Life Writing and Nature Writing in W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*

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At the time of his untimely death in a car crash in 2001 at the age of 57, W.G. Sebald was being cited by literary critics as one of the greatest living authors, and had been tipped as a possible future winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since then, the international sales of his books have demonstrated that his prose holds a lasting fascination for readers, and conferences and publications devoted to his writing in Britain (where he lived), Germany (his land of origin), the United States and elsewhere have revealed dimensions of meaning rewarding critical examination from a range of perspectives.[1] Read primarily as a holocaust writer, at least outside Germany, Sebald has been particularly praised for the reticence, modesty, respect and tact with which he approached his countrymen's anti-Semitism, Jewish exile, and the extermination camps.[2] Addressing subjects ordinarily considered unimaginable and unrepresentable, with a characteristic melancholy obliqueness, he focused on the long-term impact of childhood experiences ranging from everyday discrimination to traumatic loss. His work witnesses to the past and reflects at the same time on the processes of individual and collective forgetting and remembering.

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[1] Jo Catling, Richard Hibbitt and Lynn Wolff listed 11 monographs and 25 edited volumes or special numbers of journals written on Sebald's work in their 61-page bibliography in December 2009. The growing need for orientation in this burgeoning research field is witnessed to by 4 article-length overviews of Sebald scholarship published between 2007 and 2009 – see Zisselsberger, 'Introduction: Fluchträume/ Traumfluchten. Journeys to the Undiscover'd Country' (Zisselsberger 1-29), here note 35, pp. 27f.

[2] See for instance Will Self's lecture "Sebald, the Good German?", delivered in January 2010: "Sebald is rightly seen as the non-Jewish German writer who through his works did most to mourn the murder of the Jews." Markus Zisselsberger comments on Sebald's unique ability to approach the catastrophes of 20th-century history "from the margins and in a literary language that conveys the horror of individual suffering without appropriating or mitigating them", not least in descriptions of *places*, "in which the individual human suffering is invoked but simultaneously rendered inaccessible" (10, 13).

Nature and the place of human beings in it have been widely acknowledged as a second central concern of Sebald's.[3] His blend of these two themes is distinctive, but not unique, for the shadow of the Holocaust has been a distinguishing characteristic of much German writing on nature and environment since the Second World War. Feelings about the exploitation and destruction of nature have been commonly overlaid with consciousness of other aspects of modernity which have gone disastrously wrong, and the ideas of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (as expounded in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944) have exercised an influence (direct or indirect) over the predominantly bleak novels, poems, plays and essays representing and interrogating our relationship with the natural environment which has been at least as important as the legacy of Romanticism. Yet, though Sebald describes many instances of the relationships of human beings with the planet, and prompts reflection on their political and philosophical implications, he is not a typical nature writer in the traditional sense of authoring literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world and explores the private experience of the individual human observer.[4]

Biography, real and fictional, runs right through Sebald's writing, both as theme and as form, from his first major publication, the long poem *After Nature* (1988), via the novels *Vertigo* (1991), *The Emigrants* (1993), and *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), up to his final work, *Austerlitz* (2001). Commentators have remarked on how the readings of Austrian and other authors in Sebald's critical essays fed into the many biographical sketches and commentaries on literary works embedded in his fiction. The autobiographical dimension of his work has, however, been less frequently discussed.[5] Sebald is a very private writer: even when he describes and reflects on his childhood, as in *After Nature* and *Vertigo*,

[3] See for instance Riordan, Santner, and Zisselsberger.
[4] See Scott Slovic's definition of the term in the *Encyclopaedia of World Environmental History*, vol. 2, p. 888.
[5] It is, however, discussed in Sebald's interview with Michael Zeeman (Denham and McCulloh 21-9) and touched on in Aliaga-Buchenau, and the interviews collected by Lynne Schwartz (e.g. 103).

he conceals as much as he reveals about his inner life, and the circumstances and experiences which made him what he was. I nevertheless contend in the following that Sebald's travelogue, *The Rings of Saturn*, is not only a work in which nature writing and life writing converge, in descriptions of places through which he passes, which trigger (or have been chosen precisely because they provide an excuse for) reflection on the lives and writings of people associated with them. It is also, albeit indirectly and to a lesser degree, an autobiographical work.

