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## IMPERSONAL STYLE AND THE FORM OF EXPERIENCE IN W. G. SEBALD'S *THE RINGS OF SATURN*

TORLEIF PERSSON

The prose fiction of W. G. Sebald exhibits a curious flatness. The source of this defining quality is what the narrator of *The Emigrants* calls the “wrongful trespass” of empathetic or emotional identification with the victims of historical calamity (29). The resulting narrative distance is a familiar hallmark of Sebald’s style, realized in his writing through an almost seamless intermingling of fact, fiction, allusion, and recall—a “literary monism”—that fuses different narrative temporalities, superimposes the global on the local, and assimilates a wide range of source materials and intertextual content (McCulloh 22). Two broad responses might be discerned in respect to this particular aspect of Sebald’s writing. The first questions the ethical commitment of a style that is unable to make any kind of moral distinction. The second affirms this very refusal to conform to customary moral hierarchies as a testing case for the “formal and ethical limits of inclusion” (Walkowitz 170).<sup>1</sup> In each case, the central issue at stake is the relationship between the ethics of representation and the politics of remembrance.

Here I suggest a third possibility: if we are to engage with the complex issues surrounding the ethics of Sebald’s style, it is necessary to resist—if only for a moment—the discursive vertigo so intimately associated with his work. To do this means to focus on Sebald’s narrators not only as textual mediators, but as embodied subjects of experience in the present. Sebald’s work appears flat, I argue, because of how he at once positions and undermines subjective experience as a privileged site of ethical engagement with past and present alike. In its stead, he theorizes the potential of aesthetic form to synthesize meaning from the interstitial space that exists between what we normally think of as different points of view.

In Sebald’s work, the past generally appears by means of detached intellection rather than emotional investment. It is textual rather than

experiential. Sebald is thus a tricky figure to categorize. To the extent that he is interested in forms of witness and testimony that exist outside the first-hand accounts of survivors, he might be classified as a postmemory writer.<sup>2</sup> But the fit is an uneasy one, as he is not at all concerned with a generational translation of historical trauma catalyzed by traumatic repetition. Such a model is too subject-centered for Sebald, who affirms postmemory's critical engagement with the past but rejects its affective dimension. On Sebald's view the past should not be "felt" in the present by means of some process of traumatic transference, but held at a distance as an object of melancholic contemplation.

Attending to the experiential present of Sebald's narrators means shifting from secondary or discourse-based witnessing to the subject-centered witnessing of psychoanalytically inflected literary theory. On these accounts, lived experience makes testimony possible because it constitutes the primary material from which the witness draws in telling his or her story. Yet it is the nature of such testimony that this experience—which is invariably attached to a particular "event"—cannot be fully rendered in language; that "what happened" is, on some level, unspeakable. On this view, testimony represents an impossible yet necessary act that lays bare the limits of representation and traditional forms of knowledge. It is a radically unique disclosure of existential, psychic, and moral dimensions of suffering that cannot be repeated or relayed without losing its function as testimony. Testimony, in short, is attentive to the truth of experience and to the event of its own articulation rather than the purposed objectivity of historical truth.

Of all Sebald's prose fiction, *The Rings of Saturn* appears to lend itself most readily to a methodological privileging of experience as an end-in-itself. This is because this text is closely aligned with the conventions of the travelogue, a genre whose narrative occasion is the first-person account of first-hand experience. Just as in psychoanalytic theories of witnessing and testimony, experience functions in the travelogue as a signature of an ordinary presence. The kinds of things that Sebald's narrator experiences during his walk through East Anglia do not, however, appear to be particularly traumatic. And on the surface, one would also expect the narration of this experience to be less fraught than narration revolving around the life experiences of others. But the narrator's relation to his own experience is nevertheless marked by a surprising grammar of impersonality, and the narrative does begin with a literal and figurative paralysis that the act of writing alone can begin to address. It is as if Sebald's narrator cannot, or will not, fully claim his experiences as his own. As Sharon Cameron defines it, impersonality is not the negation of the person, but "a penetration through or outside of the boundary of the human particular" (ix). Sebald's style is impersonal because it constantly de-emphasizes individual agency, and because it resists any simple subject-object relations. Feelings, when they appear, are always passive, diffuse, and lacking

in agentive power. As Sebald renders it, experience is not the emanation of a feeling and present subject.

