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# A Melancholy Journey through Landscapes of Transience

## W. G. Sebald: *The Rings of Saturn*

Judit PIELDNER
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania)
Department of Humanities
juditpieldner@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Saturn is the planet of melancholy, about which Walter Benjamin writes: "I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays." W. G. Sebald's prose poetics seems to be driven by this motion, which is more than a simple state of being: it is a way of perceiving the world as well as a way of writing, perpetual transition, walk, halt, deviation from the road, getting lost and finding the way back. The paper reflects on W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*, 1995), a unique literary achievement deeply embedded into the history of literature, culture and the arts, which can be best construed from the direction of "the order of melancholy." On the pages of the book the reader can traverse, together with the Sebald-narrator, a route in East Anglia, with digressions in various directions of (culture) history. The journey in the concrete physical space turns into an inner journey, into a spiritual pilgrimage; the traversed locations become documents of destruction and transience. From the perspective of the order of melancholy places are determined by their relations, temporality and role in history rather than by their concrete geographic coordinates. The infinitely rich construction of the narrative creates a continuous passage between the local and the universal, the concrete locations of the journey and the scenes of world history, between the time of the journey and the (colonial) past, between East and West. The traversed historical, cultural and medial spaces displace the perception of human existence and result in the incommensurable aesthetic experience of the Sebaldian prose.[1]

**Keywords:** Sebald, journey, digression, melancholy

W. G. Sebald is the emigrant of German literature; wandering, emigration and exile constitute the main motifs of both his life and works. Similarly to the great writer models, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett or Vladimir

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Nabokov, Sebald is a perpetual wanderer, in-between languages, cultures, space coordinates, time zones and literary genres. Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald was born in Wertach, in the Bavarian Alps in 1944. He studied German and comparative literature, then he worked as a secondary school teacher in Switzerland. In 1969 he moved to Norwich in East Anglia, where he pursued his activity as a university teacher, he taught German literary history. He died in 2001 in a car accident caused by a heart attack.

His literary works, which he wrote in German, were published and became known in the 1990s and after the turn of the millenium. His essay-novels entitled *Vertigo* (2000 [1990]), *The Emigrants* (1996 [1992]), *The Rings of Saturn* (2002 [1995]), as well as *Austerlitz* (2001) are the particularly hybrid components of an oeuvre expanding inwards, which combine the generic characteristics of novel, memoir, travel journal, essay and historiography. It may be due to the "migrant" character of his work – both in terms of authorial biography and of textual reference – that W. G. Sebald's prose seems to have had a greater echo in Great Britain and in the United States than in Germany. As Mark Richard McCulloh states: "Ironically, despite numerous literary prizes in his homeland, he seems to have struck a chord with English-speaking readers to a greater extent than with his fellow Germans. Part of the reason for this is precisely his 'Europeanness' in the minds of English-speaking readers; his idiosyncratic prose has a distinctly exotic appeal" (2003, 25).

The predominant feature of his novels is the permanent oscillation between fact and fiction, presence and absence, between memoir-like documentation and imagination, between private memories and the interpersonal heritage of cultural memory. The map of emigration of Sebald's protagonists is in fact the map of Europe, modelling a geo-cultural terrain determined by the continuous confrontation between the self and the other, the private and the collective, the familiar and the foreign. Sebald's heroes seem to be lost on the map of Europe and on the map of their own identity: they desperately try to find themselves and their roots in this territory, which is but a land of foreignness, a land of incurable, open wounds that recall past traumas.

Further common thematic, narrative and stylistic features of W. G. Sebald's novels can be identified: the novels resort to first-person-narration, the (primary) narrator being/resembling the author's figure, Sebald himself, being on the road, *all'estero*, that is, abroad. Thus, the texts conform to the generic requirements of memoirs and travel journals, and employ a flowing, sophisticated, essay-like style, which moves his works towards the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. And, maybe the most interesting feature of the Sebaldian prose is that textual references are completed, counterpointed by illustrations, photos, paintings, drawings, maps, various reproductions that are systematically inserted into the body of the texts, contributing on their own to further blurring the silhouettes of fact and fiction.