Philip Lejeune has defined autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality".[6] *The Rings of Saturn* fulfils Lejeune's initial requirements for autobiography inasmuch as it is narrated in retrospect, and author, narrator and protagonist are identical. In describing a walking tour undertaken in East Anglia in the summer of 1992, it also adopts a familiar autobiographical form.[7] However, the book only recounts a brief episode in the author's life, and rather than focusing on his identity, spiritual development, and the growth of self-consciousness, and presenting the self either in its uniqueness or as a model of being human, it is primarily concerned with landscapes, people and history. Indeed, it should not be taken for granted that the narrator is identical with the author: he is more accurately characterised as a constructed subject, a melancholy 'persona' adopted, than as a self-portrait. In the poem *After Nature*, Sebald had already stylised himself, echoing a passage from Walter Benjamin's autobiographical sketch *Berlin Chronicle*, as born under the sign of the "the cold planet Saturn" (88) – hence according to astrological tradition haunted by thoughts of death, by temperament sluggish and gloomy, and predestined to misfortune.

[6] "The Autobiographical Contract." Lejeune 3-30, here 44.
[7] Autobiography has been associated with walking since Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1776-8), which (together with his *Confessions*, written 1770) ushered in the Romantic secular model of autobiography.

The writers and historical figures and historical figures to whom lengthy passages, even entire chapters in *The Rings of Saturn* are devoted, can be seen as alter egos of the narrator. Many of them are confronted with similar challenges to those he faces, and their actions and writings constitute potential models. Portraying related others is for Sebald an oblique form of self-analysis. His affinities with them, which border on identification, are underlined by strange parallels and coincidences linking their lives to his own. Commentators on Sebald's books have frequently noted the difficulty in classifying them in terms of genre. *The Rings of Saturn* has been shown to incorporate elements of travelogue, landscape description, biography, essay, fiction, apologia and autobiography. 'Essayistic travelogue' has been proposed as the best term to describe the book's form, which Sebald may have adapted from Claudio Magris's *Danubio* (Zisselsberger 25, note 10). It provides a structuring principle enabling him to knit together otherwise disparate elements of real, imagined and textual travel. Place constitutes a nexus for landscape descriptions which shade over into historical allegory, reflections on natural and human history, and considerations of the task of the scholar and writer. Sebald's writing may not be the most obvious material to turn to when investigating life writing and nature writing. But they bring the two together in an original and highly productive way.

The autobiographical dimension in Sebald's writing is more obvious the poetic triptych *After Nature*, and his first novel, *Vertigo*. The individual parts of the former work were published in separate numbers of the Austrian journal *Manuskripte* between 1984 and 1987. Each recounts, as Zisselsberger has noted (4), the biography, journeys and extreme experiences of a (male) subject. First written was the account of the naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller, who accompanied Vitus Bering on his second Kamchatka expedition in the 1740s, during which Alaska was discovered and the Siberian and American West coasts were charted, studying flora, fauna and topography. Second was Sebald's portrait of the early 16th-century painter Matthias Grünewald, whose Isenheim Altar is famous for its intensely expressive, angst-laden realism. Grünewald

anticipated the nightmare threat of nuclear winter, according to Sebald, communicating an apocalyptic vision of a world which has abandoned nature. The third and final section of *After Nature* tells of Sebald's birth in 1944, and how he grew up in a small town in the south-west of Germany, seemingly untouched by the nation's crimes against humanity and remote from the air raids which wreaked destruction in most German cities. Even as a child, however, he imagined "a silent catastrophe that occurs/ almost unperceived" (89), and was plagued by apocalyptic visions. We learn that he left Germany to work in England, where his already uneasy relationship with his country's past was accentuated by meeting Jews who had fled Hitler. The poem ends under the grey skies of East Anglia, where the Anglo-Saxon burial mounds of Sutton Hoo serve as a reminder of the ultimate fate of all human beings and cultures, and the Sizewell nuclear power plant, in which "slowly/ the core of the metal/ is destroyed", "whisper[s]/ madness on the heathland/ of Suffolk" – implying nuclear technology is another form of humanity's destructive urges. "Is this", he asks, "the promis'd end?" (110)