*The Rings of Saturn* is thus structured around a tension between the presumed immediacy of the first-hand experience that provides the narrative with its ostensible occasion, and the characteristically distant quality of its narrative voice. A similar tension between immediacy and distance also constitutes a central feature of testimony as a performative act, premised as it is on both the explicit claim that “this happened to me,” and the implicit claim that “you can never really know what it was like.” Testimony, on the psychoanalytic model, *becomes* testimony only by enacting this disjunction, which at once affirms the limitation of language to fully render traumatic experience *and* the uniqueness of the witnessing subject. Sebald’s insistence on maintaining narrative distance, by contrast, forges pathways for moral attentiveness that reverse the traditional positioning of the witness as a point of singularity. Indeed, if not for this narrative disposition, it would make no sense to speak of Sebald’s narrative *as* a testimony. Part of the story has to do with Sebald’s decision to never directly address history’s “main scenes of horror,” the conventional representations of which “militate against our capacity for discursive thinking” (*The Emergence of Memory* 80). But by disaggregating experience from first-person form, Sebald also cultivates a mode of reflection that seeks to move beyond the subject as the origin of concern, even as it is also anchored in his narrators as figures of embodied uncertainty.

As such, Sebald’s prose fiction theorizes a position of witnessing that depends on experience, while at the same time insisting that this experience should be rendered through forms of critical synthesis that are neither personal nor historical. The impersonality of Sebald’s stylistic flatness is antithetical to both the rich texture of subjective experience and the causal hierarchies of historical explanation. In turning to writing, Sebald’s narrator returns to his experience not as the content of first-person syntax, but as a conduit for an idiosyncratic mode of reflection that cuts across space and time in surprising and unconventional ways. It is in the context of this disaffiliation of writing from experience, without a concomitant turn to historiography, that form emerges as an object of attention for both Sebald’s narrator and the reader of his prose fiction. It is not that experience by itself has no form. As we normally think about it, experience makes sense to us *as* experience only when filtered through a series of conceptual—or formal—categories. Ultimately, these categories simultaneously derive from and affirm the subject as the locus of experience. While trauma theory complicates such an account, it too ultimately affirms the ethical primacy of subjective experience and the experiencing subject. For Sebald, however, form comes into being when experience is made foreign to itself in the deliberate movement from immediacy to distance. The result is a structure of doubling that pervades his prose fiction and stands at the center of his narrative ethics. To think about the form of experience in

*The Rings of Saturn* therefore entails thinking about the experience of form. This dialectic stands at the very heart of Sebald's witnessing, which is less a relation between past and present or witness and event than it is a critical orientation that *produces* the imperative to bear witness as a function of the very permeability of these categories.

### **The Witness and the Event**

"Air War and Literature," the published version of a 1997 lecture series on the literary representations of the devastation suffered by Germany from Allied firebombing during the Second World War, contains Sebald's most comprehensive account of the relationship between the act of bearing witness and personal experience. In this text, Sebald begins by enumerating a number of statistical facts about the bombing (the number of bombs dropped, the number of cities attacked, the number of civilian casualties, the number of homes destroyed, the number of homeless people after the war, and so on). Each of these is introduced by the clause "it is true that," which only accentuates their ultimate incomprehensibility (3). One would expect to see such abstraction countered by the voices of those who lived through the terrors that the numbers obscure. But Sebald deems first-person reports of the destruction to be of only "qualified value" (25). Describing the survivors as "unreliable and partly blinded," he suggests that the very language of their testimonies constitutes an effort "to cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend" (25). "The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city," Sebald explains, "with all its buildings and its trees, its inhabitants, its domestic pets, its fixtures and fittings of every kind, must inevitably have led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping" (25). For these reasons, Sebald believes that individual accounts of the destruction need to be "supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals" (26).

Above all a statement about literary technique, this pronouncement is followed by a narrative description of an air raid on the city of Hamburg in the summer of 1943. At first, the narration occupies an aerial point of view, looking down on the city to take in the scale of the conflagration and destruction below, which made "the whole airspace... a sea of flames as far as the eye could see" a mere fifteen minutes after the first bombs had been released (26). We learn, for instance, that "ten thousand tons of high-explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped," that the smoke from the ensuing fire rose "to a height of eight thousand meters, where it spread like a vast, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus cloud," and that the bomber crews could feel "the wavering heat" of the inferno raging underneath them through the sides of their planes (27). Then the narration descends onto the streets, where we witness the destruction wrought by the bombs from the perspective of a city engulfed in flames, and from its scorching remains in the days and weeks following the raid. The passage

ends with a description of how some victims had been “so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat... that the remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket” (28).

Critics working on this passage have emphasized its oscillation between different points of view and sources of information, spliced together in Sebald’s vignette to form a “synoptic” view that is nevertheless “artificial” because it is unavailable to direct experience by any one subject. “Even while it is ultimately incomplete,” Samuel Todd Presner argues, this splicing “offers a ‘synoptic view’ (and there may be many synoptic views) of the totality of the destruction through the multiplicity and simultaneity of its many contingent perspectives” (356). The ideal witness of catastrophe for Sebald is therefore not necessarily the insider who lived through the event, but the conscientious outsider who can combine and construct a multiplicity of views, scales, and discourses around it (contrasting, for instance, a detached description of the military destruction of an entire city with the domestic image of “a single laundry basket”).

