



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Sebald's Ghosts

Citation for published version:

Cooke, S 2012, 'Sebald's Ghosts: Travelling Among the Dead in The Rings of Saturn'. in J Skinner (ed.), Writing the Dark Side of Travel. Oxford: Berghahn, Oxford, pp. 47-62.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Author final version (often known as postprint)

Published In:

Writing the Dark Side of Travel

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Cooke, S. (2012). Sebald's Ghosts: Travelling Among the Dead in The Rings of Saturn. In Skinner, J. (Ed.), Writing the Dark Side of Travel. (pp. 47-62). Oxford: Oxford: Berghahn.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



CHAPTER 2

Sebald's Ghosts
Traveling among the Dead
in The Rings of Saturn

SIMON COOKE



In a recent tribute to W. G. Sebald, the artist Jeremy Millar traveled to the exact spot by the side of the A146 in Framingham Pigot where the celebrated German émigré author died in a car crash on 14 December 2001, not far from his adopted home of some twenty years near Norwich, England. After setting off a firework at the side of this minor road, Millar then took a series of photographs of the smoky apparitions that were left behind, “in memory—and celebration” of Sebald’s life and work (Millar 2007: 592). Commenting on the piece, the writer Robert MacFarlane—himself currently engaged in producing an “unconventional biography” of Sebald by following in his footsteps to re-create the routes described in his books—has noted with some astonishment that, in one of these photographs, he could just make out the “spectral image of Sebald’s own distinctive, moustached face” (2007: 82).

The distinctly thanatouristic dimensions involved in seeking out Sebald’s “ghosts” in such commemorative gestures and re-creations are clear enough. Millar’s tribute is a strikingly literal transformation of Sebald’s place of death into an example of what Chris Rojek (1993:136) calls “Black Spots,” akin to the annual vigils at the site of James Dean’s fatal car accident. But whatever view we take of the ethical questions raised by such acts of homage, there is little doubt that they are very much informed by the practices and fabric of Sebald’s own books, or at least an interpretation of them. Indeed, Sebald might well be regarded as the literary dark traveler par excellence. Born in the German village of Wertach in the Allgau in the Bavarian Alps in 1944, he figured his own biography as lying under the shadow of World War II. All of his work

is written with a view of history as “but a long account of calamities” ([1998] 2002: 295). And, in the photographic and pictorial elements of the books, as well as in the text, the narrator returns with an insistent steadfastness to scenes of atrocity, death, and destruction including—not exclusively, but perhaps most controversially—the Holocaust. Numerous reviewers and commentators have responded to the haunted, haunting quality of Sebald’s work by suggesting he writes “like a ghost” (e.g., Iyer 2000; McCrum 1999).¹

All of Sebald’s books would be worthy of study in the context of questions of writings on the dark side of travel, then, but *The Rings of Saturn* has its own special resonance with the theme. As the most recognizable travelogue among Sebald’s works, *The Rings of Saturn* lends itself to exploring the links between thanatourism and travel writing as a genre. And it is in no small part through its engagement with the issues of dark travel that *The Rings of Saturn* is, in the German publisher’s phrase, “ein Reisebericht besonderer Art” (a travel report of a special kind). The narrator, a semifictional version of W. G. Sebald, recounts a walking tour of Suffolk—not high on the thanatouristic itinerary—after completing a “long stint of work” ([1998] 2002: 3). The narrator records having become “preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” ([1998] 2002: 3). Indeed, through the course of the walking tour, the narrator encounters all but one of the five degrees of thanatourism delineated in the article in which Anthony Seaton (1996) coined the term. The narrator visits sites where actual deaths have occurred; numerous graves and monuments; battle reenactments and representations of violent death, notably Waterloo ([1998] 2002: 124–25); and a museum described as a “Chamber of Horrors” ([1998] 2002: 10). Only “travel to watch death” (Seaton 1996: 240) is entirely absent. As Sebald’s evocation of the words of the seventeenth-century doctor and writer Thomas Browne has it, “one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if levelled by the scythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness” ([1998] 2002: 79). Darkness is thus so pervasive in *The Rings of Saturn* that it is difficult to know where one might begin or end.