This poetic autobiographical sketch is linked thematically (also by mention of a place in the Alps which plays a role in all three sections of *After Nature*, and other recurring motifs) with the lives of Grünewald and Steller which precede it. In Sebald's next work, the novel *Vertigo*, it is again as if he finds it easier or more appropriate to approach his life through and after the lives of others.[8] Elements of the first three narratives are echoed in the final story, entitled 'Il ritorno in patria', in which the narrator returns to his home town in the South of Germany, and describes life there in the years after the Second World War.

Steller and Grünewald are figures with whom Sebald expresses a deep affinity, which is rooted in their shared interest in nature, sympathy with the victims of political oppression, and concern with the acquisition of knowledge and

[8] The others in *Vertigo* are Stendhal, Kafka and Casanova, whose journeys southwards across the Alps to Italy he retraces.

understanding through artistic representation and painstaking observation. Steller not only "collects botanical specimens,/ fills little bags with dried seed,/ describes, classifies, draws,/ sits in his black travelling tent,/ happy for the first time in his life". He also writes "memoranda in defence/ of the indigenous people maltreated/ and deprived of their rights" (*After Nature* 74).[9] Grünewald additionally constitutes a model in practising disguised self-portraiture. *After Nature* opens with a coded representation of this indirect approach to self-analysis: our attention is directed to the figure of St George in one of Matthias Grünewald's altars, which is identified as a self-portrait. We are told that repeatedly in his work, the painter's features emerge in "strangely disguised/ instances of resemblance" (6).

John Paul Eakin has written of the *relational* construction of self in much contemporary autobiographical writing, building on insights into the reasons for the prominence of relationships in women's autobiographies, but arguing that *all* selves are multiple, relational and profoundly embodied, and that identity is crucially constructed through involvement with other.[10] *After Nature* and *The Rings of Saturn* are not relational autobiography in either of the two primary senses developed by Eakin, i.e. combinations of autobiography and ethnography, in which the individual's development is embedded in an account of the community or milieu in which he/she grew up, and portraits of self through the lens of relations with a proximate other (often mother-daughter or father-son relationships). But Sebald reveals so close an empathy with the writers, artists, literary historians and people whose memories of the past he draws on that it is sometimes unclear whether he or they are speaking. His writing exemplifies the mixture in mode (expository and narrative) and hybridity in form (amalgamating biography, autobiography and history) described by Eakin (53). "The other's

[9] In an interview, Sebald once spoke of the special importance of naturalists for his writing: "It doesn't matter particularly whether they're eighteenth-century scientists – Humboldt – or someone contemporary like Rupert Sheldrake. These are all very close to me, and people without whom I couldn't pursue my work." (Schwartz 81)

[10] See Chapter 2, "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: Autobiography and the Myth of Autonomy." Eakin 43-98.

story, the other's life, is possessed – indeed created – by the recording self", Eakin writes (61). Laura Marcus has written similarly of the "active, in psychoanalytic terms even […] transferential relationship [of the author] to the biographical subject", suggesting the writer may often be relating their own story, "real or fantasised" (90). "Biography", she quotes André Maurois, becomes "a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature" (102).

Self and Other often merge in Sebald's biographical sketches in a suggestive form of indirect self-expression which parallels his framing of emotionally charged narratives through conversations between the narrator and the subject. Distancing the reader from traumatic historical events, this introduces elements of uncertainty which leave space for the reader's imagination. (At the same time, in the case of Holocaust survivors, it reflects failing memories and the incomplete understanding of events by their children.) The four portraits of German-Jewish émigrés which comprise *The Emigrants* are framed by a narrator who is in places clearly identifiable with the author. In interviews, Sebald has revealed the real historical persons behind these figures, and spoken of his research into their lives. Even when told first hand, their stories are, however, related in a voice like the narrator's, and tend to sound strangely like Sebald's own. This is also true of Jacques Austerlitz in Sebald's last novel, the Prague-born Jew who escaped to England as a child, grew up not knowing who he really was, is driven by a breakdown to rediscover the circumstances of his youth, and recounts his experience to the narrator in a series of lengthy interviews.

