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“THERE IS NO ANTIDOTE TO THE OPIUM OF TIME”: MEMORY, THE FLANEUR AND THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST IN W.G. SEBALD’S THE RINGS OF SATURN

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Abstract: A fictional account of Sebald’s journey on the coast of East Anglia, *The Rings of Saturn* can be analyzed as a “fiction of memory” (Neumann). Its primary concern is with cultural aspects of the past that have been ignored, downplayed or misinterpreted, so the narrator’s peregrinations and his subjective digressions point to larger issues of colonialism, exploitation or genocide. Memory as the human capacity for storing and retrieving the past is understood as variable, incomplete and selective – which makes it vulnerable to historical manipulation. At the same time these characteristics of memory reveal the role imagination plays in the working of memory. The theme of memory is linked to that of space and traveling and an important trope for the workings of both individual and cultural memory is the labyrinth. Photographs serve as the visual markings that order one’s way through the maze of memory as well as traces – pointing to the ramifications of the story. The figure of the narrator emerges as that of the flaneur, who, while apparently aimlessly strolling, picks up the remnants of the past in order to give a voice to the marginal, the liminal and the transitory.

The Rings of Saturn is the fictional account of Sebald’s journey on the coastal side of East Anglia. At first sight a loose collection of commentaries, digressions and reminiscences occasioned by the places visited by the narrator (an unnamed Sebald), it is foremost a fiction of memory – what Birgit Neumann calls “the literary representation of memory” or “the mimesis of memory”. In other words, the novel stages a certain representation of how memory works, and what it relates to. The concern of this paper lies primarily with the analysis of Sebald’s literary representation of cultural memory, of the media of memory and its workings.

Neumann defines “the mimesis of memory” as “the ensemble of narrative forms and aesthetic techniques through which literary texts stage and reflect the workings of memory. (...) Novels do not imitate existing versions of memory, but produce, in the act of discourse, the very past which they purport to describe” (334). *The Rings of Saturn* begins with the narrator’s acknowledgement of the causes that prompted him to write, emphasizing Neumann’s point that “the typical pattern for the literary representation of memory is retrospection or analepsis” (335):

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In August 1992 (...) I set off on a walking tour of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. (...) in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past (...) Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages. (6)

The presentiment of death, the realization that time mercilessly destroys everything crystallizes into the narrator's desire to confine all his thoughts and experiences to paper. Writing, as the medium of memory par excellence is called to assist in the work of salvaging. The reference to Saturn in the title of the novel, which may seem puzzling at first for a travelogue, now becomes clear: Saturn is the sovereign deity of time, presiding over the natural cycles of creation and destruction, remembering and forgetting.

There is a perpetual interaction between memory and forgetting, and oblivion of certain aspects of the past is necessary if one wants to look ahead to the future. Yet oblivion is seldom complete, because, as the phenomenon of the trace demonstrates, memories lie dormant in our subconscious waiting to resurface or to be willingly retrieved. This dynamic of memory and forgetting is embodied in Saturn, whose rings stand for the memory traces that never vanish completely. One of the novel's epigraphs, taken from a German encyclopedia, specifies 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 moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect." (2) The writing of the novel turns therefore into a work of salvaging the remains of the past and annihilating the destructive effects of time and oblivion.

Interweaving individual and cultural memory

In *The Rings of Saturn* personal memories interweave with literary and artistic comments on the cultural canon and with the reinterpretation/restaging of historical events. Thus, the first chapter begins with the narrator's hospital stay which triggers the memory of the death of Michael Parkinson (the epitome of the disinterested scholar living a hermit's life). The narrator also remembers Janine Dakyns, a lecturer in Romance languages as being devastated by the death of Parkinson and as the one who referred him to his surgeon. From individual memories the narrative abruptly skips to cultural figures of the past, for the surgeon suggests Sir Thomas Browne. At this point the theme of the fragility of both individual and the world, whose fate is to fall into oblivion, is introduced, in a commentary on Browne's *Hydriotaphia* or *Urn Burial*: "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. Hour upon hour is added to the sum. Time itself grows old" (21). After a lengthy discussion of this philosopher and physician from the 17th century, the narrator goes on to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* by remarking that Sir Thomas Browne, who had completed his doctorate in Leiden,

must have been present at the dissection presided over by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp and painted by Rembrandt. In contrast to most fictions of memory, which focus on the construction of identity through a dialogue between a past and a present self (Neumann 336), Sebald's novel is more concerned with cultural aspects of the past which have been neglected, forgotten or misinterpreted, so individual memories function as analogies or metaphors of those aspects, foreshadowing or mirroring a wider cultural context. The weight of the narrative falls on such historical or literary episodes which are reflected and commented upon extensively, while individual memories serve as the pretexts which occasion and allow the reinterpretation of aspects from the cultural past. Individual memory plays a seminal part in the process, as the contents of the cultural canon are retrieved by conscious personal effort, and the instrument that serves to re-interpret or re-stage past event is the narrator's imagination.

