I, Michael D. Hutchins, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Germanic Languages & Literature.

It is entitled:
Tikkun: W.G. Sebald's Melancholy Messianism

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Tikkun: W.G. Sebald’s Melancholy Messianism

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Abstract

Shortly before his death in 2001, W.G. Sebald made what amounts to a mission statement for his literary endeavors under the title “Ein Versuch der Restitution” (An Attempt at Restitution). In this brief address, Sebald maintains that his work can be seen as an attempt to make amends for a history of catastrophe. I argue in this dissertation that Sebald’s self-appointed and self-proclaimed mission of mending history’s tragedies corresponds to a view of the modern world as broken and needing redemption that Sebald adopted as he read Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment). Sebald came to see the modern world as broken by instrumental reason and in need of redemption. He rejected, however, the strategies others had adopted to realize a better world. Sebald remained estranged from organized religion, eschewed the kinds of political engagement adopted by his contemporaries, and ultimately even refused Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s own solution, the application of supposedly ‘healthy’ reason to counteract instrumental reason. What was left to him was the creation of an idiosyncratic “literature of restitution” which relied on willed association rather than on the discovery of causal relationships to structure the episodic narratives he collected and to reclaim individual histories from the anonymity of a history of calamity. This vision of a redemptive function for literature grew out of one of his early academic fascinations: the German-Jewish messianic discourse, particularly as it found expression in the work of Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem and Franz Kafka. I will argue that Sebald’s concept of the messiah, developed in his scholarly pursuits, played itself out in his imaginative literature as the adopting of a melancholic register. The paradoxical sensibility of hopeful despondency characterized a number of German-Jewish thinkers in the first
quarter of the 20th century, all of whom informed, to one degree or another, Sebald’s understanding of what constituted an ethical response to the disasters of human history. Sebald’s goal in invoking this melancholia is to point toward a need for an as-yet impossible solution to ongoing human crimes (both against other humans and nature). The Hebrew term Tikkun—roughly translated as “mending the world”—to which Sebald refers in his early writing, represents the mission of the messiah; but this mission, rooted in the ancient world, is no longer as clear-cut and plausible in the wake of modernity and the seeming irrelevance of metaphysics. Melancholia is then both a signpost pointing to the need for redemption as well as a dirge born of the recognition that redemption has never seemed so unattainable.
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List of Abbreviations

Parenthetical references cite the German edition followed by it English counterpart: (AG 61 / E 40). Where English and German editions are denoted by a single abbreviation (Austerlitz, Campo Santo, Die Ringe des Saturn, and Unerzählt) citation will reference the German edition first, followed by the English: (A 19 / 11).


(MZ) Der Mythus der Zerstörung im Werk Döblins. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1980


To ease reading for Sebald’s English-speaking audience, I have included English translations in parenthesis for all quoted primary and secondary literature. These have been taken from official translations wherever possible. Where no authorized translation is available, I have supplied my own rendering.
“In hassidic tales which gave the messianic figure perhaps its most vivid expression one encounters the unknown wanderer—his insignia the knapsack and the walking stick traversing the country or sitting in wayside inns uttering truth upon truth.”

—W. G. Sebald, “The Law of Ignominy”
Introduction: Encountering W. G. Sebald

When I arrived at the University of Cincinnati in the fall of 2004 to begin graduate work, the literary career of Winfried Georg “Max” Sebald\(^1\) had already blossomed to maturity, attracted an international readership, and suddenly been cut short by his death in 2001. I was not afforded the opportunity to experience Sebald’s story while it was being lived, nor was I able to read his work as it was initially published. I first encountered Sebald not by going to a bookstore, but by borrowing a well-read copy of Die Ringe des Saturn from the university library, and discussing it in the Seminarraum under the mentorship of Dr. Sara Friedrichsmeyer, who had already published on the subject. That is to say, my study of Sebald’s literary production represents a second phase in the ongoing process of Sebald’s reception. A great deal of scholarly work has already been carried out, preparing the way for the kind of summing up that second generations of readers attempt. As a latecomer, then, I find it only fitting that I begin this present study of Sebald by acknowledging the wealth of previous scholarship and responding to its claims before venturing into new territory on my own.

A Survey of Current Scholarship

Anyone who surveys the impact of W.G. Sebald on the literary world observes—and it is now almost assuredly passé to do so—that scholarship on Sebald’s oeuvre has grown to truly mountainous proportions since his death. This exponential expansion of scholarly interest in Sebald, which Lynn Wolff recently described as the “virtual explosion of secondary literature” around Sebald’s texts, means that sifting through the criticism that continues to churn out is

\(^1\)“Max” was not a shortened version of “Maximilian,” which some supposed to be one of Sebald’s middle names, (see for example Blackler 2007, 53), but rather an invention of his. Richard Sheppard, a longtime friend of Sebald’s, observes that Maximilian was never one of the author’s names. See Richard Sheppard, “‘Woods, trees and the spaces in between’: A report on work published on W. G. Sebald 2005–2008.” Journal of European Studies 39.1 (2009): 79-128. Here 96.
rapidly becoming a gargantuan task. Since the publication of his uniquely indescribable texts, beginning in the late 1980s, and his public championing by influential American scholars, such as the late Susan Sontag, Sebald’s unique and complex books have only continued to excite the imagination of his readers, who detect in his work a thematic density that invites exploration. By the 2001 publication of his last large work, *Austerlitz*, reading Sebald had already become something of a cottage industry, or perhaps even, as Neil Christian Pages terms it, a “Sebald-industrial complex,” particularly among American Germanists.

In a way, what is being done to Sebald by his professional readers—turning him into an object of inspection—runs ironically against the grain of his own personality, since Sebald always cultivated a deep disdain for the business of literary criticism. He would likely have been horrified by the industrious picking apart and analyzing of his work that constitutes a great majority of what is written about him these days. The practice of *Literaturwissenschaft*, one can deduce from his acerbic tone in reviews of secondary literature, often ran the risk of missing the point. It was a sentiment on which he delightfully elaborated in one of his (as yet) unpublished poems, “Germanistische Ballade,” which exists now as a manuscript from his aborted *Poemtrees* project in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach:

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Germanistische Ballade

Es kommt wohl sehr viel auf
den Winkel innerhalb eines
Kunstwerks & auf das Quadrat
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3 As Sheppard points out, Sebald had been publishing imaginative literature for more than 20 years when *Nach der Natur* (1988) and *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990) appeared (Sheppard 97), but his readership expanded exponentially after the English translations of *Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*) appeared in 1995, (see Denham 259).


5 See, for example, his excoriation of Horst Glaser’s and Pater Hahn’s 1971 volume *Literaturwissenschaft und Sozialwissenschaften: Grundlagen und Modellanalysen* in the *Journal of European Studies* 2.1 (1972): 76.

6 I have reproduced the text here as it appears in the manuscript, including elisions and corrections, to the extent that they are legible. It remained, unfortunately, unfinished.
Auf einer grünen Wiesen  
im miesen Morgengrauen  
sind vier pechschwarze Männer  
mit schwarzen Bart zu schaun

Im Klappzylinder, Kollege Rot Kollege  
Braun, sie sollen sekundieren  
wennd baren Haupt die andern zwei  
brachial sich textuellieren

ganz intratextuell erhebet  
Prof. Piff nun die Pistole  
damit die textexternen Paff  
geschwind der Teufel hole

Doch textextern hat Paff auch schon  
seine Pistole erhoben gezogen  
damit den intratextuellen Piff  
mitnichten doch ge [illegible]

Es kracht der Schuß es treffen sich  
die Kugeln in der Mitten  
in intertextuellen Raum  
wo sie sich überschnitten

In Schof zerplatzt & quergeschlagen  
erreilen sie gleichviel ihr Ziel  
denn Braun & Piff & Paff & Rot  
sind rücklings liegend alle tot

In ihrem Kopf der Kuckuck singt  
in ihrem Bart die Meise  
& unter ihren Leibern scharrt  
der Maulwurf schon ganz leise.

I include this deliciously irreverent caricature of territorial Germanists, taking aim at each other  
with the tools of their profession, because, in addition to its wicked sense of humor, it registers  
Sebald’s contempt for academic practice.

7 The epigraph is from a solicitous letter Hölderlin sent to Leo von Seckendorf (who would later publish some of  
Hölderlin’s work), on 12 March 1804. In this missive, Hölderlin muses on the importance of maintaining “balance  
between the earth and the sky” (Hölderlin 928). For a more in-depth analysis of the passage, see Kurz, 280-99.
Nevertheless, the ironically enormous secondary literature on Sebald has resulted in a number of productive avenues of attack. For the most part, the most successful studies of Sebald have traced and interpreted motifs in Sebald’s work (the thematic approach), or the ways in which his texts intersect with other texts (the intertextual, discursive approach), or some combination of the two. Scholars employing these approaches have observed Sebald’s invocation of a dizzying array of topics. In their introduction to a 2006 volume of essays, Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger identify seven general themes that play a role in Sebald’s work and that always return to the center of attention in Sebald scholarship. These are: travel, homeland, exile, intertextuality, imagery, history constructions, and memory. In his more recent review of current scholarship, Jonathan Long has added to this list the following topics: critique (of Sebald’s scholarly work), the Holocaust, the ethics of representation, melancholy, Sebald’s reception, and lastly miscellany. Lynn Wolff adds to Long’s catalog trauma, nature, and “the tenuous border between fact and fiction” (79). Of course, the inventory could expand indefinitely, since none of these lists include topics like sexuality and gender, or the role of animals in Sebald’s writing, which are only just now being explored. Sebald’s readership has

8 I have translated Niehaus’s and Öhlschläger’s original German list into English here for ease of reading. The original list is as follows: Reise, Heimat, Exil, Intertextualität, Bildlichkeit, Geschichtskonstruktion, and Erinnerung. Niehaus and Öhlschläger 8.