The persons described in *The Rings of Saturn*, whether they are living people with whom Sebald converses on his journey, or writers whose works he reads, are typically melancholy recluses. Their detachment from society is attributable to a traumatic experience, often involving the abrupt termination of a privileged childhood. Some can be seen as role models for the author, in that they have overcome their suffering through studying, painting or writing. His closest

affinities may be sensed in people who share his own obsessive interest in factual detail, and combine it with vivid imagination, transcending the reality of their circumstances, however fleetingly. For instance the seventeenth-century author Sir Thomas Browne, whose writings, steeped in Classical and Biblical learning and formulated with ponderous Baroque eloquence, display deep curiosity towards both the natural world and cultural constructions. Three of the portrayed share Sebald's fascination and identification with other writers. The first of these is the Norwich academic who spends his holidays retracing the steps of the inter-war French-speaking Swiss writer C.F. Ramuz (an early exponent of environmentally inflected regionalism). The second is Edward FitzGerald, the Victorian translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Finally, Sebald visits his friend, the Jewish émigré Michael Hamburger, who created a new identity for himself after arrival in England as a child, in part by translating into English and echoing in his own verse Friedrich Hölderlin's Romantic poems of exile, alienation from his fellow countrymen, and suffering from the disenchantment of modernity and the tyranny of reason. Hamburger is typical of Sebald's relational others in sharing his sympathy with the disempowered and exploited, and a concern regarding environmental destruction which borders on the apocalyptic.

In a number of cases, homosexuals' experience of repression and discrimination in a world in which sexuality is restricted to heterosexual procreation is presented as a source of emotional sensitivity, artistic creativity and social activism. Matthias Grünewald in *After Nature* is a precursor of Algernon Swinburne and Roger Casement in *The Rings of Saturn*. An X-ray image of a depiction of St Sebastian reveals, according to Sebald, that Grünewald overpainted a self-portrait by his lover Mathis Nithart: "Here two painters in one body/ whose hurt flesh belonged to both/ to the end pursued the study/ of their own nature. At first/ Nithart fashioned his self-portrait/ from a mirror-image, and Grünewald/ with great love, precision and patience/ […] then overpainted it." (*After Nature* 19) While Grünewald and Swinburne sought to overcome their suffering through their art

and writing, Casement championed social justice, exposing the appalling abuse of the indigenous population in his Congo Report of 1904.

Two of the literary portraits in *The Rings of Saturn* are of autobiographers: François-René Chateaubriand (French diplomat and author of the monumentally melancholy *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, published posthumously in 1848) and Michael Hamburger (*String of Beginnings*, 1991). Joseph Conrad is also approached through his memoirs and essays, as well as *Heart of Darkness*. All this makes for strange slidings between author, narrator and subject. Sebald asks, for instance, in the account of his visit to Hamburger: "How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?" (182) On his first visit to Hamburger's house, he recalls, he instantly felt as if he "lived or had once lived there, in every respect precisely as he does" (183).

If it is legitimate to regard *The Rings of Saturn* as life writing, and an oblique form of autobiography, it can also be seen as nature writing, in which nature is presented not as separate other, but as an entity in which humanity is embedded for better or for worse. On the one hand, Sebald shows nature as sharing in our human vulnerableness and ultimate fate of decay and disintegration. On the other, he points repeatedly to a shared propensity to violence and destruction. In all of Sebald's books, but especially in *After Nature* and *The Rings of Saturn*, nature participates in a victimhood paralleling that of the Jews. But it is simultaneously a principle cruelly indifferent to human life and happiness.