A testimony to the important role imagination plays in the recuperation of the past is the "battle of Waterloo" episode. Remembering his visit to the Maurithius in Brussels (where Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* is exhibited), the narrator also recalls the "so-called historical site of the battle of Waterloo". The visitor describes his experience along the lines of a fake authenticity:

On a sort of landscaped proscenium (...) lie life-size horses and cutdown infantrymen, hussars and chevaux legers, eyes rolling in pain or already extinguished. Their faces are moulded from wax but the boots, the leather belts, the weapons, the cuirasses and the splendidly coloured uniforms, probably stuffed with eelgrass, rags and the like, are to all appearances authentic. (83)

and an equally false point of view:

Across this horrific three-dimensional scene, on which the cold dust of time has settled, one's gaze is drawn to the horizon, to the enormous mural (...) painted (...) on the inner wall of the circus-like structure. 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 one, and still we do not know how it was. (85-6)

In "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*" Pierre Nora distinguishes polemically between memory and history, likening memory to life for its being "in constant evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" and defining history as the "representation, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (8). However, ErlI and Nunning argue that this distinction is based on the logic of binary opposition and has been largely unproductive; instead they suggest dissolving this opposition and introduce the notion of "different modes of remembering in culture" (7). Against the official/sanctioned mode of remembering great historical events like the battle of Waterloo, whose vantage point, the narrator remarks is ultimately death (the great heap of corpses over which one stands to contemplate the past) the narrator offers his own counter-way of remembering: "No clear picture emerged. Neither then nor today. Only when I had shut my eyes, I well recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a

row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters.” Yet what is the source of this image? It cannot be personal memory, as the narrator was neither a participant nor a witness in the battle. The image he recalls is drawn from a literary text: “And then I saw Fabrizio, Stendhal’s young hero, wandering about the battlefield, pale but with his eyes aglow and an unsaddled colonel getting to his feet and feeling his sergeant: I can feel nothing but the old injury in my right hand” (87). The literary image (the metonymic cannonball stands for the whole battle) is felt to be more effective than the faithful and literal representation of the battle (the coloured uniforms with the buttons). The distinction that has to be made here is that between a purely mimetic and an imaginative/ figurative representation of a historical event. Imagination, together with memory¹, is seen as playing a key role in the process of image-forming that is part of memory. In this respect, the figure of Sir Thomas Browne, evoked in the first chapter plays a key part as his writings are also concerned with the problems of memory and remembering. In a letter to his son he recommends essay-writing as a mnemotechnical device because it involves both memory and the power of invention, arguing in a Baconian fashion that knowledge is enhanced and information is better retained by exercising creativity and originality (Loffler 2-3).

The Geography of Memory

The German subtitle of *The Rings of Saturn* is *An English Pilgrimage (eine englische Wallfahrt)*, linking the theme of time and memory with that of space and traveling. At this point it should be noted that there are a few differences between the German and the English edition of Sebald’s work, such as the subtitle included in the German version, the different organization of chapters and the inclusion of further explanations in the German version, as well as the lighter and less hazy appearance of the photographs incorporated in the English edition.

Contrary to how most fictions of memory are organized (either chronologically or according to the vagaries of subjective remembering), *The Rings of Saturn* fictionalizes reminiscence as a process occurring in space, triggered by spatial landmarks and following certain routes. Travel is the means by which the narrative is sequenced and digressions are introduced. Thus each journey into past begins with the narrator’s visit to a historical site or a solitary rambling. Wandering on the deserted beaches near Lowestoft, the narrator sees the abandoned boats of the fishermen, which serve as a pretext for a long digression into the history of herring fishing. The natural history of the herring turns of course into a story of ecological catastrophe brought on by the combined effects of human greed and the objectification of Nature for purposes of conquest inherent in modern scientific ideology. After walking all the way from Lowestoft to Southwold the narrator comes across a lighthouse and sitting down on the beach, the spectral image of the naval battle at Sole Bay comes before his eyes. This battle was a turning point in the history of colonization, as it marked the decline of naval Dutch power and the