The “synoptic and artificial” thus names the consciousness of a critical limitation, as well as an aspiration to move beyond the limits of both direct experience and conventional historiography. The pivot of this aspiration is the relation between literary representation and what Sebald in “Air War and Literature” refers to as “total destruction” (46). But *The Rings of Saturn* is invested in forms of destruction that operate on much vaster timescales than the single night of destruction chronicled in the Operation Gomorrah passage. Here, and elsewhere in Sebald’s artistic practice, historical processes never crystallize into privileged sites of witnessing. From this perspective, destruction is not so much a state to be described or experienced as it is a process that is folded into the very fabric of existence, and so into the very form of the narrative itself.

To look at *The Rings of Saturn* as a text of witnessing thus means taking seriously the relation between the narrator’s impressions of the East Anglian landscapes he traverses and the discursive mode in which they are subsequently rendered. Normally, one would assume these two components to be related to each other through description. But the fact is that the narrative pays a relatively small amount of attention to the texture of actually being in a specific place at a specific time. Sebald achieves this by constantly yielding the narrative present of the foot journey to various temporally and spatially disaggregated trails of association. In contrast to the richness of the past, descriptions of the present appear merely as melancholic or poignant punch lines. The former can be seen, for instance, in the way the narrator moves from a description of a narrow iron bridge that crosses the river Blyth to an extended meditation on the internal politics of China in the context of European imperialism—all made possible by the historically spurious claim that a train that once crossed this bridge had originally been built for the emperor of China. The latter appears in phrases such as “Somerleyton strikes the visitor of today no longer as an oriental palace

in a fairy tale,” following an extended description of Somerleyton Hall during the days of industrialist Morton Pesto; “Nowadays, in some of the streets almost every house is up for sale,” following a description of the once-bustling Lowestoft; or “Today there is next to no traffic on the river, which is largely silted up,” following the description and a photo of the Blyth bridge (35, 42, 137).

We can discern here two narrative logics at odds with each other: the implied linearity and embodied basis of the narrator’s journey by foot, and its subsequent fragmentation by the digressive logic of the narration. Spliced together to form a “synoptic and artificial” whole, it is not ultimately possible to separate these two modes. But the tension between them stands—like the tension between immediacy and distance—at the center of Sebald’s narrative. In particular, it generates the perspective that allows for the narrator’s attunement to the “traces of destruction” that he encounters during his walk, and to which he bears witness both in and through his narrative (3).

### Writing and Walking

For a text that ostensibly centers on retracing its narrator’s movement, it is striking that Sebald’s narrator begins *The Rings of Saturn* by describing how, a year after his walk, he was hospitalized on account of being in a “state of almost total immobility” (3). Having begun with the declarative statement “In August of 1992...I set off to walk the county of Suffolk,” the narrative thus posits and withdraws, in short succession, the possibility of a straightforward account of the walk (3). Speculating that this state of paralysis might be connected to the “paralyzing horror” that he had felt during his journey, and with which he had been preoccupied since, the narrator continues:

It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages. I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window. (3-4)

In this scene, the narrator’s physical incapacity and the static view of the “patch of sky framed in the window” call attention to embodied perception. Accompanying this pronouncement is a black-and-white photo of what the reader can only presume to be this same vista, thus reproducing the “colourless” quality that the narrator describes in such a way as to make it unclear whether he is not in fact referring to the printed photo itself. Through this photo, the reader is asked to contemplate this “patch” of printed matter as representing the total sum of the narrator’s experiences from his walk the previous year. But perhaps “representing” is the wrong word: as indicated by the word “Indeed,” it seems instead that the narrator feels that the phenomenological quality of the

“patch” confirms his sense that “the Suffolk expanses...had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot.” The patch of sky in the window and the shrunken Suffolk landscape form a temporal palimpsest. Neither experience has obvious priority.

It is important that it is now, in this moment of physical and intellectual crisis, that the narrator begins in his “thoughts to write these pages.” This co-occurrence asks us to read the narrator’s subsequent descriptions of Suffolk as a disaggregation of what appears to admit no particularity, no differentiation. The dilation of this unfeeling spot, lacking both temporal and spatial extension, becomes the therapeutic project of the narrative to come, making writing the effort to remobilize, through the stylistic mobility of the “synoptic and artificial,” what appears here as static. This moment represents, for this reason, a similar “paralysis of the capacity to think and feel” that Sebald speaks of in relation to the survivors of the firebombing of Germany. Framed in these terms, the narrator’s project in *The Rings of Saturn* becomes a question of finding a form that will allow for the representation of his experiences from his walk, which appear here, early in the text, as a traumatic imprint pulsating inside his mind.