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Besides the topics of wandering, emigration and exile, Sebald's other great topic is the nature of decay, the evanescence of existence of humans, animals and plants, the grand history constructed upon the infinite and recurrent patterns of mass destruction, and the topography of places and spaces – traces of pain as Sebald calls them in *Austerlitz* – that preserve the memory of the past. "Sebald is one of the great melancholic writers of the twentieth century", as Zsófia Bán writes (2007, author's translation), or "the last traumatophile," as Roger Luckhurst (2008) calls him. The locations traversed in his works become documents of destruction and transience. The moments of life are traces of decay or carry the "promise" of destruction, hence the uncanny and visionary character of the singular inscribed into the transcience-rhythm of existence. At Sebald all this is included in the span of the sentences, in the breath of the words. Ferenc Takács describes this complex tone of Sebald's prose as follows: "The emotional accompaniment, at the same time, counterpoint, of this universal catastrophism is the self-possessed despair; the quiet melancholy of hopelessness (the silent irony, what is more, humour) pervades his books, among them also *The Rings of Saturn*" (2011, author's translation). Sebald's works are essentially trauma narratives "not just because they explore the legacy of the Second World War and are imbued with this suave melancholia, but also because they hold to a model of history that coincides exactly with the idea of traumatic occlusion and the belated recovery of memory" (Lockhurst 2008, 112).

W. G. Sebald's essay novel entitled *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*, 1995) is a unique, unparalleled achievement of world literature, at the same time organically incorporated in the history of culture, of the arts and literature, which can be best construed from the direction of "the order of melancholy." Similarly to the archaeological layers formed out of open books on Janine Rosalind Dakyns Flaubert-researcher's desk, "the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended towards perfection" (Sebald 2002, 9). The predominant prose-poetical feature of Sebald's works is that a specific narrative order, infinitely rich in detail, is constructed while the very sense of order, the ideal of the possibility of scientific cognition and systematization is questioned and overwritten.

Saturn is the planet of melancholy, about which Walter Benjamin writes: "I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays" (qtd. in Sontag 2001). W. G. Sebald's prose poetics seems to be driven by this motion, which is more than a simple state of being: it is a way of perceiving the world as well as a way of writing, perpetual transition, walk, halt, deviation from the road, getting lost and finding the way back. On the pages of the book the reader can traverse, alongside the journey, the walking tour of the Sebald-narrator, a route in East Anglia, in Suffolk shire in the summer of 1992. The original German subtitle, *Eine englische Wallfahrt*

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(*An English Pilgrimage*), defines the walking tour as a pilgrimage, traditionally associated to religious visits of holy sites with the purpose of spiritual purification and initiation. At Sebald the term pilgrimage both defies and retains this basic meaning: it is definitely not a pilgrimage in the religious sense, as the wandering narrator traverses a route that mainly includes sites of past traumas, crises and catastrophes, however, the search for what is beyond the visible, beyond the material lift the physical journey into the realm of the spiritual.

The abundance of micro-narratives and digressions organically embedded into the travelogue turn the concrete physical journey into an extended reflection upon (culture) history and the totality of human existence. The book starts with the description of the narrator-protagonist's state of crisis revealing the antecedents of the journey: "in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work" (Sebald 2002, 3). However, the walking in the deserted landscape seems to deepen the suffering even more, as the narrator-protagonist gets into the hospital in a state of deep depression, and lying in his bed he can only see a small segment of the sky through the wired window of his hospital room, the photo of which (?) we can see in the book. J. J. Long draws attention to the fact that the narrator's corporeality is always pushed to the fore, in the sense that it is always some kind of breakdown and crisis that constitutes the starting point of the journey and "sets free a displaced or vertiginous mode of perception" (2007, 133). The thought of writing this book is born in this state of pain, evolving from a simple travel journal into an inner journey, a spiritual pilgrimage, and even more than that, into a universal historical reflection and visionary prose, while the description of the stages and scenes of the concrete journey is preserved throughout the text. This implies a double vision, both on the part of the reader and that of the narrator, an active gaze which perceives every detail of the surrounding environment, on the one hand, and a reflective gaze, detached from the concrete site and getting "elsewhere", into distinct spatio-temporal and culture-historical dimensions, on the other. Thus, the material world is always transcended, or better said, the traversed spaces are at once material and transcendental, real and metaphysical. As Christina Kraenzle puts it, "geographical locations become liminal spaces, gateways between the material and the unearthly" (2007, 126).