9 Jonathan Long and Anne Fuchs, Sebald and the Writing of History, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007). Specifically, Long identifies 10 “provisional” categories of Sebald research: critique of criticism, the Holocaust, memory, the ethics of representation, photography, melancholy, Heimat and its other, intertextuality, reception, and a “roundup” of unclassifiable topics.

10 Maya Barzilai is, by all accounts, the only one to extensively examine gender roles in Sebald’s work, though Friedrichsmeyer, Anja Johannsen, and Kilbourn have alluded to the lack of (hetero)sexuality in Sebald’s texts with varying explanations. Eric Santner has also dedicated the last portion of his volume on Sebald to the sexual implications of Sebald’s work. A more recent contribution can be found in Andrea Fieler’s dissertation, in which she reveals Sebald’s cryptic, and to my knowledge, sole description of the sexual act in Nach der Natur. See Maya Barzilai “Facing the Past and the Female Spectre in W. G. Sebald’s The Emigrants,” Long and Whitehead 203–16; Sara Friedrichsmeyer, “Sebald’s Elective and Other Affinities,” Denham and McCulloh 77–89, esp. 83; Russell Kilbourn “Kafka, Nabokov ... Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in Vertigo and The Emigrants,” Denham and McCulloh 33–63, esp. 51; Eric Santner, On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006, 167-96; Andrea Engels, “W.G. Sebalds Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht” (Diss. University of Cincinnati, 2006) 76.
even begun to expand into the seminary, producing Erik Borgman’s recent “theological” reading. Nevertheless, though such list making is helpful, albeit interminable, in organizing the diffused field of research, these accounts of the sites that have captured the attention of Sebald’s professional readers also point out an important fact about the state of affairs in Sebald research: the field is currently expanding into ever more isolated and specialized zones of investigation, rather than producing analyses that take in the whole of Sebald’s literary project. For example, it is true that travel, as Susan Sontag was among the first to point out, seems like a “generative principle” in Sebald’s works. But he is surely up to more than writing elaborate travelogues; his narrator is certainly more than a perpetual flâneur, as some have suggested. Similarly, though Sebald incorporated both images and narrative threads that have to do with the Holocaust, it simply is not sufficient to consider him a Holocaust writer, nor to assert, as Ernestine Schlant does, that Sebald was the first German writer to mourn the Holocaust (Schlant 225). His fiction also gives voice to the victims of catastrophe in, for example, nineteenth-century Congo, eighteenth-century China, and sixteenth-century Germany. For that matter, the list of those he considers victims extends even beyond the human family to include silkworms and herring. Such heuristic reductions, which are too often the consequence of taking a topical approach to Sebald, simply do not do his complex oeuvre justice. Another consequence is that, as Jonathan Long observes acerbically, Sebald criticism has become increasingly predictable and repetitive (30). Richard Sheppard, agrees, putting it rather less charitably; the task of surveying Sebald scholarship, which, Sheppard points out, threatens to become a full-time job, would be “a


13 A good example is John Zilkosky’s essay “Sebald’s Uncanny Journeys: The Impossibility of Getting Lost,” Long and Whitehead 102-20. In this regard, see also Leone’s contribution to the same volume (“Textual Wanderings,” 89-101), and in the negative, Karin Bauer “The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz,” Denham and McCulloh 233–50.
very tedious one, since much of the work is under-researched” (80). Nevertheless, at the risk of repeating some of the work of the above mentioned scholars, it would be fitting here to speak to the most significant contributions to date in these sites of interest.

The Act of Writing

Many have observed that Sebald’s work seems often to be “about” the act of writing itself, in that it problematizes the notion of authorship, representation, and narration. This was, in fact, the central argument of the first monograph on Sebald published after his death, Mark McCulloh’s *Understanding W.G. Sebald* (2003). McCulloh argues that what Sebald is actually up to is writing in a mode he terms literary monism. In Sebald’s literature, McCulloh maintains, there is no *real* external vs. internal, subject vs. object, etc. but rather only oneness. This reminds McCulloh of Jorge Luis Borges’s “monism” in *Tlön, Uqbar, Ortis Tertius* (1940), where, for example, Borges considers the notion that the whole of time has already happened and that this present life is but a vague memory or dim reflection, doubtless false and fragmented (20). But McCulloh’s analysis goes beyond considering Sebald’s texts to speculate that the author himself was a metaphysical monist (21). Since then, McCulloh has added an essay in which he considers Sebald’s writing practice from a linguistic point of view in his edited volume (with Scott Denham) *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma* (2006).

Other scholars, such as Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau, Katja Garloff, and Ben Hutchinson have examined Sebald’s work through the lens of Narratology. Aliaga-Buchenau’s article, “A Time He Could Not Bear to Say Any More About’: Presence and Absence of the Narrator in

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14 See Aliaga-Buchenau (2006); Garloff (2006); Hutchinson (2006). In addition to these and the other studies I discuss here, a number of other notable essays, for which there is simply no space here, have appeared recently. See Richard Bales (2009); Timothy Bewes (2005); Blackler (2009); Maria Brunner (2009); Anne Fuchs (2004); and Nicola King (2004). My own contribution to a narratological view of Sebald’s work, “W.G. Sebald Authentizitätsbegriff.” (in *Erzählte Authentizität*, Antonio Weixler and Matias Martinez eds., Berlin: DeGruyter,) is forthcoming. An interesting consequence of Sebald’s genre-bending works has been the suggestion of new genre distinctions to make sense of his work from a narratological point of view. See in this regard Peter Craven (1999).
W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*” (2006) offers a sometimes paradoxical account of the absences and presences of the narrator in Sebald’s *Ausgewanderten*. Sebald does not adhere to the conventions of narration, Aliaga-Buchenau asserts, in that the reported speech of other interlocutors within the text often appears in the indicative, as though these were the words of the narrator, or Sebald, himself. These absences of the narrator allow the other speakers a degree of immediacy, but the absence of explicit Holocaust description “bears witness” in Aliaga-Buchenau’s opinion, “to the pervasive presence of the horror of the Holocaust” (Denham and McCulloh 155). Narratology, then, opens up new avenues, at least for Aliaga-Buchenau, of addressing larger issues such as the ethics of representation and Sebald’s practice of speaking for victims, which will be discussed later in this present study.

Katja Garloff’s contribution, “The Task of the Narrator: Moments of Symbolic Investiture in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*” (2006), considers Sebald’s narrative practices under a similar light. Questioning whether a non-victim can speak for victims of the Holocaust—a problem that Sebald himself engaged with regards to Alfred Andersch—Garloff insists that Sebald’s non-Jewish narrator in *Austerlitz* defuses the potential pitfalls of “facile identification” (158). Sebald’s narrator reveals not only Austerlitz’ story but also his own investment in it—retrieving memories at the behest of Austerlitz, who gives him photos and a narrative—thereby rescuing the legitimacy of narrating a Jew’s story.

Ben Hutchinson’s “‘Egg boxes stacked in a crate’: Narrative Status and its Implications,” (2006) underscores Sebald’s status as an artist rather than a “Holocaust writer” or historian (171). Hutchinson points out the basic structural contrast in Sebald’s narratives: tension between narration-story and the stories being narrated. He considers the effect of the interlocking structure of Sebald’s narratives, which he compares at one point to a matryoshka doll (175).
Hutchinson continues his examination of the narrative structures in Sebald’s work in two more recent articles, “‘Umgekehrt wird man leicht selbst zum Verfolgten’: The Structure of the Double-Bind in W. G. Sebald” (2006) and “‘Seemann’ oder ‘Ackermann’? Einige Überlegungen zu Sebalds Lektüre von Walter Benjamins Essay ‘Der Erzähler’” (2009), the latter of which addresses not only the interlocking narrative layers Hutchinson described in 2006, but more specifically theorizes how this “Einschachteln” exists in a dialectic with the technique of montage. It is to this “uneasy relationship” between montage and interlocking layers that Hutchinson attributes the tension between fiction and fact in Sebald’s work. Hutchinson is incidentally one of the few Sebald researchers to have directly engaged Sebald’s private library which is housed among his other literary effects at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA) in Marbach, and has recently published his results in a monograph, *W. G. Sebald – die dialektische Imagination* (DeGruyter, 2009).