I approach this pervasive and varied darkness here with a widening thematic focus. Initially, attention is on the traveler-narrator’s sense of his own mortality in Sebald’s engagement with the intimate relations between travel, writing, and death. The focus then opens out into an assessment of the ethical questions posed by writing the spectacle of

the suffering and deaths of others: here the concern is with the tension between ethical duty and fascination, between redress and appropriation, and Sebald's response to the association of death and suffering with "darkness." Finally, we turn to Sebald's response to a sense of those sufferings that are not directly witnessed but hover on the peripheries of consciousness in memory or imagination: dark sites at a distance. Cumulatively, the argument is that Sebald's text persistently resists the idea of a discrete darkness in which suffering, death, and disaster can be contained, working instead toward an integration of this darkness into experience and history and life. The darkness is everywhere, so to speak. And it is in the insistence on its pervasiveness that darkness is most powerfully resisted.

Travels in the Undiscovered Country

In delineating forms of thanatouristic or dark travel and travel writings with reference to specific sites associated with death and disaster, it is worth noting that both the journey and writing have a long, perhaps fundamental, association with death—fearing it, facing it, and escaping it, as well as seeking out encounters with it. The refrain of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, by broad consensus one of the oldest surviving written texts, is a case in point. Motivated by a quest for immortal fame, Gilgamesh is overtaken by "the doom of mortals" after the death of his companion, Enkidu, resolving into a causal logic between morbid fear and wandering: "[I grew] fearful of death, [and so wander] the wild" (Anon. 1999: Tablet X, 239). If the anonymous poet of *Gilgamesh* sees in questing and wandering a relation to immortal ambitions and mortal fears, so too can the "travel narrative, published or recounted" be seen as "a record of survival," as Gillian Beer writes, in that "the narrator is here to tell it in retrospect even as the reader sets out on the journey" (Anon. 1999: 55). The travel narrative, as a record of survival, is thus often imbued in its basic form with an idea of the risk of death. As Joseph Jacobs writes in his notes to *The Book of Wonder Voyages*, in most such journeys and their narratives "there are traces of the influence of the last voyage of man. ... They are connected with the hopes and fears of man's last moments" ([1896] 2008: 216). And, as Sebald himself observes, "Psychoanalyse verzeichnet Reise und Wanderschaft als Symbole des Todes (Psychoanalysis records travel and wandering as symbols of death)" ([1985] 2003: 78).

The Rings of Saturn brings such perennial links among travel, writing, and death to the fore. The shape of the journey itself has thanatolog-

ical implications. The route involves traveling south along the east coast toward Orfordness before moving inland again—and, as in Dante’s descent into Hell, to travel south is, symbolically, to travel toward death (Hulme 2002: 227). Similarly, the time of year in which the journey is taken is rendered significant, taking place “under the sign of the Dog Star” ([1998] 2002: 3)—suggesting not only a general fatalism (or engagement with fatalism) but also death. In their study of the cultural history of the association of Saturn with melancholy, Kilbansky, Panofsky, and Saxl cite the *Schönspergerscher Kalender* (Schönspergerscher’s Calendar) of 1495 as stating that Saturn is “hostile to our nature in every way and stands over to the east” (1964: 195). That a substantial portion of the journey takes place along the coast also has liminal—even apocalyptic—undercurrents. The devastation of the now submerged coastal town of Dunwich, “dissolved into water, sand, and thin air” ([1998] 2000: 159), for example, is a striking realization of what Robert Pogue Harrison has identified as a key feature of the eschatological imagination in which “the sea, in its hostility to architecturally or textually imprinted memory, often figures as the imaginary agent of ultimate obliteration” (2003: 4). In its most basic geography and atmosphere, then, *The Rings of Saturn* thus presents itself as a landscape haunted by death.

If there is a sense in which *The Rings of Saturn* is spatially and temporally structured around a thanatological principle, there are a number of times in which there is an implication that the story is that of a traveler who has himself ventured into the “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns” (Sebald alludes to Hamlet’s famous cartography of death once more in characterizing Schiphol Airport as an antechamber to death [(1998) 2002: 89]). Throughout the book, there are hints that we are reading the account of a kind of ghost. When the traveler visits the poet and translator Michael Hamburger, he records that “the quite outlandish thought crossed my mind that these things, the kindling, the jiffy bags, the fruit preserves, the seashells and the sounds of the sea within them had outlasted me, and that Michael was taking me round a house which I myself had lived in a long time ago” ([1998] 2002: 185). When Mrs. Ashbury (a significant word-compound in itself) answers the door to the traveler at the bed and breakfast in Clarahill, “she gazed at me wide-eyed, or rather, she looked right through me” ([1998] 2002: 210). Among the papers held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach is a letter from Sebald to his publisher on his work in progress in which the implicit identification of the narrator with the Viscount de Chateaubriand in his *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (*Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*) is given an almost literal slant:

gerade wie der exilierte französische Graf, so macht auch der Erzähler dieses Buchs seine Aufzeichnungen an einem Ort, der schon zu seinen Lebzeiten ein Stück weit jenseits liegt des eigenen Grabs [just like the exiled French Vicomte (de Chateaubriand), so the narrator of this book makes his notes on a place that, already in his own lifetime, lies some way beyond his own grave]. (N. Sebald 1995: 3)

The most subtle yet concrete suggestion that *The Rings of Saturn* can be read as memoirs from beyond the grave is made elliptically. In the opening chapter, the narrator tells us that “several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality that I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting” ([1998] 2002: 4). A photograph depicting such a window is inserted into the narrative. This image is echoed in the closing passage of the book that retrospectively invests that opening scene with a symbolic supplement to the “strange reason” for the black netting draped over the hospital window. The narrative draws again on Thomas Browne, who

remarks in a passage of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that I can no longer find that in the Holland of his time it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people of the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever. ([1998] 2002: 296)

The black netting on the hospital window thus becomes, symbolically and retrospectively, a portent of death.² Sebald's book is so carefully composed that this must be more than coincidence, and it is perhaps significant that the observation of the black netting across the hospital window does not appear in the first draft of the chapter and was added after the completion of the full draft.³ The opening chapter then takes on something like the quality of a figurative, autobiographical death scene: his nurses are described as “ministering angels” ([1998] 2002: 18) and, looking out of this window, the narrator sees an airplane trail in the sky. Though he “at first took this as a happy sign,” in retrospect, Sebald's narrator fears it “marked the beginning of a fissure that has since riven my life” ([1998] 2002: 18). Although a crass literalism would clearly be reductive here, there is a sense that we are reading the account of one in a kind of limbo. *The Rings of Saturn* is presented—or rather, remembered in closing—as the account of a “soul ... distracted on its final journey” ([1998] 2002: 296).

Within the logic of the account, Sebald's travel narrative can be read as the performance of the record of a ghost. It draws on and dramatizes the thanatological dimensions implicit in travel writing generally, but also marks the book's innovation as one deeply linked with issues in dark travel in its subtle but fundamental subversion of the generic contract of travel writing as a tale of survival. That *The Rings of Saturn* can be read as the record of a traveler in the undiscovered country is, in a sense, its most quietly audacious underlying fiction. That we can read the narrative as Sebald's imagining of this narrative situation is one of the most fragile yet tenacious ways in which the text lives, documenting the investment of death with life, as well as life with death. *The Rings of Saturn* is thus written from a perspective in which writings on the dark side of travel cannot strictly be limited to a consideration of sites publicly associated with death and disaster: the thanatological is invested in travel and writing more widely. One might also suggest that Sebald's approach to such sites of death and suffering is filtered through his own foregrounded sense of mortality: he sides with the dead, so to speak. Yet the substance of *The Rings of Saturn* is also an account of a "soul ... *distracted* on its final journey" ([1998] 2002: 296, emphasis added). These distractions are to a large degree the sufferings of others, and it is to the spectacle of other people's misfortune that we now turn.

"Other People's Misfortune": Writing the Spectacle of Suffering

In *Kafka's Other Trial*, Elias Canetti writes that "in the face of life's horror—luckily most people notice it only on occasion, but a few whom inner forces appoint to bear witness are always conscious of it—there is only one comfort: its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses" (1974: 4). This ethically unsettling idea—that the horror experienced by others provides the only comfort for those "whom inner forces appoint to bear witness"—points towards the moral tensions involved in attending to the spectacle of suffering. It is a psychological mechanism echoed closely in Sebald's writing from early on. In his first nonacademic publication, *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht* (1988), translated by Michael Hamburger and published in 2002 as *After Nature*, the narrator reflects that if life is like a "Nordic chess tragedy," and an "arduous enterprise," then "For comfort there remains nothing but other people's / misfortune" (2002: 92–93). The ethical commitment to memory is thus accompanied by the open admission of the comforts of other people's sufferings. And if there is a kind of comfort that accompanies concern, there is also a danger of something more like a pornog-

raphy of suffering. Sebald suggests this most overtly in the postscript to *The Natural History of Destruction* in describing an interest in the bombing of Dresden:

