seasons. Austerlitz would look at illustrated scenes of snow and would ask: "But if it's all white, how do the squirrels know where they've buried their hoard?" "Those were your very words," Vera tells Austerlitz, "the question which constantly troubled you." Following these words in the text is another question which seems to be spoken by both Austerlitz and the narrator—or perhaps by Sebald himself. The question asks: "How indeed do the squirrels know, what do we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we

find in the end?"¹³⁴ It seems that all we can do for the time being is to continue to walk and wonder.

¹³⁴ Sebald, *Awt.*, 204.

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