Lisa Diedrich’s contribution to Patt’s and Dillbohner’s edited volume of essays, *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald.* (Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007) also considers Sebald’s writing practice, but under the rubric of witnessing. In “Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W. G. Sebald’s Practices of Witnessing.” (Patt and Dillbohner 256–79), Diedrich describes five “practices of witnessing” (257) that she compares to Thomas Browne’s “quincunx,” which Sebald invokes in *The Rings of Saturn* (RS 31/20). The five points of that structure, which Browne thought underlay the entire created order, correlate in Diedrich’s analysis to Sebald’s method of “witnessing from above; from among; witnessing in words; in images; and, finally, witnessing that accounts for ghosts” (257). These practices demonstrate, in Diedrich’s estimation, that Sebald “is concerned as much with the how of history and memory as

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15 Among other researchers who have availed themselves of this resource is Richard Sheppard, who insists that it is not being used enough by Sebald scholars. See Sheppard, “Woods, trees and the spaces in between” 81.
16 For another essay that engages this topic rather successfully, see Jan Cueppens (2007).
with the what” (257). And these practices Diedrich identifies serve to illustrate a “gravelike structure” Sebald constructs, in the center of which lie entombed ghosts (274).

Ethics

Considering Sebald’s act of writing leads to other, related concerns. The ethical questions that Sebald’s authorial practice raise have been examined by a number of scholars including, most recently, Carol Jacobs, who devotes a chapter of her monograph, Skirting the Ethical (2008) to considering the four “lange Erzählungen” in Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten as texts that refuse to autocratically prescribe ethical responses, or take ethical action, even as they “openly stake out ethico-political positions” only, Jacobs adds, to eventually “disrupt” them (xvii). Rather than prescribe or enact an ethics, these works skirt ethics in order to avoid making the almost unavoidable mistake of hitting on the ethical head-on. It is an important avoidance, since “all direct hits turn out suspicious at best” (xvii). While the language at play in these works, taken at face value, is “capable of saying what it means more or less directly and operating as a call to action” (xvii), Jacobs proposes that there is another, less tyrannical version of ethics at work below the surface—or in the shadows—that operates as a “disturbance” to the straightforward ethical position.

Jan Ceuppens takes on the same work in his article “Transcripts: An Ethics of Representation in The Emigrants” (Denham and McCulloh 251-63). And it is in that sense of what can be represented ethically that he pursues, as he puts it, “the quest for the appropriate

17 Ceuppens 2002 essay “Im zerschundenen Papier herumsteigernde Gesichter: Frage der Repräsentation in W.G. Sebalds Die Ausgewanderten” (Germanische Mitteilungen 55, 79-98) provides another perspective from the same author and demonstrates that this has been a persistent topic for quite some time. For other significant studies in this vein that also engage other texts, see Bettina Mosbach (2007 and 2009); Brad Prager (2005); Karen Remmler (2009); Eric Santner (2006, esp. 62-63); Stuart Tabberner (2004); Bianca Theisen (2006); Arthur Williams (2000 and 2003); John Zilcosky (1997) and Jane Zwart (2006) as well as many of the essays engaging the airwar controversy (below).
distance with regard to the subject under scrutiny” (254). Sebald’s practice, which, Ceuppens asserts, is an “attempt to approach a character through reading and writing rather than through imaginary empathy” (255), is evident in the narrator’s compunction in *The Emigrants* at diving too wholly into the narratives he relates—of painting them too luridly—and thus transcending an ethical, respectful distance and becoming conflated with his characters. It is, for Ceuppens, as though Sebald adheres, curiously, to a “Bilderverbot” (prohibition on images, 253 and 259), which Ceuppens identifies as a central concern of Sebald’s work.

Sara Friedrichsmeyer, on the other hand, examines not the ethical considerations of representing victims, but the problematic boundary that excludes animals from this category. She raises the prospect that Sebald is actually expanding our ethical categories to include “Sebalds Heringe und Seidenwürmer” (Martin and Wintermeyer 11–26). This essay, which I will examine in greater detail in Chapter 5, is an excellent example of why these fields of interest are by no means airtight, since one could just as easily categorize this contribution under the rubric *Nature*.

Along the same lines, Eric Santner’s recent monograph, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (2006) considers the degree to which Sebald interacts with the creatureliness of existence—that which humans share with the rest of animate nature—in constructing an “archive of creaturely life” (xiii). Making use of a “psychotheological” way of thinking, which Santner had postulated in an earlier monograph *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (2001), Santner relates Sebald’s work to the context of Jewish messianic thinking in the modernist tradition. Modernist messianism—most notable in Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (1921)—has to do with how to engage in acts of neighborly love recognizing the neighbor’s *otherness*. Santner’s argument in *Psychotheology*
was that Rosenzweig’s book “orbited around the difficult task of turning toward such a face, [the
type of Freud’s Rat Man,] of becoming responsive, answerable to the new ethical material” (xiii).
Santner sees Rosenzweig as hinting at a form of solidarity with the “creaturely expressivity that
makes the other strange not only to me but also to him- or herself.” In this light, Santner casts
Sebald as the successor to Rilke’s exilic protagonist Malte Laurids Brigge who seeks to return to
the masses their creatureliness.

**History, Historiography, and the Holocaust**

The ethical questions Sebald raises also attach to his engagement with history, which is
one of the most frequently visited sites of interest among scholars and understandably so, since
his fictional work invokes a broad spectrum of historical events and artifacts from the sixteenth
century to the present. To that fund of fictional material, Sebald also added his critical voice in a
number of essays, in which he works through the legacy of the Allied bombing campaigns in
Germany during World War Two. When studies of Sebald’s treatment of history do not directly
link to the Holocaust, they often address his volume *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (which later
appeared in translation as *On the History of Natural Destruction*). A number of the most
significant contributions on this topic have been collected in Anne Fuchs’s and Jonathan Long’s
*W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History* (2007), but some others deserve to be mentioned.¹⁸
Perhaps necessarily, essays that investigate Sebald’s interaction with history often cite his
academic work, so it makes sense to group together the theme of history with the topic of Sebald
as a scholar.

¹⁸ For other important contributions, for which there is simply no space in this essay for detailed response, see
Marcel Atze (1999 and 2005); David Bell (2008); Christine Cosentino (2007); Carolin Duttlinger (2007); Volker
Hage (1998 and 1999); Hans-Joachim Hahn (2004); Christopher Hitchen (2003); Brad Prager (2005); Bruce
In this vein, Wilfried Wilms contributes two articles, “Taboo and Representation,” (2004) and “Speak no Evil, Write no Evil: In Search of a Usable Language of Destruction,” (2006). In them, Wilms observes that Sebald’s *Luftkrieg* speaks to both the psychological difficulties of speaking about the air raids, (which Sebald describes as a form of repression,) and the political realities that inhibited a literary treatment of the air war. But Wilms makes an important observation that Sebald employs a “rather selective historiography that...has its roots in the complex difficulties of presenting Germans as victims at all (Long and Whitehead 187). Wilms is one of the few Sebald researchers who have taken a more skeptical view of the author as a scholar. Others in this vein include Martin Klebes and Ulrich Simon, both of whom assert that Sebald either ignored pertinent considerations in his research or simply got the facts wrong. Nevertheless, Wilms’s contributions add a necessary counterbalance to the hagiographic perception of Sebald, into which many essays devolve.

Graham Jackman’s “Gebranntes Kind: W.G. Sebald’s Metaphysik der Geschichte” (2004) takes a different stance. Jackman does not consider the legitimacy of Sebald’s argumentation in *Luftkrieg*, as Wilms does, but rather he connects Sebald’s depiction of destruction in *Luftkrieg* with his fiction seeing both as characterized by the same drive to memorialize the victims of the destructive process of instrumental reason outlined in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is a concept to which I will return in the first chapter of this dissertation. Andreas Huyssen has similarly defended Sebald’s

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interaction with history, particularly as opposed to Jörg Friedrichs’s *Der Brand*, to which Huyssen raised serious objections.20

Taking a slightly different approach, David Darby’s “Landscape and Memory: Sebald’s Redemption of History” (Denham and McCulloh 265-77) engages Sebald’s notion of history as mediated through his depictions of landscape in *The Rings of Saturn*, which Darby compares to Theodor Fontane’s *Walks through the Mark Brandenburg* (1892) and Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1930s). Darby claims that though connecting Sebald and Benjamin to Fontane is unexpected, they “share a redemptive project, the making of a landscape in the imagination, the collection and recording on paper, fragment by fragment, story by story, of worlds destined to pass beyond personal memory” (266). He assures us that this does not imply that the three share the same view of history, but rather “a shared melancholy sense of disruption and alienation from a world that was once whole and intact” (267). I find this assertion a little problematic in light of my failure to locate in Sebald such an idyllic time that was lost. Sebald seems averse to reinscribing the utopian Romantic avowal of a distant past unity with nature, which might possibly be regained if only we could find the magic word to invoke it. Rather, as I will explore in Chapter Four of this study, Sebald’s vision of the problem of modernity reaches back to before the onset of the modern era. There is no golden age for Sebald, because the rift between humans and nature stems from the process of individuation and the struggle for survival, which always sets humans on the path toward, as Sebald put it (quoting Nietzsche), “Schlachten gegen die Natur” (Tiere 198).