To this day, any concern with the real scenes of horror during the catastrophe still has an aura of the forbidden about it, even of voyeurism, something these notes of mine have not entirely been able to avoid. I was not surprised when a teacher in Detmold told me, a little while ago, that as a boy in the immediate post-war years he quite often saw photographs of the corpses lying in the streets after the firestorm brought out from under the counter of a Hamburg second-hand bookshop, to be fingered and examined in a way usually reserved for pornography. ([1999] 2003: 98–99)

The question thrown up by the consolations and even the titillations of the spectacle of sufferings experienced by others is further compounded in the case of writers who occupy a special place in the taxonomy of the dark tourism spectrum. The act of writing may imply critical distance and a certain ethical authority, rendering the traveler an observer, rather than a participant, in the practices described. But, as Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan imply in the title of *Tourists with Typewriters* (1998), the writer is no less a tourist and consumer through writing than any other voluntary traveler. Moreover, there is an additional ethical dilemma in that the writer utilizes the experience more directly than others. For dark tourists with typewriters, to slightly modify the title, misery is material as well as spectacle. The writer approaches sites and experiences of suffering to consume and utilize. This too is an issue Sebald has been acutely sensitive to. As he once remarked in an interview with Christopher Bigsby:

Writing is by definition a morally dubious occupation ... because one appropriates and manipulates the lives of others for certain ends. When it is a question of the lives of those who survived persecution the process of appropriation can be very invasive. ... A writer's attitude is utilitarian. I think Graham Greene said somewhere that most writers have a splinter of ice in their heart. This seems to me a very perceptive remark because writers have to look upon things in a certain way. There is this horrible moment when you discover, almost with a sense of glee, something that, although in itself horrid, will fit exactly with your scheme of things. (Bigsby 2001: 153)

How does Sebald's approach to the suffering of others fit into this nexus of problems? More precisely, how does Sebald's writing—his means of presentation and engagement in terms of his aesthetics—engage with these complex relations?

Sebald's self-reflexivity is the most immediately significant factor here. As the quotations above indicate, Sebald is not simply conscious of these issues in his work; his work is written out of these very concerns. At another level, the reader is frequently given the opportunity to see Sebald's traveler through the eyes of those he encounters. When, in the first chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald recounts setting out in search of Thomas Browne's skull at the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital, not only do the "ladies and gentlemen" of the administrative staff "stare ... in utter incomprehension," but he "even had the impression that some of those [he] asked thought of [him] as an eccentric crank" ([1998] 2002: 10). It registers, often, more subtly still as ironic self-awareness that is less overtly expressed than implied through narrative organization and sequencing. Sebald continues this passage as follows:

Curiously enough, Browne himself, in his famous part-metaphysical treatise, *Urn Burial*, offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnaw'd out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But, he adds, who is to know the fate of his own bones, or how often he is to be buried? ([1998] 2002: 11)

This passage is followed immediately in the text by an image: a painting reprinted in black and white of what is presumably Thomas Browne's skull resting on a pile of books. In the original German, the name "Thomas Browne" appears underneath it on a separate line, like a title ([1995] 2004: 21). The irony of Sebald's attempt to exhume Browne's skull while also exhuming his views against this is left open for the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Nevertheless, the organization of the narrative presents this irony for inspection and provides the reader with the same choice. Sebald's desire to unearth the skull is also part of a desire to recover the physical bodies, the individual lives, from the obfuscations of representational or schematic organization. According to Sebald's reading of Rembrandt's *Autopsy of Aris Kindt*, "it is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible" ([1998] 2002: 13–17). He continues by noting that the eyes of the medical students are not on the body but on the "open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being" ([1998] 2002: 13). Recalling standing before the much-cited dark site, the war memorials at Waterloo, the narrator's line of thought goes against the grain of the memorial function, inquiring after the bodies: "Are they buried underneath the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death?" ([1998] 2002: 125). Sebald's work is

thus culturally reflexive as well as self-reflexive and works to undo the commodification of sites of suffering in the process.