In the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s narrator frames his walk as a means of “dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work” (3). This hope is at least partially realized, for the narrator proceeds to note that he had “seldom felt so carefree as I did then” (3). This feeling of “unaccustomed freedom,” however, is intermingled in the narrator’s mind with a feeling of “paralysing horror” that he claims to have experienced “at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” (3). The experience of East Anglia as “remote” enables the suspension of these two feelings, which are then not so much opposed to each other as they are mutually implicated: the “unaccustomed freedom” consists, in fact, in the experience of “paralysing horror.” But it also constitutes a figure for the narrative distance that is deployed even when one might not expect this to be necessary. The same narrative impetus that animates Sebald’s resistance to writing as an appropriative gesture in relation to the lives and experiences of others thus also operates in relation to what are ostensibly the life and experiences of his own (quasi-autobiographical) narrator.

Actual descriptions of scenes from the narrator’s walk are, as I have mentioned, few and far between. When they do appear, they assume a peculiarly diffuse quality. Instead of experiential particularity, we get its systematic effacement. In his description of the fishermen that he sees in their “tent-like shelters made of pole and cordage, sailcloth and oilskin” (51) along the beach some miles south of Lowestoft, for instance, the narrator does not include any details that he might himself have experienced as he walked past on that particular day. He turns instead to a mode of narration-by-abstraction



that belies the specificity of his own first-person experience, which becomes transformed into the occasion for a sociological reading of the scene. We are told that “their number almost always remains more or less the same,” that “today it is almost impossible to catch anything fishing from the beach,” and that “[h]ere and there one comes across abandoned boats that are falling apart, and the cables with which they were once hauled ashore are rusting in the salt air” (52-53).

The narration in this passage hovers over the scene it describes as a detached and disembodied viewpoint that distends both time and space in order to observe general patterns rather than specific details. Instances of these patterns can be seen “at any time of the day or night and at any time of the year” (51). But the apprehension of the pattern *as* a pattern requires a view of the scene that is not tied to any specific time. And the scene does, indeed, have an air of timelessness to it: the number of fishermen “remain the same” as if in defiance of the fact that there are no longer any fish to be caught—and while individual fishermen do not register for the narrator, he speculates that their collective motivation resides not so much in the activity of fishing as in the existential desire to “be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness” (52). As the only constant in a section that otherwise outlines the diminishing fortunes of the fishing industry as a whole, and the genetic mutation of fish from upstream pollution, the recalcitrant presence of the fishermen appears to Sebald’s narrator as a beacon of quiet resistance to the slow process of destruction that surrounds them.

This sense of resistance is, however, located less in the scene itself than in the narrator’s “synoptic and artificial” relationship to it, which transcends the unique perspective of the walker. The central emblem for Sebald’s skepticism towards inhabiting the experiential reality of the individual subject can be seen in the pronoun “one,” which is a recurring feature in *The Rings of Saturn*. “From the footpath that runs along the grassy dunes and low cliffs one can see,” writes the narrator as he segues into his description of the Lowestoft beach, again emphasizing his synthetic relationship to the materials that constitute his narrative (51). Another example of the transition from particularized experience as the point of origin for description to the more impersonal quality of the indefinite pronoun comes a bit later in the narrative, when the narrator finds himself at “Benacre Broad, a lake of brackish water...halfway between Lowestoft and Southwold” (59). Beginning by noting how the “deciduous woodland” that encircles the lake is “now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea,” Sebald’s narrator reflects that it is “[d]oubtless... only a matter of time before one stormy night the shingle bank is broken, and the appearance of the entire area changes” (59). It is once more impossible for the narrator to fully inhabit the scene as it appears in front of him, as his perception is always qualified by a consciousness of the destruction, past and future, that is everywhere present to him.

The sentence that follows these reflections seems to shift the narrative focal point. “But that day,” the narrator continues, “as I sat on the tranquil shore, it was possible to believe one was gazing into eternity” (59). Here, it seems at first as if the pronoun “I,” the temporal location of “that day,” and the spatial location of “the tranquil shore” hold out the promise of an embodied and particularized perspective on Benacre Broad. But the sentence’s second half does not follow through. We are not told that the narrator believed *himself* to be “gazing into eternity.” Instead, the pronoun “one” generalizes, once more, what now appears as a conditional—“it was possible” followed by the infinitive “to believe”—rather than first-person description of embodied affect and cognition. We begin, thus, with the subject, but we end in a more tentative third-person perspective that imposes distance between the narration and its presumed basis in experience, marked as it is by the temporal finitude of mortal existence.

This tenuous perception of “eternity” stands in contrast to the actual precarity of the environment that surrounds the narrator. But it is also tied to a sense of absolute stillness that functions as a narrative counterpoint to the destruction ascribed to the imagined “stormy night.” “The veils of mist that drifted inland that morning had cleared,” the narrator observes, “the vault of the sky was empty and blue, not the slightest breeze was stirring, the trees looked painted, and not a single bird flew across the velvet-brown water” (59). Because of these circumstances, the world appears to the narrator “as if . . . under a bell jar”—an image that in *The Rings of Saturn* recalls the narrator’s research into the whereabouts of Thomas Browne’s skull, which by the circuitous workings of history was at one point put on display in a hospital museum, “under a bell jar” and among other “anatomical curiosities,” before being committed again to the earth in 1921 (59, 11). The third-person perspective that makes possible the apprehension of this eternity provides access to a form of experience that is at once aesthetic and pseudoscientific, connecting an ephemeral moment of transcendent calmness with the certainty of death and decay.