¹ The underlying connection between memory and the imaginative faculty was brought to the fore in the early modern period. Hegel is the German philosopher that first conceived of memory and imagination as complementary faculties.

beginning of the English supremacy at sea. This shift in power, the narrator remarks, had nothing to do with the resourcefulness and the capability of British administration, but was entirely due to “the vagaries of the wind and the waves that day” (65). The story of the Sole Bay naval battle is both the spatial and the narrative counterpart of the natural history of the herring as it restores agency to an overly objectified Nature. Visiting the Sailors’ Reading Room in Southwold and coming across a photographic history of the First World War he had not seen before, the narrator also happens to read an article about the war in the Balkans. The coincidence turns his thoughts towards the plight of the Serbs, cruelly tortured and massacred by the Croatian militia with the help of the Wehrmacht. A casual remark familiarizes the reader with what turns out to be a historical blunder: a young officer of the Heeresgruppe E (the intelligence division of the German army) which participated in the massacre was later appointed Secretary General of the United Nations and in this capacity, the narrator observes ironically “he spoke onto tape, for the benefit of any extraterrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II” (76).

The following story, that of Roger Casement and his trial and execution by the British government for high treason represents the counterpart to the story of the war criminal promoted to high office and turned into an exemplary human being, worthy of representing our species in front of an alien race. A British consul in Congo and later in South America, Casement’s reports to his superiors show “an unconditional partisanship for the victims” (89) of colonial rule, detailing the suffering of the “hundreds of thousands of slave labourers being worked to death every year by their white overseers” (88) as well as for the tribes that were wiped out in South America, while their land had been burned to ground. Espousing the cause of the “white Indians of Ireland” and traveling on a secret mission to Berlin where he hoped to enroll the aid of the Germans for the Irish cause, Casement is arrested and executed. In order to prevent him from becoming a martyr for the Irish, the British Authorities decided to make public excerpts from his Black Diary, a chronicle of his homosexual relations. “It was precisely Casement’s homosexuality,” the narrator concludes, “that sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of social class and race, of those who were furthest from the centers of power” (91). The stories of the war criminal turned high official and of Roger Casement are historical blunders that highlight the selectivity of collective memory and the injustice that is often a part of it. From this point of view the novel acts as a corrective to collective and cultural memory by seeing the blind spots in the process of historical recollection and trying to fill in the gaps. By choosing to focus on the marginal, the oddities, the exceptions, the author simultaneously issues a critique of the ideologies of power that have shaped modernity and post-modernity and tries to unearth the repressed histories of the marginal. McCulloh remarks that Sebald’s fascination with “the strangeness of life” springs from his affinity with Freud and in particular Freud’s notion of “the uncanny”. According to Freud, “the uncanny” is the once familiar (now repressed) which is suddenly revealed, as if the spirits of the dead return among the living. The repressed haunts consciousness, evoking the paradox

of the familiarity of the strange. Thus the revelation of long forgotten incidents repressed by collective memory becomes both a comment on the workings of memory and an attempt to liberate it from its socio-political and cultural determinations. Memory is incomplete, variable and selective – and that makes it vulnerable to historical manipulation. Sebald’s use of “the uncanny” which creates an eerie atmosphere suggests that the emphasis is placed not so much on the restoration of the past as on revealing “the bottomless pit” – the huge memory gaps on which the present is founded.

A spatial metaphor that reflects on remembering as a convoluted process is the labyrinth. Labyrinths are mentioned several times in the novel – and the narrator recounts two of his experiences of getting lost in them: first in the maze at Somerleyton, the second time on the sandy tracks at Dunwich Heath. At Somerleyton he is able to find his way out of the memory maze by “drawing a line with the heel of my boot across the white sand of every hedged passage that had proved to be a dead end” (26). This symbolic marking of dead ends that have to be bypassed in order to find the way out of the maze of history is the novel itself, with its many digressions and commentaries on the human dead end products of civilization. The second experience is more traumatic, as every attempt to come out of the maze ends with the narrator returning to the initial starting point, as it happens in several board games when the player comes across an unlucky number. The exit is found accidentally, as the narrator remembers: “suddenly I stood on a country lane, beneath a mighty oak, and the horizon was spinning all around as if I had jumped off a merry-go-round” (107). The memory of this experience comes back to him later in a dream where he sees the labyrinth as representing “a cross-section of my brain.”(107) The maze out of which there is no escape stands for Hades, and thus traveling into the past resembles a katabasis – the descent into Hades. Symbols and visual markings are an absolute necessity – and in this sense the photographs that are interspersed in the novel act as visual landmarks that break the convoluted, labyrinthine space of the novel. On another level, the act of remembering, metaphorically construed as a descent into hell throws light on the ghostly quality of the past it evokes: the narrator’s act of looking back makes this past freeze on the border between being and non-being, an apparition that is summoned out of nothingness, never to become completely real. Like Orpheus’ gaze, it is the very act of remembering, of looking back, that prevents the past from wholly emerging out of the Hell of oblivion.