Such skeptical scrutiny of self and cultural form is a mark of the conscientiousness that attends to Sebald's journeying among the dead; but this in itself might suggest only that Sebald be seen as a more conscientious dark tourist. Yet there is a sense in which Sebald's approach to sites of death and destruction runs directly counter to the thanatouristic. If we follow Anthony Seaton's suggestion that the "more differentiated and comprehensive the traveller's knowledge of the dead, the weaker ... the purely thanatouristic element" (1996: 240), then Sebald is the opposite of the dark tourist. Or perhaps: the thanatouristic element is self-defeating in his writing, always transforming itself into an interest in life, but an interest in life that acknowledges the mortality that makes that life possible. What it resists is not our interest in death so much as the assumption that an interest in death is any more specific than an interest in life: it resists the separation of the interest in *death* from an interest in the *dead*.

It also harasses us out of the assumption that concern with *death* is self-evidently and unquestionably associable with the *macabre*, as is sometimes implied (Stone 2006; Stone and Sharpley 2008). The macabre is the grim, ghastly, theatrical, and artificial. The association of death and the macabre has a long history going back to the Middle Ages,⁴ but the macabre is not, for all this, synonymous with death. It is rather a way of responding to death. It is a vestige of psychology, anthropology, and cultural history that this association among death, suffering, and the macabre is so automatic. But might it be that this association is the most pervasive way in which death is sequestered in many contemporary societies? The journey taken by Thomas Browne's skull in *The Rings of Saturn* enacts a movement toward and then away from the thanatouristic. The placement of Thomas Browne's skull in a "Chamber of Horrors" is macabre; as, perhaps, is the narrator's interest in tracking it down at the beginning of the narrative ([1998] 2002: 9). But Sebald's desire to see the skull is first self-reflexively satirized as such ([1998] 2002: 11), and then later manifestly becomes elegiac. In the process, object becomes subject: Sebald's traveler may go in search of Browne's skull at the outset, though it is Thomas Browne who is given the last word in the book.

Darkness and Distance: Atrocity and the Everyday

One of the most influential arguments that has been put forward as to why dark tourism became so prominent (if not new) in the late twentieth century is that of Lennon and Foley (2007). Their understanding of dark

tourism is that it is an “intimation of postmodernity” brought about in part by global communication technologies opening up the “territory between the global and the local, thereby introducing a collapse of space and time” (2007: 11). Visiting dark sites is an attempt to make real that which we encounter in mediated form, that which we are aware of but in which we are not directly involved.

One of the formative experiences behind Sebald’s work is closely aligned with this. Sebald spoke of the “sense that while I grew up in what was, after all, quite an idyllic environment, at the same time the most horrendous things happened in other parts of Europe,” and continued as follows:

While I was sitting in my pushchair and being wheeled through the flowering meadows by my mother, the Jews of Corfu were being deported on a four-week trek to Poland. It is the simultaneity of a blissful childhood and these horrific events that now strikes me as quite incomprehensible. I know that these things cast a very long shadow over my life. (Bigsby 2001: 144)

What Sebald here presents as the awareness of an “incomprehensible simultaneity” of bliss and horror is perhaps one of modernity’s most exemplary ethical problems.⁵ In terms of dark tourism, the issue is that the dark experience does not begin and end on site. The dark sites of the contemporary world are not only experienced in situ, but in extended consciousness, in prospect, and in memory. This is not to forget that imprisonment and the lack of freedom defines the experience of those whose sufferings mark dark sites—or that the most tragic extension of the experience of suffering is the trauma that pursues the survivors of atrocity. It is only to insist that these sufferings, whether at the hand of persecution or conflict or natural disaster, have no discrete place. Voltaire’s “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster” neatly encapsulates the sense of ethical paradox arising from an awareness of sufferings elsewhere:

Earth Lisbon swallows; the light sons of France
Protract the feast, or lead the sprightly dance. ([1756] 2000: 100)

One of the features of Sebald’s work is that it develops a narrative form appropriate to this moral paradox. We see this in Sebald’s frequent narration of lists of events that share a particular day as an anniversary. The day on which the narrator brings *The Rings of Saturn* to completion is 13 April 1995:

It is Maundy Thursday, the feast day on which Christ’s washing of the disciples’ feet is remembered, and also the feast day of Saints Agathon,

Carpus, Papyrus and Hermengild. On this very day three hundred and ninety-seven years ago, Henry IV promulgated the Edict of Nantes. ([1998] 2002: 294–95)

But as the list continues, increasingly incommensurable events are linked together: the anniversary of the first performance of Handel's *Messiah* coincides with the day on which the Anti-Semitic League was founded. And, finally, Maundy Thursday was also the day on which the narrator's wife's father died. As far as is known in the public domain, Sebald never went to the most iconic dark site, Auschwitz-Monowitz, though his work records journeys made in his own life to Breendonk in *Austerlitz* (Sebald [2001] 2002: 33). Sebald strenuously resisted having his work categorized as Holocaust literature, condemning it as "a dreadful idea that you can have a sub-genre and make a speciality out of it; it's grotesque" (Jaggi 2001: unpaginated). His sense of sites of atrocity similarly resists the impulse to subcategorize or compartmentalize.

One of the most remarkable "visits" to such a scene in *The Rings of Saturn* occurs in chapter 3, which accounts for the stretch of the walking tour as it moves south from Lowestoft along the coast toward Southwold. The listings in the table of contents—"Fishermen on the beach—The natural history of the herring—George Wyndham le Strange—A great herd of swine—The reduplication of man—Orbis Tertius"—indicate already that a degree of departure from the base level of the walk is involved in the narrative. There is no mention, however, of the most harrowing site—an image of the Nazi death camp at Bergen Belsen. Its plotment proceeds as follows: reflections on the fishermen who sit on the beach—who "themselves are dying out"—lead into a history of the herring in which the narrator discusses their eerie luminosity after death and challenges the "assumption that the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes" ([1998] 2002: 53, 57). As the cumulus clouds brew up and cast their shadows over the earth, the narrator switches course:

Perhaps it was that darkening that called to mind an article I had clipped from the *Eastern Daily Press* several months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake. During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April, ... but immediately after VE-Day returned home from Germany to manage his great uncle's estates in Suffolk, a task he had fulfilled in exemplary manner, at least until the mid-Fifties, as I knew from other sources. ([1998] 2002: 59–62)

The ellipsis in the passage stands in for an image of a photograph of what the reader is invited to assume must be connected to the camp of Bergen Belsen. Human corpses cover the forest floor of what might, at first glance, have appeared to be a pastoral composition. The image receives no direct commentary; and Bergen Belsen appears as a site with its photographic counterpart embedded in the story of Le Strange's eccentric relationship with his housekeeper to whom, according to the *Eastern Daily Express* article that the narrator paraphrases (and of which a photograph is also provided), the major left his entire fortune ([1998] 2002: 62). Inasmuch as Bergen Belsen is a site of death in *The Rings of Saturn*, it appears without warning as an element of another story alongside more extended reflections on other subjects, such as the suffering experienced by the herring. It is this passage that is noted by Mark McCulloh when, summarizing the controversy that such juxtaposition arouses, he asks: "Is it tasteful to lump such qualitatively different data together?" (2003: 65). What is clear is that the technique is so intrinsic to Sebald's approach that we cannot view such juxtapositions in an assessment of the ethics of his aesthetic as anomalies. It is as endemic to his approach to sites of atrocity as the longer, part-fictionalized biographical engagements with human beings who have suffered them. What is the effect? And is this an ethically viable aesthetic?

The initial impact of the image as it appears derives precisely from its incommensurability and from its interruption of the narrative: the lack of explication or emplotment registers, irreducibly, this silence. The image is important in part in that it *is* part of the story of Le Strange that cannot be worded into his story: the narrative is literally broken. And we can begin to see Sebald's insertion of the photograph as a kind of psychoanalytic enlargement on that detail of Le Strange's story, volunteering it as a cause implicated in his subsequent silent relationship with his maid. As we move beyond the story of Le Strange—it is a narrative that is constantly departing—the image becomes part of a wider canvas, again echoing through the narrator's own account as well as Le Strange's. We might also note that the image echoes the photograph a few pages earlier of a haul of herring ([1998] 2002: 54). It is here that the patterning is most controversial. Since the German "historians' dispute" of the 1980s in particular, the question of the relativization of historical events, the comparison of the Holocaust with other genocides, has been a highly charged public debate. The effect can be compared to that of a montage film such as Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955). As Andrew Hebard has argued, the scandal surrounding the film may have "resulted not so much from the images themselves" but from the "use

of archival material juxtaposed with present day footage” and the sense of “moral contamination” this involved (1997: 89). Sebald’s prose, like Resnais’s film, frequently allows leakage between the horrific and the everyday, providing no framework for the logical connections between the different forms of data. The sense of contamination is especially subversive in that, in the absence of discursive comparison in the text itself, the reader is implicated in seemingly incommensurable experiences, images, and events.