The imposition of distance through form (“the trees looked painted”) separates the narrator from his experiences throughout most of *The Rings of Saturn*, as if his writing self is peering back at the curious specimen of his walking self from the outside of that bell jar—which is to say, from the outside of his own metaphor. This form of impersonal distance is contrasted, however, with moments where some external event produces a flash of absolute clarity. The most important such moment occurs when the narrator visits Orfordness, a shingle spit containing both a fragile natural environment and the remnants of a long-abandoned Cold War military research installation that is still not present on any maps of the area. Passing through this “undiscovered country,” the narrator feels at once “utterly liberated and deeply despondent” (234). The source of this affective complexity is again the narrator’s sense that the two emotional reactions are inextricably tied to one another. “I had not a

single thought in my head,” he continues serenely, in a moment that stands in stark contrast to the frenetic mental activity that normally overwhelms him (234). Earlier in the narrative, for instance, the narrator becomes lost not only on Dunwich Heath, but also “in the thoughts that went around in my head incessantly” (171). Though it produces the opposite effect, a similar mirroring of environment and subject occurs at Orfordness, where with each step he takes, “the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound” (234).

This description of the narrator’s mental state as he walks across the Orfordness spit is then cited as a potential reason for why he becomes “frightened almost to death” when a hare emerges from the grass (234). “It must have been cowering there as I approached,” the narrator continues,

heart pounding as it waited, until it was almost too late to get away with its life. In that very fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (234-35)

The narrator’s attention to the singularity of this moment is almost unprecedented in *The Rings of Saturn*.<sup>9</sup> Here, the pronoun “I” anchors the narrator’s voice to the moment that he describes, and he claims to remember the sequence with “undiminished clarity.” “I still see,” the narrator begins. But in the very next sentence, the qualifying “still” falls away. “I see,” he continues, as if the moment is still unfolding, not in his memory, but before his very eyes. The passage’s insistence on clarity thus goes far beyond memory. It also invokes a mode of hyper-perception, recorded most clearly in the narrator’s assertion that he is, and was, aware of “every individual blade of grass.” Giving rise to this overwhelming and persisting surfeit of detail is the narrator’s sense that the hare’s fear “cut right through me” in that “fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight.” The intersection between this “fraction” and the “tremulous instant” that the narrator describes is produced by his sense that the hare’s anthropomorphized terror is also his own—or, perhaps, his terror imposed upon the hare. The narrator’s description of the “cowering” hare as waiting “until it was almost too late to get away with its life” suggests as much, as it makes it seem as if it was actually in danger. In the moment when the hare looks back and meets the gaze of the narrator, the narrator then sees a reflection of himself, and becomes “one with it”—which is to say, joined in a union that is simultaneously “strangely divided.” And the narrator himself is divided, between the impersonality of the “empty” third person, and the presumed immediacy of the first.

### Form and Witnessing

At the end of “Air War and Literature,” Sebald invokes the “horrified fixity” of the gaze of Benjamin’s angel of history (67). Benjamin’s angel has also become a familiar model for understanding the aesthetic project of *The Rings of Saturn*, which appears to provide literary form to Benjamin’s quasi-poetical image of the past as wreckage. There is little need to linger further on this comparison here, except to note that it helps us to understand Sebald’s approach to destruction as a diffuse presence that subtends any of its supposedly delimitable instances. As the occasion of his narrative, the foot walk is similarly dispersed by the narrator’s descriptions of his own experiential present, whether during the walk itself, or later, at the time of writing. The present, as it is perceived by Sebald’s narrator, is permeable.

This is why spatial and temporal distinctions seem to collapse so often throughout *The Rings of Saturn*. The narrator’s description of his visit to Somerleyton Hall emblemizes this process. Here too, the narration takes on the peculiar distance that I have discussed: “There are indeed moments,” Sebald’s narrator writes,

as one passes through the rooms open to the public at Somerleyton, when one is not quite sure whether one is in a country house in Suffolk or some kind of no-man’s-land, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean or in the heart of the dark continent. Nor can one readily say which decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist. (36)

While the history behind this agglomeration of historical and geo-political locations is made possible primarily by the spoils of the long and violent history of British colonialism, Sebald does not organize these disparate elements into anything resembling a historical narrative. Instead, he finds the ensuing bricolage strangely comforting. “How uninviting Somerleyton must have been,” he reflects, “when everything... was brand new, matching in every detail, and in unremittingly good taste. And how fine a place the house seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion” (36). As indicated by the shift from the “must have been” of the imagined past to the “seemed to me now” of the experiential present, the present is again characterized primarily in terms of tentativeness, with the narrator acquiring some semblance of traditional self-possession (the “me” is circuted through the earlier “one”) only at “the brink of dissolution”—the dissolution, that is, not only of history itself, but also of the unquestioned possibility of the liberal, self-determining, subject.