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20 In his essay, “Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad,” (*New German Critique*, 2003: 163-76), Huyssen attributes to Sebald a “much larger and more subtle” approach than Friedrichs’s, and claims that Sebald’s historiography, unlike Friedrichs’s maintained an appropriate distance from its subject. Nevertheless, he sees Sebald’s book as a forerunner of a shift in the acceptability of depicting the suffering of German’s during the bombing campaigns, which Huyssen sees in the 2002 publication of Friedrichs’s widely popular book.
Sebald’s use of history leads us to consider its function in his work, and the degree to which it can be considered historiography, which has been recently explicated by Lynn Wolff. Wolff, whose recent dissertation traces this theme in great detail, has also contributed an excellent condensed version in Gerhard Fischer’s edited volume *Schreiben ex patria* (317-30). Here Wolff builds an argument that Sebald’s work can be seen as existing somewhere between traditional, narrative historiography (as described by Aristotle) and historical fiction (319). In that Sebald pushes against the border between these genres—Wolff uses the term “troubling the boundaries”—his works “combine the possibility and potentiality of fiction with direct references to an extra-textual reality, as lived by individuals, recounted in historical texts, or evidenced in artefacts” (320). The result is that he disrupts the standards by which both artistic and scientific narratives of history are judged to be reliable. This allows him to create a “hybrid” genre (322) that has both the documentary characteristics of historiography and the compelling literariness of fiction, which, in Wolff’s estimation, allows him to “work against forms of history that perpetuate the anonymity of its participants” (330). In this respect, Wolff comes very close to asserting the same kind of redemptive purpose we will pursue in this study, but she does not take note of the influence of the Jewish messianic traditions, which, as I will argue, formed Sebald’s view of the potential of literature.

Wolff’s work on Sebald’s interaction with historiography leads us to consider Sebald’s relationship with academic work in general, which has been carefully examined by Uwe Schütte, one of the last doctoral students Sebald mentored. Schütte points to Sebald’s scholarly writings as evidence of his rejection of the academic life in general. This conclusion, which Schütte reaches in his essay “Für eine ‘mindere’ Literaturwissenschaft: W. G. Sebald und die

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‘kleine’ Literatur aus der österreichischen Peripherie, und von anderswo,” (2007) is (presumably) further addressed in his contribution, “Against Germanistik: W. G. Sebald’s Critical Essays” in Catling’s and Hibbitt’s forthcoming volume *Saturn’s Moons: A W. G. Sebald Handbook* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011). It is interesting to note, however, that Sebald remained an active member of his academic department even in times of crisis, and, as Richard Sheppard points out, contributed greatly to its survival by “becoming very active in the field of student recruitment” (“Reception” 375, n.77). Schütte’s observations are perspicacious with regard for the disdain Sebald had for the especially bureaucratic manner in which Germanistik is practiced in some quarters. This undoubtedly stems from his bad university experiences in Freiburg, where many of the faculty had dubious wartime careers (see Sheppard, “Sternheim Years”). But there was certainly more to his turn toward literature than disappointment with academia. There is something larger afoot here. Despite prevalence of self-reflection in his work, it proves to be much more interested in the suffering of others.

It was this suffering which prompted one of the most enduring (mis)readings of Sebald, particularly prevalent among Anglophone critics, which is, as Jonathan Long observes, the perception that he is “a writer of Holocaust literature” (Fuchs and Long 14), and even a cursory glance through secondary literature on Sebald shows how often the topic is engaged. Arthur Williams, Samuel Pane, and Anne Whitehead have all expressed in various ways what Deane Blackler claims: “the Holocaust is a spectral presence that haunts Sebald’s books” (*Adventure and Disobedience* 8). Long’s previously mentioned survey of Sebald criticism does much to expose this phenomenon and point to its insufficiency. One of its consequences is that it unnecessarily dilutes the thematic variety of his work and heuristically reduces his literary production to a manageable, yet unsophisticated formula that usually goes something like this:
Sebald was, as are all post-war Germans (this simplification is often invoked) overshadowed by the Holocaust and thus wrote to purge himself and get on the right side of history. This is the essence of Peter Morgan’s argument in his essay “The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W. G. Sebald’s Prose Narratives” (GLL [2005], 75–92), in which he speaks of Sebald’s “overdetermination” by Auschwitz (77). Peter Morgan’s essays represent particularly egregious examples of the danger in reading Sebald in this light, and deserve to be examined in some depth. In his most recent article, “Literature and National Redemption” (Fischer 213-29), Morgan argues that Sebald’s thoughts on the Allied air campaign in Germany contain the “implicit…desire for another literature” in which lurks:

the desire for one which would redeem Germany by representing it in its human normality….[Sebald’s] argument is that German literature and culture failed to redeem the nation. This is a new version of an old argument based on the German idea of culture and Bildung. He wants a literature of redemption, in which the “schöner Schein” of an idealised human normality compensates for an imperfect reality. (228)

Here, I must take issue with Morgan’s analysis. One might think that a study dedicated to tracing the messianic strains in Sebald, such as Morgan’s, would resonate with the notion that Sebald depicts “an idealised human normality,” but this is simply not the case. Such an avowal of a better, somehow more real reality in which Germany appears “normal” would approach the kind of sanctimonious self-justification that Sebald found distasteful. It is not the argument of his essays on the air war. Neither is it what he is up to in his own literary work. Morgan’s argument is simply wrong-headed and rests on the presumption he openly acknowledges, and defends in his earlier essay, “The Sign of Saturn,” that “[Sebald’s] identifications with the sufferings of Jewish survivors of Auschwitz and his generalised sense of personal malaise and the meaninglessness of the universe can be traced to his sense of the injustice suffered by post-war Germans at the end of the war” (“National Redemption” 229). This presumption precludes
Morgan from seeing Sebald’s redemptive yearning in any other light than dressed-up, shabby self-pity—Morgan’s use of the term “personal malaise” sets a distinctly reproachful tone here—and orients the term “redemption” away from the sense in which Sebald understood it, which was engagement on behalf of others (see my Chapter Two).

Nevertheless, where reading Sebald in light of the Holocaust leads Morgan to dismiss the notion of redemptive literature as a reification of the tired German Bildungsideal, more productive analyses connect Sebald’s interaction with the Holocaust to a longer history of destruction and catastrophe. Some insightful readings of Sebald from the perspective of the Holocaust include Graham Jackman’s “Gebranntes Kind,” an essay that extends Sebald’s disquiet to other catastrophes of history, and Stuart Taberner’s rather more critical view “German Nostalgia? Remembering German-Jewish Life in W. G. Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz” (Germanic Review [2004] 181-202). Taberner examines Sebald’s engagement with Jewish lives and the Holocaust in a way that recognizes his participation in post-war German longing for ‘normalcy’ (one of Taberner’s perennial sites of investigation, 184) but in a more differentiated way than Morgan’s “overdetermination” allows. Taberner does take Sebald to task for what he deems an indulgence in nostalgia for this lost normalcy. But he admits that the process is recursive, since “a putting to rest of the past would never be possible” (198). Thus Taberner recognizes in Sebald one of the central characteristics I will be examining: the sense that any working through the past is a forlorn prospect from the outset despite its necessity.

Intertextuality

The intertextual approach to Sebald reveals that Sebald was not only an avid and thorough reader—his personal library contains more than 1,200 volumes, many with extensive margin notes—but that Sebald digested the books he read by incorporating them, often uncited,
into his imaginative writings. McCulloh points out that Sebald as a scholar was “steeped in the
texts, some quite obscure, of a much broader range of writers, Latin-American as well as
European” (**Understanding Sebald** 140). Correspondingly, researchers have unearthed
references to Thomas Browne, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Thomas Bernhard, Alfred Döblin,
Walter Benjamin, Hölderlin, and Jorge Luis Borges, among many, many others.22 But these
kinds of analyses are rarely in agreement about what is to be gained by deciphering Sebald’s
allusions. Martin Klebes, for example, goes to great lengths to demonstrate correspondences
between Sebald’s *Vertigo* and Kafka’s stories “Hunter Gracchus” and “Josefine the Singer, or the
Mouse People” only to conclude that “Sebald’s integration of references to Kafka’s travellers
Gracchus and Josefine thus articulates a perspective thoroughly skeptical of the reliability and
permanence of biographical and historical forms of memory that would fix the meanings of the
stories told by Kafka’s and Sebald’s narrators” (Long and Whitehead 138). Anne Fuchs, by
contrast, has recently argued that Sebald engages other texts specifically in order to make
memory permanent, or at least to counter historical forgetfulness by exciting the reader’s
imagination.23 A significant contribution to the theoretical underpinnings of an intertextual
approach to Sebald can be found in Ann Pearson’s most recent offering, where she explains not
only the history of intertextuality as both a condition and practice of literature, but also observes
that Sebald’s use of intertexts “contributes to the historical layering of his narratives.”24 By