Thus, the route of the pilgrimage, albeit being very concrete, becomes floating and relative; the description of the East-Anglian spaces evoking the memory of WWII bombings turns into the topography of transcience and destruction. From the perspective of the order of melancholy places are determined by their relations, temporality and role in history rather than by their concrete geographic coordinates. It is essential that this route is traversed by the Sebald-wanderer in East-Anglia. The topos of the East carries the complex symbolism of constant degradation, crisis, abandonment and oblivion. By the time of the journey East

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Anglia, where the thriving tourist resorts used to be full of visitors, where hundreds of servants and chambermaids bustled to serve the guests of the monumental hotels, had turned into a mere ghostly memory of this dazzling past. The whole space floats as the phantom of the past, geographically in-between the British Isles and the European continent, from the point of view of colonization and the history of trade, in-between Europe and Africa, Asia and South-America, activating the "post-colonial English historical consciousness" (Luckhurst 2008, 112).

The East is transition itself, not only spatially but also temporally, associating far eastern connections, far back into the past. The various temporal patterns are folded upon one another; the boundaries of private and historical memory, of civilization and barbarism are redrawn, while the constellation of details points at the false perspective of grand history. An unbelievable amount of forgotten detail, memory, pain, suffering, destruction and death is accumulated and flows continuously in the shade of grand history.

The "ambulatory"[2] (Long 2007) character of the Sebaldian prose transporting from the journey in the concrete space into the space of reflection reveals that the larger horizons always pop up in the details, similarly to the way Flaubert, evoked at the beginning of the book, "saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains" (Sebald 2002, 8). In parallel with the journey taking place in the physical-geographical space, another route unfolds in the space of reflection, leading through English culture history, in the course of which we meet several odd figures, many emigrants, as Sebald himself, such as Sir Thomas Browne seventeenth-century doctor who, similarly to Sebald, moved to Norwich and there he wrote his hybrid works, similar to those of Sebald's, in-between science and arts, his melancholic Baroque sentences surely determining Sebald's way of writing; further on, with Edward FitzGerald, Joseph Conrad, that is Józef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowsk, Charles Algernon Swinburne or vicomte Chateaubriand. We travel through the scenes of world history, from the tyranny of medieval China, through the shameful episodes of African colonization also documented in Joseph Conrad's prose, to the plague spots and destructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The meaning of darkness is also activated in a Conradian sense: "*The white patch had become a place of darkness*" (Sebald 2002, 139). The darkness of the colonizing past haunts the spaces of the present.

We are walking in burdened places, among ruins and traces of pain, where, as Sebald says, he imagined himself "amidst the remains of our civilization after its

2 In my view, J. J. Long's term can be actually related to what Carsten Strathausen expounds on as follows: "In Sebald's universe, physical movement always brings forth and, paradoxically, results from the emotional and spiritual wanderings of his protagonists. Internal, psychological space and external, geographical space ceaselessly merge and (re)constitute each other, and his protagonists are both fleeing from one particular scene and are desperately searching for another place." (2007, 475)

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extinction in some future catastrophe" (2002, 237). The infinitely rich construction of the narrative creates a continuous passage between the local and the universal, the concrete locations of the journey and the scenes of world history, between the concrete time of the journey and the (colonial) past, between East and West. As Thomas Browne points out the same octagonal *quincunx*-pattern in the figurations of nature and art,[3] similarly the patterns of history are superimposed in an uncanny manner, in simultaneous coverage through time and space. In this total (textual) space there fold upon each other the passion of the herrings and the cultivation of silk worms, the sugar cane and art history, Doctor Tulp's anatomy lesson on Rembrandt's painting and the Cartesian heritage of European civilization.