This sequence at Somerleyton Hall highlights the narrator’s fundamental openness to perceiving the present through the past, the global through the local, and the center through the periphery. It is one thing, however, to pronounce the collapse of time and space in declarative sentences, referring to some mental state or other. It is quite another to render such openness formally.

An exemplary moment of the latter occurs when the narrator, after having left Benacre Broad, comes across a couple having sex on the beach. As he approaches, he sees at first only an “odd, pallid colour move on the shoreline” (68). Surprised and “overcome by a sudden panic,” he crouches down to avoid detection before peering over the edge of the cliff he is standing on (68). The narrator describes what he sees as follows:

A couple lay down there, in the bottom of the pit, as I thought: a man stretched full length over another body of which nothing was visible but the legs, spread and angled. In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man’s feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusc washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils. (68)

Here we discern first the cognitive work of anticipation and recognition: the narrator sees—almost intuitively—a man and a woman engaged in intercourse. Yet the narrator never acknowledges this in any direct way, turning instead to the literally dehumanizing description of the couple as “some great mollusc washed ashore.” The description of the man’s twitching feet “like those of one just hanged” turns the final moments of copulation into an image of cadaveric spasm, occurring to the narrator in a “startled moment...which lasted an eternity.” Even this moment, however, soon recedes into the past, as eternity is undercut once again by an imposing now: “Filled with consternation” after his encounter, the narrator soon finds himself unable to say “whether I had really seen the pale sea monster at the foot of the Covehithe cliffs or whether I had imagined it” (69). The crux, of course, is the fact that the narrator *did* imagine this “pale...monster,” and that it is, in fact, precisely the image of the “two-headed monster” as “the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils” that makes possible the scene’s intermingling of mythical past and apocalyptic future.

Whether in the superimposition of monstrous form on the couple on the beach, or in the perception of “a human expression” on the face of the hare, form reveals itself in Sebald in moments of doubling, like those “ghosts of repetition” that the narrator claims haunt us all, and like the act of writing itself, doubling back in a “synoptic and artificial” mode on that “insensate spot” with which the narrative begins, and on which there can be only one embodied perspective (187). The pronoun “one,” in particular, does not locate experience within a specific feeling subject as much as it treats it as a generalized possibility. Yet, in each of these cases, form does not fully eradicate that upon which it is superimposed; a trace remains. The couple is not, after all, a “singular being,” and so the referential logic of this particular

figuration would appear to misfire. This is not to say that the narrator did not *experience* the couple as such. It is to say, however, that it is the moment of “consternation” that follows that stands at the heart of Sebald’s poetics. Like the experience of “strange division” with the hare, this moment unsettles form itself. An unsettling trace of the “I” similarly persists throughout the text, formed by the very distance imposed by Sebald’s pronominal grammar. Naming a process of narrative displacement, it can never figure at the center of the narrative, nor guarantee its integrity. For such integrity, such a total view, is unavailable to Sebald’s narrator, as even his relation to his own experience is emphatically provisional.

In this way, Sebald makes it possible for his reader to adopt the same relation to his prose fiction that his narrator does to Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson*, a painting that depicts the dissection of one Aris Kindt in front of the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons. Because the surgeons in this painting are looking past the body on the operating table, their “Cartesian” gaze fixed instead “on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being,” the narrator questions “whether anyone ever really saw that body” (13, 17). In the famous reading of the painting that follows, the narrator proceeds to direct the reader’s attention to how “the much-admired verisimilitude of Rembrandt’s picture proves on closer examination to be more apparent than real” (16). Focusing specifically on the “grotesquely out of proportion” hand that is being dissected in the painting, the narrator notes that the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left hand, are in fact those of the right. We are faced, the narrator concludes, “with...a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas, evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true-to-life painting (if one may so express it) into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made” (16-17). Refusing to believe that this seeming misrepresentation is merely “a flaw in the composition,” the narrator argues that the “unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt,” and that it is “with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies” (17).