22 For representative contributions, see Elena Agazzi (2007); Marcel Atze (1997); Jo Catling (2008); Jan Cueppens
(2008); Iris Denneler (1999); Gabriele Eckart (2009); Andrea Engels (2008); Dominik Finkelde (2007); Richard
Gray (2009); Katharina Hall (2000); Russell Kilbourn (2006 and 2007, discussed below); Martin Klebes (2009);
Patrick Lennon (2006); Christian Poetini (2008); Susanne Schedel (2004); Oliver Sill (1997); Holger Steinmann
(2006) and Ruth Vogel-Klein (2005 and 2008). Whereas these scholars trace the intertextual attachments of
Sebald’s narratives, Thomas Kastura takes a rather different approach to the same phenomenon, examining not
intertextuality, but cultural transfer in his 1996 essay “Geheimnissvolle Fähigkeit zur Transmigration” (**Acadia**: 197-
216). In this vein, see also Massimo Leone (2003).
24 Ann Pearson, “‘Rememberance...is nothing other than a quotation’: The Intertextual Fictions of W.G. Sebald,”
*Comparative Literature* 60.3 (2008): 261-78. 279.
cross-referencing Sebald’s works with other texts, Pearson explains, we glean a better appreciation of these layers and are invited to rediscover the original texts on our own—provided of course, that we recognize them (263). Studying the intertexts Sebald incorporates, then, is not merely for the purpose of self-congratulation at having detected something hidden, but it is an avenue to appreciating both texts more deeply. This is a refreshing assertion in the context of a world of scholarship that all too often seems to lose sight of the enjoyment of literature in its pursuit of argument.

Russel Kilbourn has proposed another function for the complex relationship between Sebald’s work and other texts; he situates Sebald’s self-appointed attempt at redemption, which I will be discussing at greater length later in this dissertation, within the writerly mode of intertextuality. Kilbourn is one of the only scholars to have specifically engaged the influence of Jewish messianic traditions on Sebald in his 2006 essay, “Kafka, Nabokov…Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in Vertigo and The Emigrants,” (Denham and McCulloh 33-63). He begins with the assertion that in Sebald’s texts, the primary “‘object’ of representation” is a “meditated experience of subjectivity” (33). He then argues that Sebald’s uses of Kafka texts and Nabokov motifs signifies a “conjunction” of the themes of chance and (secular) redemption, between which exists a choice that Sebald represents as a “product of the pattern—call it ‘fate’—rather than as a represented individual act of volition” (34). His analysis acknowledges, for example, that Sebald, in his essays on Kafka (which we will examine in more detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation) “lays the groundwork for much of his own subsequent fictional output through a sympathetic combination of Walter Benjamin’s modernist messianism and Ernst Bloch’s utopian ‘Principle of Hope’” (Denham and McCulloh 36). But Kilbourn’s essay is rather more interested in the ways in which Sebald’s intertextual attachments to
Nabokov and Kafka reveal his choice not to “resort to an ironically metaphysical ‘solution’” to the problem of death (62), but rather to find in the “‘truth’ that consciousness is inseparable from the endlessly reiterated narrative patterns of Western literature” a momentary solace, or, as Kilbourn puts it, “a redemptive mechanism, or even just its promise” (63). For Kilbourn, then, the contemplation of history, (accessible via intertextual reference), holds out the prospect of redemption from its inevitable end: death.

**Melancholia, Memory, and Trauma**

A significant contribution to the study of Sebald’s melancholia—which is by some accounts, the most “obvious” of Sebald’s thematic fixations, is Michael Niehaus’s and Claudia Öhlschläger’s recent compilation *W. G. Sebald: Politische Archäologie und melancholische Bastelei* (2006). Niehaus and Öhlschläger use the term “politische Archäologie” to describe the “reconstruction” of historical knowledge that remains aware of the “Bedingungen der Wahrheitsproduktion” (9). They assert that the ongoing, “resiginifying” deployment—an expression they adopt from Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993, p.168)—of collected knowledge leads to a dislocation within the ‘archeological order’ of things, by which they mean that though Sebald seems to organize the catastrophes he recounts, any illusions of unitary, unambiguous “Lesarten” is undermined by the author himself (9). By “melancholische Bastelei” they mean the process of assemblage—or *bricolage (à la Lévi-Strauss)*—of both visual images and allusions to other texts, which presents Sebald’s writing as a pre-rational collecting of “akkumulierter Fundstücke” (Sebald), and emphasizes the ‘fictionality’ of composing a text. They seek to examine the melancholic perspective from which this assemblage is constructed.

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25 This is the judgment of Jonathan Long, who points to Mary Cosgrove’s essay on Sebald’s melancholy, “Melancholy Competitions: W. G. Sebald Reads Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer,” (2006) as “the most intelligent discussion” of the topic (Fuchs and Long 21).
from a *poetological* point of view—in contrast to the approaches that focus on trauma, which they hold to be a misunderstanding of Sebald’s melancholia (9).

Despite these reservations, however, trauma is a growing site of interest in Sebald research. The effects of trauma on memory, the ability to relate memories and thus the degree to which a narrative can *memorialize* are questions that perennially fascinate a number of researchers, most of whom approach this topic from the standpoint that the central trauma in Sebald’s life was the Holocaust. The fact that he had no first-hand experience with this event has prompted the application of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” including J.J. Long (“History, Narrative and Photography” 122). This seems rather fitting, since, as Hirsch defined it, postmemory, generationally separated from memory and more personal than history, is “mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and recreation” (22). But, as has been pointed out by a number of critics, including most recently Peter Morgan, this is problematic because Sebald did not have “a close second-generation experience of the events in question” (Fischer *Schreiben* 216). Other critics have averred, as does Karen Remmler, that Sebald’s work “goes far beyond the mediation of the remembrance of the Holocaust within paradigms of…postmemory” (134). Hirsch’s term was meant to describe primarily the relationship of survivors’ children to their parents’ trauma (Hirsch 3-23), thus it seems less useful in describing Sebald’s work. Nevertheless, trauma and the dubious reliability of memory are themes that Sebald engaged explicitly in his work, as in *The Rings of Saturn*, to name one

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26 See Carolin Duttlinger (2004); David Kaufmann (2008); Dora Osborne (2007); Christina Szentivanyi (2006); and Susanne Vees-Gulani (2005).
27 Though I differ from Morgan in a number of important respects, his analysis of the insufficiency of the “postmemory” model seems especially astute.
28 The studies engaging Sebald’s relationship to memory are too many to mention here except for some significant contributions, such as those by Maya Barzilai (2006); Carol Bere (2002); Jens Brockmeier (2008); James Chandler (2003); Mary Cosgrove (2008); Richard Crownshaw (2004); Iris Denneler (1999 and 2001); Claire Feehily (2009); Anne Fuchs (2003 and 2006); Lilian Fürst (2007); Stefanie Harris (2001); Russell Kilbourn (2004); Franz Loquai
of many examples, where he depicts a memory that is obviously too perfect and therefore suspect. It truly beggars belief that his narrator could have actually seen the pores on the eyelids of a duck, at night, by the light of a lightening flash, as he thinks he has (RS 110/89).

**Nature**

This duck that Sebald’s narrator seems to think he has seen in a rainstorm is but one of the many non-human creatures populating his books. Indeed, though many critics have pointed to Sebald’s work as a memorial to human suffering (in the Holocaust and elsewhere) one could make the case—as I intend to—that his attention is just as much drawn to the fate of the natural world as to the human. One might even go further and claim that one of the problems Sebald diagnosis in the modern condition is the notion that humans and the rest of nature are necessarily to be separated from the natural world, that they are qualitatively, ontologically different.

This forms a central question in Anne Fuchs’ 2007 essay “Ein Hauptkapitel der Geschichte der Unterwerfung” (Fuchs and Long 121–38). Fuchs points out the prevalence of landscape-oriented readings of Sebald and argues that landscapes for Sebald, and for Adalbert Stifter, “engage with the problematic of perception and subjectivity from a phenomenological perspective,” (122) by which she means that, for Sebald at least, “subjectivity is an essential prerequisite to an experience of nature” (123). Unexpectedly, this undergirds nature’s autonomy: “nature is not identical with our understanding of it” (123). To illustrate this, Fuchs considers Sebald’s use in *The Rings of Saturn* of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* (Fuchs and Long 123-27) and van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem* (127-30). The former image, Fuchs contends, represents a world “at a historical juncture” from whence the modern concept of nature became dominant (127). In using the latter artwork, Fuchs argues, Sebald is demonstrating that the view of nature

in that painting no longer holds true, since “it is no longer possible for landscape to exist independently of the history of the subjugation of nature” (129). In both cases, the view of nature, its depiction, as interpreted by Sebald reveals the negative aftereffects of modernity and widens the gap between humans and nature. This is an important concept Fuchs taps into that will play a role in Sebald’s diagnosis of the world as broken (in my first chapter below.)