The opening lines of *The Rings of Saturn* suggests the book will be the story of a "nature cure". In August 1992, we learn, the narrator set out from his home in Norwich (where Sebald was University Professor of European Literature) on a ramble, first eastwards to the coast at Lowestoft, then southwards through rural Suffolk, inland, and finally back to Norwich, "in the hope of dispelling the emptiness which takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of

work" (3). "And", he continues, "in fact my hope was realized, up to a point: for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast." At this point, readers might expect something along the lines of recent British illness narratives such as Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2005), or the American texts examined by Mark Allister in *Reconfiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography*. Allister analyses the processes whereby grief is worked through and a liberating distance achieved by focusing on external subjects that absorb the writer and compensate for his/her loss. The solitary traveller's immersion in the natural world leads them to recuperation.

However, Sebald writes in a sudden turn, "in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing 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." This horror, he surmises, may have led indirectly to his admission to hospital a year later in a state of near-paralysis. Here he began to recall and write notes on his walking tour, although the manuscript proper only took shape a year later. In reality, Sebald had injured his back. However, his narrator appears to be recuperating from a condition as much mental as physical. And the structure of the book is such that readers are encouraged to overlook the details of the framing narrative and assume that the journey which follows was undertaken in order to recover from the philosophically inflected breakdown hinted at in the opening pages. All Sebald's books are concerned with journeys, and his protagonists are frequently wanderers in a state of emotional and physical near-collapse.

Sebald's walking tour is a deeply ambivalent experience, in which the promise of redemption and healing is disappointed.[11] There are moments in *The Rings of*

[11] "I knew then as little as I know now whether walking in this solitary way was more of a pleasure or a pain," he comments in the penultimate chapter (241).

Saturn where the narrator appears to gain strength from a sense of oneness with nature, and to be returning to places to which he is (or becomes) bound in a meaningful relationshp.But as elsewhere in his work, dislocation and exile far outweigh an identificatory relationship with place. If a therapeutic effect is to be found anywhere, it is in the act of writing, making sense of his encounters, his life, and human history in retrospect, rather than in walking or observing.

The landscape descriptions in *The Rings of Saturn* are ambivalent in status. Simultaneously real and symbolic, they alternate between observed reality (geological, botanical and social), projections of the author's state of mind, and emblems of his conception of history. The depopulated marshes, the declining economic activity in the towns along the East Anglian coast, the dilapidated bathing resorts and deserted harbours with their rotting fishing boats, abandoned military installations and the very coastline subject to constant erosion are physical traces of a universal process of decline and death. Sebald recalls the technological achievements of the British Empire and the cultural flowering of the Victorian era with a degree of admiration. But he hints constantly at the terrible cost incurred. The cruel, wasteful and ruinous course of western civilisation is illustrated in long passages about colonial exploitation in Africa and China, and about the two World Wars. The Holocaust is never actually mentioned, but present in one of the captionless photographs which accompany the text, and between the lines in a number of passages.[12]

Marine pollution, the extinction of species through over-fishing, and the history of silk manufacturing demonstrate the recklessly exploitative treatment of the *non*-human world which Sebald sees as going hand in hand with our political actions. Silkworm cultivation exemplifies both the best and the worst humanity is capable of, providing the basis for the most magnificent products of Chinese culture, but

[12] "I've always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people," Sebald said in an interview shortly before his death. But "the only way in which we can approach these

operating by means of ruthless instrumentalisation of nature. In the final chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald explains how silk husbandry was introduced in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but failed because of the despotic manner in which local rulers attempted to enforce its adoption, overburdening entrepreneurial spirit with authoritarian management. Their vision of the silk industry leading to a moral as well as economic transformation of the nation was revived in a final perverse form in the Third Reich. Sebald summarizes the argument of an educational film from the 1930s:

"Silkworms afforded an almost ideal object lesson for the classroom. Any number could be had for virtually nothing, they were perfectly docile and needed neither cages nor compounds, and they were suitable for a variety of experiments (weighing, measuring and so forth) at every stage in their evolution. They could be used to illustrate the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, retrogressive mutations, and the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration." (294)