The perspective created in the text also resembles the one that Thomas Browne writes about: as if we were using a telescope and a microscope at the same time, and the more we see, the more conscious we become of how we just grope our way in the darkness. "What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world" (Sebald 2002, 19). The order of melancholy is contoured in this distinct, complex and simultaneous seeing. The spectacle opening up in the text is always visionary, as the visible always manifests together with the invisible, the present appears in the horizon and simultaneity of the past and the future. Perception extends beyond the mere thing, the spectacle and the present moment. The spectacle reveals itself from the perspective of transience for the gaze of the melancholic, for the child of Saturn. A place, a spectacle, an occurrence carry past traces, at the same time, viewed from the future, everything becomes the document of transience.

> Next morning, the atmosphere at Schiphol airport was so strangely muted that one might have thought one was already a good way beyond this world. As if they were under sedation or moving through time stretched and expanded, the passengers wandered the halls or, standing still on the escalators, were delivered to their various destinations on high or underground. [...] Every now and then the announcers' voices, disembodied and intoning their messages like angels, would call someone's name. *Passagiers Sandberg en Stromberg naar Copenhagen. Mr. Freeman to Lagos. La señora Rodrigo, por favor*. Sooner or later the call would come for each and every one of those waiting here. (Sebald 2002, 89, emphasis in original)

3 "Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter: in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins, in the vertebrae of mammals and the backbones of birds and fish, in the skins of various species of snake, in the crosswise prints left by quadrupeds, in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies, silkworms and moths, in the root of the water fern, in the seed husks of the sunflower and the Caledonian pine, within young oak shoots or the stem of the horsetail; and in the creations of mankind, in the pyramids of Egypt and the mausoleum of Augustus as in the garden of King Solomon, which was planted with mathematical precision with pomegranate trees and white lilies" (Sebald 2002, 20–21).

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The past, the present and the future moves together up and down on the escalators, in the passengers' luggage, creating a deep sense of the uncanny.

"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 (→ Roché-limit)" – we can read the entry quoted from the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia as the third motto of the book. Ferenc Takács places this motto into the interpretive framework of the Sebaldian aesthetics of universal destruction:

> As we advance in reading, *The Rings of Saturn* turns more and more into some kind of encyclopaedia of destruction: this encyclopaedia is »Sebald«'s memory, *the* memory, as well as writing, the only means capable of creating a trace and memory of universal destruction. There is nothing else – the book suggests – to stand in the way of this indeed universal process, everything is relentlessly subjected to […] the astrophysical law, the description of which we can read in the motto placed at the beginning of the book. The so-called Roche-limit is the critical distance within which the tidal forces generated by the planet (in our case the Saturn) scrunch the moon revolving around it and the moon is destroyed: it falls into pieces and revolves around its planet as an inert ice and power ring. (Takács 2011, author's translation)

Travel is a recurrent, if not obligatory, trope of Sebald's prose in general. It does not follow prescribed itineraries but rather the rhythm of a search for something that vanishes once one attempts at touching it, the unattainable ultimate reality in the Derridean sense of infinite regress. Travel is also staged medially, in the disparity between text and image, verbal account and visual traces that never attest certainties but rather contribute to blurring the boundaries between the real and imaginary geography of the traversed – cultural, historical and mental – sites. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this multilayered travel that Sebald's books allow is the travel in the textual landscape, in the text-scape itself, capable of transforming the experience of loss and destruction into the jouissance of reading. To conclude by reconnecting to the title and to the motto, the enthralling beauty – carrying the spell of decay – of the rings of Saturn may become the signifier of the aesthetic pleasure that Sebald's reader can experience as an addiction, as the irresistible pleasure of the text.

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