This analysis is echoed by a number of other critics, such as Greg Bond, who focuses on Sebald’s portrayal of nature as ruined by capitalism in his article “On the Misery of Nature and the Nature of Misery” (Long and Whitehead 31-44), an analysis echoed less compellingly by Mary Cosgrove (Fuchs and Long 91-110). But whereas Bond places blame on capitalism, he also points out that nature is not only the victim of human aggression, but also a perpetrator. “Sebald’s text,” he notes, “does not posit a benign non-human world entirely at the mercy of human violence. The viciousness of capitalist extravagance is matched by nature” (76). Similarly, Colin Riordan examines Sebald’s *After Nature* from an ecocentric point of view, which is quite unique in Sebald scholarship and remains compelling despite having been published seven years ago (Long and Whitehead 45-57).

Among the now increasing number of critics who read Sebald at least in part through the lens of his nature depictions is Anja Johannsen. Johannsen’s 2008 monograph, *Kisten Krypten Labyrinthe*, treats Sebald in connection with Anne Duden and Herta Müller under the aspect of “Raumfigurationen” (figurations of space), but its most interesting claims relate to Sebald’s view of nature. Johannsen unveils two depictions of nature (dystopic and utopic) at work in Sebald’s prose. Insightfully she observes that these competing ‘natures,’ the one sick and destroying, the other homeostatic and “einen unerreichbaren Sehnsuchtpunkt” (78), are resolved in moments of precarious stasis. However, she continues, they come to a boiling point in the episode from *The
Emigrants where Ambros Adalwarth describes Jerusalem in his purported journal (Johannsen 83-90). In this episode, Johannsen believes she finds the single moment in Sebald’s fiction where the sublimation of the two conceptions of nature does not take place.

**Homeland and Travels**

Travel is one of the more frequently pursued themes in Sebald scholarship and understandably so. Most of his narratives have as their most general organizing principle a journey (or exile) of one type or another. And some of the most recent literature examines Sebald under this light. Markus Zisselsberger’s 2010 edited volume, *The Undiscover’d Country: W. G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, collects 12 essays from leading Sebald experts who take this self-evident topic into familiar as well as unexpected directions. In one particularly thought-provoking essay, “*Campi deserti: Polar Landscapes and the Limits of Knowledge in Sebald and Ransmayr*” (142-60), James Martin considers a hitherto seldom examined intertextual relationship. Travel, he explains, cannot be separated from intertextual considerations, since a “key aspect” of post-modernism is the acknowledgement of the “pervasive mediation of experience through seeing preexisting texts” (152).

It is that sense of the “overdetermination” of a landscape (to borrow Peter Morgan’s phrase out of context,) that John Zilcosky considers as he examines the eeriness of Sebald’s travel in his essay on “The Impossibility of Getting Lost” (Long and Whitehead 102-20). Sebald’s narrators, Zilcosky argues, attempt to lose themselves but each finds to his dismay that he, “no matter how far away he journeys, can never leave his home” (103). This argument has

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29 The list of scholars who treat this topic, which is often tied to the theme of exile, is long indeed, but for some representative studies, see Claudia Albes (2002); Richard Bales (2003); Jo Catling (2003); Christopher Gregory-Guider (2005); Mark Ilsemann (2006); Ruth Klüger (2003); Christina Kraenzle (2007); Helmut Kreuzer (1991); Massimo Leone (2003 and 2004); Verena Lobsien (2004); J.J. Long (2009); Kimberly Mair (2007); James Martin (2007); Peter Morgan (2005); Verena Olejniczak-Lobsien (2004); Carsten Strathausen (2007); Bianca Theisen (2004); John Zilcosky (2004); and Markus Zisselsberger (2010).
some solid support, and is echoed (with variation) in Claudia Albes’ essay “Die Erkundung der Leere” (304), but also its problems. Zilcosky situates these frustrated journeys in the Romantic tradition of getting lost as a therapeutic endeavor, which he interprets as an attempt to combat anxiety (103-104). This certainly rings true to the beginning of The Rings of Saturn and Vertigo, for example. He does not get lost in the way Odysseus and Goethe do in their respective journeys, it is true, but both narrators do actually unmistakably get lost. The hope of conquering the spreading emptiness in himself “erfüllte sich auch bis zu einem gewissen Grad” (was realized, up to a point), as the narrator of Rings of Saturn explains on the very first page (RS 11/3). Nevertheless, Zilcosky’s argument that disorientations never lead to new discoveries touches on two important truths. First, the landscapes Sebald encounters are already textually and historically implicated. His narrators always recognize something there. Second, any glimpses we get of another land are temporary at best. This fits, as we will see, with the recursive nature of the search for redemption we will be tracing in this study.

Images, Art, and Ekphrasis

Thus far, I have discussed critics who focus above all on Sebald’s words and their relationship to authorship, ethics and history. But an equally important aspect of his literary work—and one that has received a great deal of attention—is its incorporation of imagery both in terms of visual material and ekphrastic description; the study of his intertextuality is now being supplemented by acknowledgement of intermediality.30 A central question in such studies

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30 In addition to the studies considered here, there are a large number of notable, mostly recent, contributions in the field of Sebald’s imagery, for which I unfortunately do not have room to discuss. See Timothy Adams (2008); Jeff Adams (2008); Heiner Boehncke (2003); Klaus Bonn (2007); Adrian Daub (2007); Brian Dillon (2003); Carolin Duttlinger (2008); Noam Elcott (2004); Florence Fiéreisen and Daniel Pope (2007); Mattias Frey (2007); Andrea Gnam (2007); Christopher Gregory-Guider (2007); Lilian Fürst (2006); Torsten Hoffmann and Uwe Rose (2006); Silke Horstkotte (2002, 2006 and 2008); Avi Kempinski (2007); George Kouvaros (2009); Christina Kraenzle (2007); J.J. Long (2003); James Martin (2007); Hans-Christoph von Nayhauss (2009); Markus Nölp (2001); John
is the relationship between image and text, which is not always clear and which is clouded by the
variety of kinds of images and texts under discussion. As Anne Fuchs points out, the three-
hundred odd images in Sebald’s oeuvre express a wide variety of subjects, emotional content and
quality (“Painters” 167). But, functionally speaking, there are generally four different kinds of
images in Sebald’s work:

1) There are images that flow from with the text and seem to actually represent what the
text claims them to be, such as the monument to the fallen soldiers in *Vertigo* (SG 199/V 182).

2) Other images compete with the text, either for prominence, space or authenticity,
such as the drawing of a herring that is actually a cod in *The Rings of Saturn* (RS 75/57) or those that give the text another meaning to textual utterances, such as the
image in *Vertigo* of “ein Untergehender” (SG 22/V 18).

3) Still other images *become* text (in other words, examples of ekphrasis) such as the
descriptions of the paintings of Grünewald in *After Nature*.

4) Finally, there are instances of text that becomes image, such as the reproduction of
the page from Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus* in *The Rings of Saturn* (RS 35/23),
the handwriting that appears in drawings, photos, and diaries, as in *The Emigrants*
(AG 50/E 33, 194-95/132 and 200-201/135).

The images that “illustrate” the text are the least problematic; they are a traditional narrative
device with a long tradition. But the other dimensions of Sebald’s practice, though they also
serve an evidentiary purpose, are more nuanced and similar in many ways to those in other
recent German fiction such as Monika Maron’s *Pawels Briefe* (*Pavel’s Letters*, 1999 and 2002).

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Silke Horstkotte’s 2008 essay “Photo-Text Topographies” examines these correspondences between Maron and Sebald under the aspect of the image-text layout and the different spaces it conjures: within the photo, within the work of literature and between the work and its recipient. Arguing along similar lines, Thomas Steinaecker’s recent monograph Literarische Foto-Texte: zur Funktion der Fotographien in den Texten Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns, Alexander Kluges und W.G. Sebalds (2007) considers, as the title suggests, Sebald’s method of inserting photographs in his texts and compares that practice with other near contemporaries in order to trace the development of the “photo-text.” This study, one of the most thorough investigations of Sebald’s use of imagery, distinguishes Sebald’s technique from the tradition of the illustrated book, situating it instead (as does Horstkotte) in a dialogic tradition. Steinaecker’s contribution is to read Sebald’s work not, as is usually the case, in tandem with Walter Benjamin’s or Roland Barthes’ theoretical work, but in comparison to Brinkmann’s pop-literature texts and Kluge’s rather more analytic work. Among the most thought-provoking comments Steinaecker makes is his observation of an apparent discrepancy between Sebald’s own photo-textual practice and the strong objections he raised to the photographic medium as an “Agent des Todes” (agent of death) and “Relikte des fortwährend absterbenden Lebens” (relics of a life that is continually dying off, LiL 178; cf. Steinaecker 248). However, having raised this conundrum, Steinaecker fails to fully develop an explanation for this troubled relationship.

In the same year that Steinaecker’s monograph appeared, Lisa Patt’s and Christel Dillbohner’s edited volume Searching for Sebald (2007) became the first of its kind to collect both visual and analytic responses to Sebald. The contributions to this volume range from critical investigations to artistic replies in a mode that Patt describes as an “adjective that both

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suggested a new medium and launched a fresh critical palliative….”Sebaldian” (17). These contributions include established Sebald experts (such as Markus Zisselsberger) as well as a number of readers from other disciplines, such as the visual artists who contribute their own memorials to Sebald. Thus, it represents a mixed-bag from the standpoint of literary criticism. However, Daniel Lash’s architectural investigation of The Rings of Saturn, which provides compelling visual references for the book’s structure and for certain episodes, is among the noteworthy engagements in this volume that come from outside the field of literary studies.