Whether this is compositional manipulation, or the expression of a mind in motion resisting the censorship of questionable proximities, it represents an insistence on the implicatedness of such harrowing histories in the rest of human experience. Sebald quotes the philosopher Emil Cioran: living is only possible “par les deficiences de notre imagination et de notre mémoire” (through the deficiencies in our imaginations and our memories) (quoted in Sebald [1999] 2003: 147–71). As a narrative, *The Rings of Saturn* performs the effort to live in imagination and memory. Except in the brutal sense that persecution is in itself an act of imprisonment, it is thus centrally formed around the principle that dark sites are never self-contained, and that, if one is alive to the world, no darkness is discrete.

Conclusion

Sebald’s work is both exemplary of, and divergent from, the dark tourism paradigm. *The Rings of Saturn* does contribute to what Philip Stone and Richard Sharpley have suggested to be dark tourism’s potential to “offer a revival of death within the public domain, thereby de-sequestering mortality and ensuring absent death is made present, transforming (private) death into public discourse and a communal commodity upon which to gaze” (2008: 588). As we have seen, he foregrounds the sense of mortality in his own traveler, he pays constant attention to the sufferings of the living and the dead, and he insists that dark sites are implicated in one another. But Sebald’s approach is very different to that which arrives at classifications such as “Dark Camps of Genocide” (Stone 2006)—as if “dark” were sufficient, or there were another kind of death camp. *The Rings of Saturn*, for all that it confronts us with many shades of darkness, goes against the argument that the “confrontation of death and contemplation of mortality, within a socially acceptable dark tourism environment, may potentially bracket out some of the sense of dread death inevitably brings, by insulating the individual with information

and potential understanding and meaning” (Stone and Sharpley 2008: 588). *The Rings of Saturn* shows that death is part of all our journeys. It insists that the dead are not a separate category of being from the living, and that our mortality cannot be isolated from life. It approaches sites of suffering not as a solution to the tourist’s dread of death but as a challenge to the security of insulating the individual against this knowledge. It is the potentially deadening effect of such insulation—either of the dead from the living, or of the dead from their lives—that Sebald so persistently circumnavigates.

Notes

This is a revised and updated version of an article that appeared as “Sebald’s Ghosts: Travelling among the Dead in *The Rings of Saturn*” in J. Skinner, ed., *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing*, Special Edition, *Writing the Dark Side of Travel* 11, no. 1 (2010): 50–68.

1. This chapter takes its place in a long line of academic responses to Sebald’s work that emphasize the reference to ghosts, specters, and hauntings in their titles. See, for example, Diedrich (2007), Barzilai (2006) and Cueppens (2006).
2. John Beck has also noted this detail of the text’s beginning and ending, suggesting that the narrative may thus be understood as “the record of a final passage from this world to another” (2006: 77). Beck’s interpretation differs slightly, however, in arguing that the narrator “has journeyed toward death, perhaps, to return with a message from the other side” (2006.: 77). Although this is literally the case, my reading pursues the possibility that the book is haunted by a sense that the narrator, strictly within the logic of the narrative, has not returned from the other side.
3. See Folders 7–9 of the Sebald Nachlass that contain handwritten drafts of the work in progress.
4. See Seaton (1996: 236) quoting Huizinga ([1924] 1968): “At the close of the Middle Ages the whole vision of death may be summed up in the word macabre, in its modern meaning. ... [The] sentiment it embodies, of something gruesome and dismal, is precisely the conception of death which arose during the last centuries of the Middle Ages.”
5. This has been called the “meanwhile problem” (Buzard 1998: passim) and has been linked to the way in which the Diaspora in the wake of the French Revolution led to a “dramatic reorganization of modern time and space, so that contemporaries felt themselves *contemporaries*, as occupants of a common time zone” (Fritzsche 2004: 9–10; emphasis in original). Stephen Kern, similarly, links the inception of World Standard Time and the rapid development of telecommunications “worked to create the vast extended present of simultaneity” (1983: 318). Susan Sontag has written that to be “a traveller—and novelists are often travellers—is to be constantly reminded of the simultaneity of what is going on in the world, your world and the very different world you have visited and from which you have returned ‘home’” (2007: 228).