Individual and collective instances of cruelty, violence and destruction are located in a context of cyclical patterns of human behaviour, and indeed of the laws of nature. While he indicts governments and names individual persons responsible, Sebald depicts the loss which ensues from their actions as cumulatively catastrophic, and implies it cannot be avoided in principle. In *The Rings of Saturn*, as in *After Nature* he presents suffering as the inescapable lot of human and non-human life, and extinction as our inevitable fate. The theme of transience and the sombre tone of *The Rings of Saturn* are anticipated in a motto taken from the *Brockhaus Encyclopaedia* explaining that "The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former

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things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation." (Schwartz 80)

moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect." Sebald's conception of nature is one of a process of growth, reproduction and decay devoid of human-related meaning. It is a post-Holocaust understanding of creation, but also one with a long line of ancestors. A key influence was the conception of history as a chain of disasters only recognisable in retrospect by a hapless humanity driven into the future by the force of progress which Walter Benjamin formulated in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. It can be traced back through German culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in literary representations of nature as "a monster, forever devouring, regurgitating, chewing and gorging" (as Goethe writes in *Werther*, 1774), and in the nihilistic philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. This countervision to the pastoral was the reverse of the project of reuniting urban readers with an increasingly distant and fragmented nature, which dominated German poetry throughout the 19th century. Sebald's pessimistic outlook on the future, which culminates in a series of apocalyptic passages in *After Nature* (28, 30f.) and *The Rings of Saturn* (229, 237, and 295, where he writes of history as "but a long account of calamities"), corresponds to a significant current in late 20th-century German literature.[13]

In *After Nature*, Sebald had described nature as a series of monstrous experiments, stressing the cruelty inherent in natural selection:

The panic-stricken
kink in the neck to be seen
in all of Grünewald's subjects,
exposing the throat and often turning
the face towards a blinding light,
is the extreme response of our bodies
to the absence of balance in nature
which blindly makes one experiment after another
and like a senseless botcher
undoes the thing it has only just achieved.

[13] See Hans magnus Enzensberger's *Sinking of the Titanic* (1978), Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* (1979), Ulrich Horstmann's *The Beast* (1983), Christa Wolf's *Accident* (1986) and Günter Grass's *The Rat* (1987).

To try out how far it can go
is the sole aim of this sprouting,
perpetuation and proliferation
inside us also and through us and through
the machines sprung from our heads,
all in a single jumble,
while behind us already the green
trees are leaving their leaves…" (27)

The follies and perversities of human invention mirror the inherent structure of the natural world, with its universal processes of combustion and entropic tendency towards disorder. An example of the historical events in which Sebald condenses the lamentable effects of human behaviour is his description of the wanton destruction of the magnificent Chinese imperial Summer Palace gardens by invading British and French troops in 1860:

In early October, the allied troops, themselves now uncertain how to proceed, happened apparently by chance on the magic garden of Yuan Ming Yuan near Peking, with its countless palaces, pavillions, covered walks, fantastic arbours, temples and towers. On the slopes of man-made mountains, between banks and spinneys, deer with fabulous antlers grazed, and the whole incomprehensible glory of nature and of the wonders placed in it by the hand of man was reflected in dark, unruffled waters. The destruction that was wrought in these legendary landscaped gardens over the next few days, which made a mockery of military discipline or indeed of all reason, can only be understood as resulting from anger and the continued delay in achieving a resolution. Yet the true reason why Yuan Ming Yuan was laid waste may well have been that this earthly paradise – which immediately annihilated any notion of the Chinese as an inferior and uncivilized race – was an irresistable provocation in the eyes of soldiers who, a world away from their homeland, knew nothing but the rule of force, privation, and the abnegation of their own desires. (*The Rings of Saturn* 144f.)

Responsibility for devastation of the natural and cultural environment is, however, less easy to make out in the following passages on threats to Britain's trees and the great storm of September 1987:

Since the mid-Seventies there has been an ever more rapid decline in the numbers of trees, with heavy losses, above all amongst the species most common in England. Indeed, one tree has become well night extinct: Dutch elm disease spread from the south coast into Norfolk around 1975, and within the space of just two or three summers there were no elms left alive in the vicinity.