Among the many other analyses of Sebald’s imagery that one could mention, Anne Fuchs’s “W.G. Sebald’s Painters: The Function of Fine Art in his Prose Works” (2006) stands out at making a significant contribution to the interpretation of, as her title suggests, his use of paintings (rather than photography). This is important, because, as she suggests, “works of fine art entertain a different relationship to cultural memory from that of photographs” (168). The works of art that become part of Sebald’s art provide, she estimates, a place of refuge different from the question-raising photographs. Fuchs proposes that, in light of Sebald’s “partisanship for the victims of history’s accumulating catastrophes” (169), which she compares to that of his longtime friend, Jan Peter Tripp, his use of images acts against the silencing effect of traditional forms of historical narrative and enacts “the scrupulous indexing of the chain of circumstances that leads to the recovery of an individual’s life story” and that fine art is “particularly suited to this type of contemplative memory work” (169 and 172, respectively). It is the transcendent, multivalent property of fine art that she esteems here. She points to his subversive interpretation of Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson as an example of how, for Sebald, “the artist’s aesthetic resistance to his contemporary reality an important criterion of good art” (174). Fuchs’ analysis does much to clarify the relationship between fine art (which is handled differently than
photography in Sebald’s work) and his sense of the ethical burden and potential of literature. As I will be considering below in my second chapter, such perspectives will become central to Sebald’s reception of the Jewish messianic tradition and his development of a restitution-oriented literature. Though, because of the limited scope of my dissertation, I will not be able to devote the kind of attention to imagery that the topic deserves, there are specific ways in which the images Sebald reproduces—or chooses not to reproduce—have a bearing on the subject of this study.

Reception

The existence of this ever-growing body of research that I have been surveying has ironically brought about yet another area of research: Sebald reception. How Sebald went from a relatively unknown Germanist in Norwich to a literary figure of truly global prominence raises questions which a number of scholars have addressed. Scott Denham has examined the American reception of Sebald closely (and at times skeptically) in two essays, “Die englischsprachige Sebald-Rezeption” (2006), and the forward to his and Mark McCulloh’s edition *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma* (2006). In the latter essay, Denham makes the important observation that Sebald is a phenomenon; his books are not only discussed in academia, but also well-sold. However, he acknowledges that much of this popularity was due to the accolades of well-respected and well-situated critics, such as Susan Sontag, Christopher Hitchens, James Wood and others (3-4) Denham reveals that Sebald’s adulatory reception came in two waves: one in response to his literary work, and one in response to his taboo treatment of an American obsession—World War II (in *Luftkrieg und Literatur / Natural History of Destruction*.) His success in the English world, Denham adds, has much to do with his perceived status as a Holocaust writer (6). But Sebald is read far beyond the English- and German-speaking world.
His work has been translated into dozens of languages, to great success, which has been documented in Spain by Carmen Gomez Garcia (2005), and in France by Ruth Vogel-Klein. The latter observes that Sebald’s success, which in France was both “durchschlagend” and “schlagartig” success (sweeping and sudden, 133 and 142, respectively), was in large part due to his success elsewhere. Regarding the 1999 translation of *Die Ausgewanderten* into French (*Les Émigrants*), she notes “schon in den Überschriften wird daher auf den Erfolg des Buchs im Übersee aufmerksam gemacht” (Atze and Loquai 134). Vogel-Klein also puts the much vaunted best-seller status into real terms as well. She records that by the beginning of 2004 (her article appeared in 2005) over 10,000 copies of the hardcover edition of *Les Émigrants* and almost 14,000 of the paperback had been sold (134)—impressive figures that pale however in comparison to the numbers Denham cites for sales of *The Emigrants* in the United States, where five times that number sold between 1996 and 2002 (Denham and McCulloh 1), and *Austerlitz* and *On the Natural History of Destruction* which ran over a staggering 900,000 copies each (Niehaus and Öhlschläger265). Given the continued sales of Sebald’s work, and the continued scholarly interest, it is safe to conclude that the “phenomenon” will continue.

**Diffusion**

But it is exactly this success and the attending expansion of research that has led, as I mentioned earlier, to diffusion. The task of classifying Sebald’s body of work has proven to be daunting. It recently prompted fellow writer and scholar John Domini to declare that Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* is not a novel (a label which Sebald emphatically refused for his works anyway), but rather “this author’s Purgatory.”32 The resulting confusion about what to make of Sebald’s literary production is understandable, perhaps even inevitable. Of course, the best

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essays cross boundaries between zones of interest, between localized intertextual research and a grasp of Sebald’s overall aesthetical project, between Sebald as a thematic tactician and Sebald as a discursive strategist. That is precisely what I hope to accomplish in this present study. Seeing in Sebald’s work a throughline without reducing his oeuvre to that red thread is a challenging, but a necessary task.

Thus in the first half of this dissertation, I attempt to set the groundwork for viewing Sebald’s work through the lens of one of his persistent fascinations: Jewish messianism. This perspective, which might at first seem rather unexpected, perhaps even bizarre, is actually suggested by Sebald’s own comments. On 18 November 2001, almost exactly a month before his death (though he could not possibly have known it to be the case), Sebald gave a speech commemorating the opening of the “Literaturhaus” in Stuttgart in which he took a remarkably retrospective glance at his own literary career. In this speech, later published posthumously in *Campo Santo* (2003), Sebald reflects on the potential of literature, which he asserts represents a “Versuch der Restitution” (attempt at restitution, CS 240-48/197-205). The distinctly salvific tone, as it turns out, has nothing to do with his Catholic upbringing, but rather betrays the influence of his study of Jewish messianic traditions during his school days. What emerges is both an understanding of why Sebald came to see the world as basically broken and how he envisioned going about a mission of mending that world via literature. In the first stage, Chapter One, I outline Sebald’s sense of the world as needing repair. There is a correspondence between Sebald’s depiction of world history as a “beinahe nur aus Kalamitäten bestehende Geschichte” (history, which is but a long account of calamities, RS 350/295) and the critique of enlightened instrumental reason in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Sebald depicts the consequences of unreflective, goal-oriented
rationality which leads to the alienation of humans from nature and from themselves. As Eric Santner has recently pointed out, Sebald’s narrator is dissatisfied with the tendency (at least since the Enlightenment) to relegate the Other to a status outside ethical consideration. What is broken about the world—what needs mending—is in fact a crime-history that all humans share to one degree or another with regards to each other and nature. However, I will also explore Sebald’s unwillingness to propose the same kind of totalizing “cure” to the problem of unreflective rationality that was available to the Frankfurt School. As Carol Jacobs observes, straightforward ethical systems all too often devolve into the kind of autocratic imperatives which Sebald eschewed. He chose rather the “skirt the ethical” even as he highlights the need for ethical responses. I will argue that instead of proposing a systematic response to history’s catastrophes, Sebald’s method takes the idiosyncratic form of juxtaposing seemingly disparate events and characters (brought together by coincidence or willed association) in order to foreground their essential similarity. This contemplation leads to re-classing all sorts of creatures out of strict victim-perpetrator categories, but not in order to obliterate these categories. Rather, what Sebald is up to, I will argue, is the reinvigoration of an ethical interaction with other creatures that makes amends for the destruction of history.

In the second step of this enterprise, in Chapter Two, I outline how this vision for mending the world corresponded to, and grew out of, Sebald’s early academic work, in which Jewish messianism played a pivotal role. I show how the concept of messianism grows more distinct for Sebald, as evidenced by the increasing specificity with which he describes and employs messianism as an interpretive tool in a number of articles he wrote between 1972 and 1991. I chart in detail those features which Sebald thought constitutive of the messianic character and mission, and how they actually correspond to a union between ethics and

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aesthetics—a notion Sebald borrowed from Hermann Broch—that itself serves as a key to understanding Sebald’s poetics. These ideas form the basis and style of Sebald’s subsequent literary attempt at restitution, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

In the second half of this dissertation, I investigate the way in which Sebald carries out his own mission of practicing literature as a means of restitution—reminiscent of the messianic mission of Tikkun. In the first stage, Chapter Three, I explore his poetry, some of which is relatively unknown. These poems represent Sebald’s earliest moves toward a literature of restitution. His smaller poetry as well as his 1988 “Elementargedicht” Nach der Natur (After Nature), demonstrate that this throughline begins in his earliest work and presents a metaphysics of willed association (or elective affinities) that serves as a framework and justification for his subsequent works.

In Chapter Four, I examine an as-yet unnoticed body of work: Sebald’s dramas. These pieces, still largely unpublished, show that in Sebald’s years of literary apprenticeship—the 1980s—he was transfixed by the prospect of the loss of nature, the damage wrought by human civilization and the consequences of evolutionary “progress.”