Rembrandt thus turns his compromised position around, transforming his art into a form of subversive witnessing. If we today stand before this painting, the narrator notes, we are standing precisely where those present at the dissection would have stood, believing that we see what “they saw then” (13). But as the transposed hand indicates, this is not the case. Mimesis turns out to be a ruse, undermined in the very act of representing the body; no one who was there could have seen what Rembrandt sees, and no one who was there could then see what the narrator sees in Rembrandt’s painting. Sebald’s point is not the familiar one that representation is suspicious in itself. For the scene stages a dialectic between the disembodied gaze of the

surgeons, filtered through the anatomical atlas as an end-in-itself, and the re-embodiment gaze of the painter, filtered through the critical consciousness of the narrator. Together, artist and narrator restore dignity to the body. While the painting appears at first sight to depict the scientific rationale behind the incision, it portrays in fact the violence of the atlas itself, which is, as it were, entirely abstract and impersonal. Rembrandt's misrepresentation, once our attention has been drawn to it, reverses the logic of erasure by which science instrumentalizes the body. The artist alone "sees that greenish annihilated body, and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man's eyes" (17). But to attend to these details of the painting, the viewer must avert her gaze from the grotesquely exposed tendons which indelibly claim our attention—the "event," so to speak, of the painting. This spell can be broken only by the trace of form that builds into the apprehension of this "otherwise true-to-life painting" the processes by which the body is mediated or assimilated by modern science, inscribed by Rembrandt (or so the narrator claims) at the very site of bodily violation.

For Sebald's narrator, Rembrandt's painting is structured around two competing imperatives: first, the realist imperative for mimetic absorption; and second, the ethical imperative to subvert, in an allegorical mode, the very world that is thereby represented.<sup>10</sup> Aesthetic form undergirds both these ambitions. In the former, form is imagined as that which falls away in the service of producing a sense of unmediated presence. The central example in the narrative of this process can be found in the narrator's reflections on the Waterloo Panorama, which in its claim to historical immersion contains no splicing of perspective, seeking instead to fully absorb its viewer in an illusion of seamless totality. In the latter, form is experienced as a rupture in the insidious fiction of such coherence, which occludes more than it reveals about the past. This form is not self-indulgent or gratuitous—what Sebald in "Air War and Literature" calls "linguistic fretwork" (58). Instead, it is form as it emerges in Rembrandt's "synoptic and artificial" view, which supplements what appears at first to be simply the limited perspective of an embodied spectator. In the compositional logic of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald arrives at his discussion of *The Anatomy Lesson* by means of a series of reflections on the life of Thomas Browne, whom he speculates might have been "among the onlookers in the anatomy theatre in Amsterdam" (17). We do not, however, know from what angle Browne saw the proceedings (if he did), nor do we know "what he might have seen" (17). In Sebald's historical conjecture, Browne does not become a surrogate subject, but a contingent point of connection.

For Sebald, the work of art emerges in the interplay between imaginative immersion and its foreclosure. In this respect, *The Anatomy Lesson* might be characterized in terms of the tension it stages between the incision that constitutes its ostensible subject matter, and Rembrandt's *formal* "incision" into the representational fabric of the scene his painting depicts. In fact, the

moment in which Rembrandt makes his presence as an artist known is the moment his art diverges from what can be known by reference to experience alone. Outside the enabling fiction of mimetic representation, form now appears as an object of experience in itself. Most important here is the moment of doubling that makes possible the transition between these two “views,” dramatized by Sebald’s narrator in his description of the painting. We have looked at a number of moments in which similar doublings occur in *The Rings of Saturn*, emerging from the “synoptic and artificial” narrative process that Sebald deploys to supplement individual experience. They appear in Sebald’s engagement with point of view, and with the production and embedding of positions that make possible the witnessing of the destruction that everywhere surrounds the narrator. By necessity, instances of such imposed form are not only partial and unstable; they also constitute “traces of destruction” in themselves, just like the incisions in Rembrandt’s painting. These traces are present even in those equivalences that suggest the absence of the normative hierarchies by which we normally judge “the murder of the Jews” to be categorically distinct from “industrial trawling for herring,” to invoke what is surely *The Rings of Saturn*’s most famous instance of ethical flatness (Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity* 144). For what appears here as the absence of form is, as a deliberate rhetorical staging of narrative material, form nonetheless. The issue, as always—and this is the implicit problem in the critical debate around this particular aspect of Sebald’s text—is whether form *constitutes* that violence, or whether it *reveals* it. Rembrandt’s painting suggests that the answer may well be both.

Sebald engages with the ethics of testimony, then, by dramatizing an oscillation between personal and impersonal points of view. Katrin Kohl has argued that Sebald’s “narrative stance...dispels any notion of the person who was not there being able to act as witness” (99). My position is different. To be sure, my focus on direct experience in *The Rings of Saturn* hardly amounts to a return to direct testimony. Sebald’s narrative voice is too distended and disembodied for that. But neither does it map very well onto theories of postmemory, as the narrative does not move from a discursive exploration of the past to an affective affirmation of personal significance. Instead, Sebald unfolds a testimonial form that originates at once in the subject *and* in the discursive space normally associated with postmemory, each layered on the other until there is no longer any meaningful distinction between the two. The narrative bears witness to a new dynamic of witnessing where the goal is not to recover “how it was” or to assess “what it means.” Through his prose fiction, Sebald sets in motion an open-ended process defined neither by fact nor feeling, but by contingency and uncertainty. Sebald’s language of doubling—the superimposition of form in its various temporalities, the slippage between the “one” and the “I,” the complex interrelation between writing and experience—does not deny the person as much as it formally



penetrates it. The question of how to relate ethically to the past, and how to testify to its injustices, becomes a question of how one relates to the present. This relation can only be specified critically at the moment style defamiliarizes habitual modes of comprehension, and thus appears *as form*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Bewes's claim that Sebald's style resists "exemplarity," which is to say the logic of relation that ascribes significance to the particular through a "normative connection" to some larger category that it represents, constitutes another example of this kind of argument (3). See also J. J. Long's description of *The Rings of Saturn* as fundamentally structured by a quintessentially modern "principle of equivalence" (*Image, Archive, Modernity* 144).