The six elm trees which had shaded the pond in our garden withered away in June 1978, just a few weeks after they unfolded their marvellous light green foliage for the last time. The virus spread through the root systems of entire avenues with unbelievable speed, causing capillaries to tighten and leading to the trees' dying of thirst. […] It was then also that I noticed that the crowns of ash trees were becoming sparse, and the foliage of oaks was thinning and displaying strange mutations.
[…]
Finally, in the autumn of 1987, a hurricane such as no one had ever experienced before passed over the land. According to official estimates over fourteen million mature hard-leaf trees fell victim to it, not to mention the damage to conifer plantations and bushes. That was on the night of the 16th of October.
[…]
I stood at the window and looked through the glass, which was strained almost to breaking point, down towards the end of the garden, where the crowns of the large trees in the neighbouring bishop's park were bent and streaming like aquatic plants in a deep current.
[…]
I did not believe my eyes when I looked out again and saw that where the currents of air had shortly beforehand been pouring through the black mass of trees, there was now just the paleness of the empty horizon. It seemed as if some one had pulled a curtain to one side to reveal a formless scene that bordered upon the underworld. At the very moment that I registered the unaccustomed brightness of the night over the park, I knew that everything down there had been destroyed.
[…]
In the first light of dawn, when the storm had begun to abate, I ventured out into the garden. For a long time I stood choked with emotion amidst the devastation.
[…]
With pulsating radiance the sun rose over the horizon. (264-7)

As so often in his writing, Sebald declines to explain the connections between the phenomena he describes, or to draw conclusions from the chokingly emotional scene. These threats to Britain's trees are (at least in part) unintended consequences of our increased mobility (leading to the import of diseases from other parts of the world) and industrial development (resulting in acid rain and increasingly frequent extreme weather conditions as an aspect of climate change). However, they are presented as natural rather than anthropogenic phenomena, implying there is no way of halting them, and no point in seeking to do so. And it is similarly problematic to equate, as we have seen Sebald do implicitly, silk manufacturing with the Holocaust. Or, as he did explicitly in an

interview, the Allied air raids on Germany's cities in the Second World War with the burning of forests in Borneo and the Amazon today, as instances of a universal process of combustion, a "natural history of destruction".[14]

To assume Sebald was a nihilist would, however, be mistaken. For if his works are to be judged by whether they promote reflection on our place in nature and our relationship with the natural environment, or even by whether they motivate and empower readers to action in pursuit of a more sustainable and just society, we must ask ourselves whether his apocalyptically inflected melancholy is not an aesthetic strategy designed to challenge and prokoke readers. As Riordan has pointed out, Sebald's writing is ecocentric in the sense of presenting human life interwoven in natural processes. *The Rings of Saturn* may offer little of the literary naturalism which constitutes the core of the nature writing genre, but it hints at a new model of subject constitution in its focus on the connection between biography and place. Individuals' lives are described in terms of their 'territory', as Zisselsberger observes (11). Sebald's reconstruction of life stories is inseparable from description and photographic reproduction of the places his subjects traverse. Their dislocation is mitigated (however incompletely) by a mobile and imagined form of spatial identification.

Eric Santner has argued in the same vein, but from a philosophical perspective, that Sebald's whole work should be read as an archive of 'creaturely life' and that it models an alternative form of interaction with our natural environment. The term 'creaturely life', which is taken from Heidegger via Agamben, means the 'open' realm of being enjoyed by animals, from which humans are commonly excluded by self-consciousness, but which remains the proper domain of human existence. Sebald's archival record of vestiges of 'animal-like' relations to our surroundings is linked to understanding of what it means to engage ethically with another person's history and pain, and complemented by his mode of writing. His practice of acute attentiveness to the suffering of others and his neighbourly

[14] See Denham and McCulloh 28; Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

engagement with their history constitute a different way of being to the consumptive and destructive behaviour illustrated above, one whose implications extend to our relationships with animals and nature. Sebald's writing thus suggests how we might think and handle the human condition after the discreditation of the hegemony of instrumental reason. It combines an epistemological principle of partial and fragmented remembering and knowledge with an aesthetic strategy of witnessing which derives creativity from Saturnine melancholy, preserves ironic detachment in the face of disaster, and wrests exhilaration from accounts of exile and decay.

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