The Narrator as Flaneur

Memory is a form of traveling, and as such it parallels the narrator’s labyrinthine journeys through the landmarks and sites of East Anglia. The trope of travel and pilgrimage associates itself with that of memory, making *The Rings of Saturn* a kind of space-time continuum where the narrator moves freely, in an idiosyncratic order. Because of the discontinuities that these journeys evoke the persona of the narrator resembles more what has been termed the flaneur than the pilgrim. Yet pilgrimage is an essential trope of the novel, because it reflects on the history of colonialism and destruction: in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Captain Marlow describes his journey on the river Congo as a “weary pilgrimage”

and refers to his companions as “pilgrims” (18). Conrad makes the object of a long digression in chapter 5, the same that discusses Roger Casement and the battle of Waterloo. However, there are strong points for considering the narrator a flaneur. In the first place, his mode of seemingly aimless strolling, accompanied by a constant reading of his surroundings remind the reader of Walter Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire, the modern poet, rag picker and flaneur par excellence. Concerned with the refuse of the modern capitalist city, the flaneur picks up the remnants and invests them with his personal meanings. There is a similarity between rag-picking and the narrator’s excavation of the past in order to give voice to different marginal, silenced stories.

The flaneur has been defined in a multiplicity of ways, as an idler, a stroller, a dandy, a passionate observer of life, a marginal or liminal figure – yet what all these definitions reveal, Milburn argues, is the fact that the flaneur becomes identifiable by “what he does”: “The flaneur is a conflation of a person, a metaphor, a way of seeing and a way of expressing” (2). Furthermore, Tester contends that “Flanerie is the observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the permanent and central self” (7). McCulloh argues that the peregrinating narrator which involves the reader “in an act of studied observation at every juncture” aims to “regain the immediacy of a moment on the verge of receding into the void of the past” (6-7). Consequently, the narratorial person resembles more the flaneur than the pilgrim, in his attempt to capture the liminal, the fleeting and the transitory rather than the eternal. Fragmentary glimpses of previous worlds are seen through the workings of memory – what is left of the past are only traces, and these traces are in their turn ephemeral. Again, according to Walter Benjamin (one of Sebald’s canonical figures), in the act of wandering the flaneur is more than a simple observer of life – he becomes simultaneously engaged in an “archeological” process of discovering the collective myths of modernity. Remarking on the affinities between the flaneur and the detective, Benjamin notes that “No matter what traces the flaneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (72). This holds especially true for *The Rings of Saturn*: the narrator’s journeys into space-time are conducted in an archaeological manner, by which old forgotten incidents are retrieved so as to throw light on the meta-narratives of modernity and the large-scale destruction they brought about. What Benjamin calls “forensic knowledge” aids the narrator to excavate the vestiges of forgotten crimes and incidents – and every path of the story ultimately leads to exploitation, extermination and torture, natural or man-made catastrophes.

Photographs as Traces

In Sebald’s novel memory is fictionalized both as the only means which allows us to retrieve and reinterpret the past (and attempt to correct history’s voluntary or involuntary errors) and as an extremely unreliable, labyrinthine and incomplete process which can never yield an objective truth. There is no single truth procedure that can be applied to the operations of memory. The only way out of the complex convolutions of re-membering is to trace a line along every road that leads to a deadend. The labyrinth of memory is the labyrinth of one’s brain, which, as we all know, still remains incomprehensible, even for the neurosciences. If no theory is

capable of explaining the intricacies of our brain, how can we still manage to use it? If no theory is able to explain how memory functions, why do we still rely on it? Sebald's fiction attempts to give an answer to this dilemma, or rather, his fiction becomes the embodiment of this answer. Topography is important because it functions as a trope or an analogy for the way human beings use memory. Before mapping and looking at maps became the standard procedure of dealing with topography and finding one's way, people used landmarks, objects that functioned as signs and that gave indications of one's position in space, such as a building, a tree, wall, etc. By making extensive use of photographs, visual signs that mark the space-time of the novel just as trees or buildings charter a familiar territory, the narrator suggests that memory, in spite of its unreliability, can still be effective. There is no single way of reconstructing the past, yet if one has all the building blocks and just a few instructions, a likely version will emerge.