<sup>2</sup> The term postmemory is strongly associated with the work of Marianne Hirsch. Its critical cognates include the "secondary" or the "intellectual" witness. In its earliest incarnations, postmemory referred specifically to the passing down of memories within the unit of the family. Hirsch later expanded the concept to include forms of remembrance that draw on cultural and historical materials more generally. For a summary of the trajectory of Hirsch's work on this concept, as well as an argument against its expansion to include authors such as Sebald, see Kathy Behrendt.

<sup>3</sup> Foundational to this tradition is Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony* and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*. For two recent assessments of this work, and the work of others under the same general paradigm, see Michal Givoni and Joshua Pederson.

<sup>4</sup> In drawing this connection I do not mean to suggest that we should think of Sebald's narrators alongside the witness-survivors that stand at the center of this approach to witnessing. Sebald's engagement with the relationship between form and experience is, however, informed by some of the problems originally formulated by psychoanalytic theorization of witnessing. Writing about Belgian Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, Sebald rehearses the familiar position that personal experience provides a conduit for knowledge that would be otherwise inaccessible to us. But Sebald complicates the status of this experience when he argues that the most powerful aspect of Améry's testimony revolves around its transformation, at the moment of articulation, into a more abstract register of political and philosophical reflection. In his description of his torture at the hands of the Nazis, for instance, Améry emphasizes "the monumental madness of the procedure inflicted on him rather than the emotional aspect of his suffering" ("Against the Irreversible" 151). A similar dynamic between experience and reflection is visible in Sebald's own writing, even if it emerges from a very different set of material circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> While this is true in all of Sebald's prose fiction, it is only *The Rings of Saturn* that exclusively offers a journey as the narrative's point of departure. Many critics have written about Sebald's relationship to this generic form. See, for instance, Long's reflections on Sebald's engagement with the distinction between traveler and tourist ("W. G. Sebald: The Anti-Tourist?"); Christian Moser's positioning of Sebald as rewriting the Romantic and Enlightenment tradition of the literary walk; Bianca Theisen's helpful contextualization of Sebald in relationship to the eighteenth-century shift from object-oriented to subject-oriented travel narratives; and John Zilcosky's argument that Sebald reverses what he takes as the travelogue's master trope of getting lost and finding one's way. For an argument that ties the travel narrative to the historical emergence of witnessing as a discourse about first-person experiential knowledge, see Andrea Frisch.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, "Air War and Literature" rests in part on a conflation between an alleged moral failing, on the part of postwar German society, to adequately face up to the devastation of its own cities, or what Sebald calls "the tacit agreement... that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described," and the epistemological problem of how to process experiences that are constitutionally "beyond our ability to comprehend" (10, 25).

For a good overview of this conflation, as well as an assessment of Sebald's contentious claims about postwar German culture, see Wilfried Wilms. For related reflections on Sebald's tendency to describe the firebombing of Germany in language usually associated with the Holocaust, see Ruth Franklin.

<sup>7</sup> While I would resist the "totality" invoked by Presner here, I think his description is generally correct. For similar takes on this passage, see Richard Crownshaw and Julia Hell.

<sup>8</sup> Jo Catling makes this point when she argues that Sebald's "most vividly evoked landscapes often seem to occur in dreams or imagination, or recollections or representations, rather than as descriptions of the actual place the narrator happens to be at a given time" (28-29). A similar sentiment animates Massimo Leone's claim that "Sebald's travelogues almost immediately plunge into a sort of day-dream" (96), as well as David Darby's emphasis on Sebald's construction of space through "the making of...landscape in the imagination" (266).

<sup>9</sup> The only other moment like this occurs when a flash of lightning imprints on the narrator's mind the impression of a "solitary mallard...with such perfect quality that I can still see every individual willow leaf..." (88-89).

<sup>10</sup> Although an in-depth discussion of Sebald's visual practice is outside the scope of this article, a short remark is in order. Lise Patt argues that the inserted visual material in *The Rings of Saturn* "teeters close to the null point of indexicality" (47). As such, their function in the narrative is akin to the transposed hand in Rembrandt's painting. "Instead of seeing a predictable, easy (and maybe even desired) effect of reality that would have us step into the photograph's center," Patt writes, "we are constantly reminded of the various effects of photography...that can result in an altered photographic print" (48).

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