Bibliography

- Anon. 1999. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Trans. Andrew George. London: Penguin.
- Barzilai, M. 2006. "Facing the Past and the Female Spectre in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*," in J. J. Long and A. Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 203–16.
- Beck, J. 2006. "Reading Room: Erosion and Sedimentation in Sebald's Suffolk," in J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 75–88.
- Beer, G. 1999. *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bigsby, C. 2001. *Writers in Conversation*, vol. 2. Norwich: EAS Publishing in conjunction with Pen & Inc Press, for the UEA Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies.
- Buzard, J. 1998. *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800–1918*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Canetti, E. 1974. *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*. Trans. Christopher Middleton. New York: Schocken Books.
- Cueppens, J. 2006. "Seeing Things: Spectres and Angels in W. G. Sebald's Prose Fiction," in J. J. Long and A. Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 190–202.
- Diedrich, L. 2007. "Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W. G. Sebald's Practices of Witnessing," in L. Patt (ed.), *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald*. Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 256–79.
- Fritzsche, P. 2004. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harrison, R. 2003. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Hebard, A. 1997. "Disruptive Histories: Toward a Radical Politics of Remembrance in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*." *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer): 87–113.
- Holland, P., and G. Huggan. 1998. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Huizinga, H. [1924] 1968. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Hulme, P. 2002. "Patagonian Cases: Travel Writing, Fiction, History," in J. Borm (ed.), *Seuils & Traverses: Enjeux de l'écriture du voyage*, vol. 2. Brest: Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, 223–37.
- Iyer, P. 2000. "The Strange, Haunted World of W.G. Sebald." *Harper's Magazine* (October): 86–90. Jacobs, J. [1896] 2008. *The Book of Wonder Voyages*. London: Adams Press.
- Jaggi, Maya. 2001. "The Guardian Profile: W.G. Sebald. Recovered Memories." *The Guardian*, 22 September. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/22/artsandhumanities.highereducation> (accessed 9 October 2011).
- Kern, S. 1983. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Kilbansky, R., E. Panofsky, and F. Saxl. 1964. *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Lennon, J. and M. Foley. 2007. *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. London: Thomson.
- McCrum, R. 1999. "Ghost Writer." *The Observer*, 12 December. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1999/dec/12/2> (accessed 9 October 2011).
- McCulloh, M. 2003. *Understanding W.G. Sebald*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Millar, J. 2007. "A Firework for W. G. Sebald (2005–6)," in L. Patt (ed.), *Searching for Sebald: Photography after Sebald*. Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 550–11.
- Resnais, A. 1955. *Nuit et Brouillard*. France: Argos Films.
- Rojek, C. 1993. *Ways of Escape*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Seaton, A. 1996. "Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2(4): 234–244.
- Sebald N. [1995] 2004. Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Marbach am Neckar. "Die Ringe des Saturn—Handschrift." Fols. 1–9.
- Sebald, W. G. [1985] 2003. "Das unentdeckte Land: Zur Motivstruktur in Kafkas *Schloß*," in W. G. Sebald, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag GmbH, 78–92.
- . [1995] 2004. *Die Ringe des Saturn: eine Englische Wallfahrt*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag GmbH.
- . [1998] 2002. *The Rings of Saturn*. Trans. Michael Hulse. London: Vintage.
- . [1999] 2003. *The Natural History of Destruction*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- . [2001] 2002. *Austerlitz*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Penguin.
- . 2002. *After Nature*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. New York: Random House.
- Sontag, S. 2007. *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Stone, P. 2006. "A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions." *Tourism* 54(2): 145–60.
- Stone, P. and R. Sharpley. 2008. "Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective." *Annals of Tourism Research* 35(2): 574–95.
- Voltaire F. [1756] 2000. "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," in F. Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts*. Trans. David Wootton. Indianapolis: Hackett, 99–107.