Photographs in Sebald's novel function as traces. Ruchatz explains that photography acts as a kind of memory by itself and that it can refer to the past both as externalization and trace. They can serve to capture and preserve the present moment, saving it from oblivion and in this capacity they are externalizations, or they can act "as a reminder that triggers or guides remembering" (370) – a trace. The photographs that are interspersed in the novel are just as unreliable as memory itself – black and white, blurred, hazy, lacking captions. They do not try to immortalize the fleeting moment, but are there to point to the numerous ramifications of the story. Sebald himself referred to his photographs as "spectral images" (McCulloh xiii). They relate heavily to the text, and sometimes they point in the opposite direction – as for example in the photo of the Chinese quail, which the text describes as "demented" and "solitary", while the photo is unable to prove the first and clearly disproves the second, as we can see another quail in the background. Many of them are reproductions of famous works of art or portraits of the people discussed in the novel. Together they create a visual inventory that serves to mark the reader's way into the memory maze. From another perspective, the rows of photographs can be interpreted as an instance of the ancient art of memory, detailed by Frances Yates in her seminal work. They build a memory theatre¹ inside the novel itself, whose chapters are the rooms where the photographic objects are inserted in a certain order so as to guide remembering. However, the ancient art of memory had its roots in oral traditions that did not use writing and where information was more likely to be lost. In Sebald's work there is

¹ "The Theatre is...a building divided into memory places on which are memory images" (Yates 157). The building of an imaginary memory theatre or memory palace was a mnemonic technique, going back to antiquity and resurging in Renaissance treatises on memory. In order to remember information, one had to build an imaginary palace/ theatre and endow it with a set of images that formed a complex coded system for the retaining of information. The memory theatre technique was based on the perceived association between the image-forming capacity of the mind and memory. It is interesting to note that such techniques were part and parcel of the occult tradition of Christian Hermetism whose representative was Sir Thomas Browne, discussed at the beginning and at the end of *The Rings of Saturn*.

an excess of media which can store information – both writing and photography are forms of memory. Our contention is that the use of excessive media originates in the same concern that has given rise to memory studies: the specific contemporary concern with the fragility of human memory, the constant awareness of how much is being lost every moment which results in a kind of neurotic attempt to find more technologies of memory preservation. Pierre Nora observes in an article that “we are witnessing a world-wide upsurge in memory”, a “memorialist” trend which is grounded in a specific post-modern awareness of an acceleration of time and history (*Reasons* www.eurozine.com). As the stability and continuity of the patriarchal order was gradually eroded by the ideology of scientific rationalism and constant change became the rule of thumb, human communities felt an increasing need to develop new techniques for preserving the past. The remains of the past accumulate in ever greater amounts, due to rapid change and technological progress, and so there is a greater urgency to preserve.

One of the main concerns of Sebald as a writer is with the means of preservation. How is the past to be preserved? In writing or in artefacts? Sebald mingles both, and his early inclusion of photographs has been a hallmark of his writing. Yet he goes deeper than that. His photos are not just externalizations, pure mimesis/ representation of what happened. Photography constantly interacts with the text, they are mutually challenging and determining each other, so that the reader is forced to draw out the meaning from the intersections between the two. Pic argues that the incorporation of photographs in Sebald’s work is part of a technique of literary montage, a technique meant to emphasize the role of literature as a place that mediates between the objectivity presupposed by history and historical documents and the subjectivity of witnesses’ accounts (9).

In conclusion, since in Sebald meaning always resides in intersections, his novels can be said to inhabit a liminal space, that third space that was theorized by Homi Bhabha to be the space of negotiation and invention¹, of the encounter with the Other. A journey through space is simultaneously a journey back in time, and the landmarks that shape and define that geography serve as liminal spaces, the interstices where one can encounter the Ghosts of the Past.

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¹ An important theorist of postcolonialism, in the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argued that the formation of postcolonial identity takes place at the intersections of race, class, gender and ethnicity, in an “in-between” space where identity is constantly refashioned and negotiated.

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