Chapter Five concerns itself with the most familiar works of Sebald, his long prose pieces that began appearing in the early 1990s, paying special attention to The Rings of Saturn. If After Nature can be viewed as the metaphysics of messianism, The Rings of Saturn is Sebald’s contribution to ethics, which he expands into the animal world. Here, I argue, Sebald gives full voice to his melancholic messiah, redrawing the borders of his characters’ selves and questioning categories, all the while failing to postulate answers. How significant is it that Sebald refuses to speculate on the feelings of a herring even as he raises the matter of its feelings to our attention?
Part One

The Development of a Messianic Mindset
Chapter One

Breaking and Mending the World: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the Mission of *Tikkun*

Abstract

In the introduction, I surveyed the current state of affairs in Sebald research and observed that while scholarship has exponentially expanded since Sebald’s untimely death in 2001, most recent studies have tended to take a topical view of the author. The result was diffusion. Though melancholia is an obvious characteristic of Sebald’s work, scholars have thus far insufficiently explained the origin and function of this in the context of his work. On the one hand, melancholia is a literary device, and on the other an emotional state. Both are at work in the literary production of W.G. Sebald and the two phenomena share a common genealogy. In the following chapter, I will examine how Sebald’s reception of classic Frankfurt School texts, especially *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, caused him to view the world as fundamentally broken and how the traditional means of repairing this rupture, including those preferred by Horkheimer and Adorno, were unavailable to him.

In the introduction to this study I outlined the difficulty that Sebald’s readers have had in classifying his work and the resulting diffusion that characterizes the field of Sebald scholarship. It is, simply put, hard to speak categorically about Sebald’s literary output. He specifically rejected the term “novel” for his long prose texts, but they do not fit neatly into any other literary box either. However, it should actually come as no surprise that it is so difficult to categorize these texts: categorizing is, after all, a way of thinking which became increasingly distasteful to Sebald.34 A number of critics have already noted that the dark, apocalyptic tone in Sebald’s works reflects his negative appraisal of the European Enlightenment with its unending, unattainable, and ultimately unfulfilling obsession with categorizing and rationalizing the

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34 I say this despite Jonathan Long’s perspicacious observation that Sebald’s narrators seem to be “obsessed with processes of archivisation and with the places where the past has deposited traces and fragments that have been preserved and in many cases systematised, catalogued, or indexed” (Long, *Image*, 11). Long’s remarks seem to justify his own approach to Sebald, which emphasizes the archival quality of his oeuvre, but, as this present study will attempt to demonstrate, any attention to archiving and cataloguing in Sebald evinces a morbid fascination rather like the inability to tear oneself away from watching a tragedy unfold. I am rather inclined to agree with one of Sebald’s former colleagues who remarked to me, while we were working through some of the Sebald Nachlass at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in the winter of 2009, how ironic it was that Sebald’s estate should become the object of archival inspection, since, though he had once applied for a six-week leave from UEA to come to Marbach, he never made the trip; “Max,” he said, “hated these kinds of places.” This seems more in keeping with his depiction of the Bibliothèque Nationale in *Austerlitz*: it is “menschenabweisend” (inimical to human beings, A 392/276).
world. Amir Eschel, for one, observes that Sebald uses the paraphernalia of modernity (trains and timepieces in Eschel’s analysis) to show “modernity’s promise and its perils, both humanity’s seeming freedom from the boundaries of nature and the all-encompassing, unprecedented alienation of humans leading to their transformation into human material in the death camps.” The resulting image of the modern condition is decidedly bleak. However, though some of Sebald’s friends and former colleagues have testified to his deepening struggle with depression, the overt melancholia to which Sebald’s narrators fall victim is to a certain degree an artistic stance that Sebald adopts. Other close friends, some of them lifelong acquaintances, claim to have known in Sebald a dryly witty correspondent and interlocutor, interested in the world and curious about all things new. Indeed it is this side of Sebald’s persona that leads Dr. Ulrich von Bülow, for example, who has taken charge of Sebald’s literary estate at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar, to recently observe that, though Sebald’s melancholia is partly a reflection of his personal psyche and political orientation, it also likely represents a literary strategy, since unlike a truly depressed person, Sebald and his narrators remained interested in the world. Put another way, Sebald decks his narrators in the

35 A recent example is Claudia Öhlschlager’s volume, Beschädiertes Leben. Erzählte Risse. W.G. Sebalds poetische Ordnung des Unglücks (Freiburg: Rombach, 2006), in which she makes the case that Sebald’s work concerns itself with the destruction of natural and human life, in other words, the “beschädiertes Leben” Adorno coined.  
38 One such witness to the more sanguine Sebald is Dr. Jürgen Käser, a friend and correspondent of Sebald’s since his school days in Sonthofen, who has recently held a number of public readings of letters in Dresden, Leipzig, Wertach and elsewhere and who was happy to show some of his correspondence with Sebald during my visit with him in Sonthofen in June, 2010. During that conversation, Käser asserted at one point that most of Sebald’s readers misread the textual invocation of melancholia as a kind of lasting existential depression, which he found insupportable.  
weeds of melancholia as a response to something that has gone wrong with modernity: its insistence on rummaging through the natural world and extending humankind’s dominion by submitting the world to the violence of inspection, vivisection, and cataloguing.

To explain how Sebald came to this perspective on modernity and to chart his response to the brokenness of the world, I will pursue the following path of investigation. Because of the influence of Frankfurt School theorists, especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Sebald came to see the modern world as broken by instrumental reason and in need of redemption. He rejected, however, the strategies others had adopted to realize a better world. Sebald remained estranged from organized religion, eschewed the kinds of political engagement adopted by his contemporaries, and ultimately even refused Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s own solution, the application of supposedly ‘healthy’ reason to counteract instrumental reason. What was left to him was the creation of an idiosyncratic “literature of restitution” which relied on willed association rather than on the discovery of causal relationships to structure the episodic narratives he collected and to reclaim individual histories from the anonymity of a history of calamity.

The Brokenness of Modernity: Sebald and Dialectic of Enlightenment

Many of Sebald’s readers have already noted that this view of modernity is not original to him. He owed much of his perspective to his readings of texts from cultural critics and theorists of the Frankfurt School. He indicated as much in a letter he sent to Theodor Adorno in 1967,40

40 Sebald’s letter to Adorno, dated 24 April 1967, takes Adorno to task for his positive assessment of Carl Sternheim, about whom Sebald was then writing his damning critique in his master’s thesis. “[…] das beunruhigt mich,” he writes, “denn nach allem, was ich aus Ihrem, Horkheimers und Marcuses Büchern und Aufsätzen gelernt habe,—und darauf allein stützt sich meine Kritik an Sternheim—, muß dieser Autor als ein Symptom seiner Zeit interpretiert werden” (Atze and Loquai 12).
by which time he had clearly read and annotated Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*.41 For that matter, some three decades later, in his essay collection *Logis in einem Landhaus* (1998), Sebald reflected on his university days, observing “wie trüb und verlogen [wäre] unser Literaturverständnis wohl geblieben […] hätten uns die damals nach und nach erscheinenden Schriften Benjamins und der Frankfurter Schule […] nicht andere Perspektiven eröffnet” (how bleak and false would our understanding of literature have remained […] had not the gradually appearing writings of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School […] opened up new perspectives to us, 12, translation mine). And the books that arguably left the largest impression in Sebald’s thinking were Max Horkheimer’s *Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* (Critique of Instrumental Reason, published in English as *Eclipse of Reason*)42 and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente* (Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments).43 He had clearly read the former shortly after its publication in 1967 and likely purchased the latter at the time of its reissue in 1969 between finishing his master’s thesis in Manchester in the summer of 1968 and taking up his doctoral studies at the University of East Anglia in 1970.44 It was during this time frame that he began writing his first serious literary work. Thus, it makes sense to look for resonances between these volumes and Sebald’s own writings. He seems to have been

41 Sebald’s copy of *Minima Moralia* (the 1962 Suhrkamp Taschenbuch edition) is inscribed “Winfried Sebald / 1965” on the flyleaf. I had the privilege of inspecting Sebald’s copies of *Minima Moralia, Dialektik der Aufklärung, Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* and many other volumes in his personal library during a 10-month research stay at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach (September 2009-June 2010) which was supported by a Fulbright grant.


44 Sebald’s personal copies of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Critique of Instrumental Reason* are from a series of Frankfurt School texts published by Fischer in 1967 and 1969 respectively. It is logical to presume that Sebald did not read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* before this date, since the 1947 edition (Amsterdam: Querido) had been a small printing, poorly received, and consequently out of print for more than 20 years before its reissue. Additionally, Richard Sheppard believes that Sebald purchased the volume shortly after its reprinting (“Dexter—Sinister” 422, footnote 6).
particulary drawn to them and clearly revisited them more than once.\textsuperscript{45} His own copies are heavily annotated and he cited them repeatedly in his academic essays, especially in his doctoral dissertation, \textit{Der Mythus der Zerstörung im Werk Döblins} (The Myth of Destruction in the Work of Döblin, 1980). Accordingly, a number of notable Sebald scholars have already carefully traced Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s influence on Sebald. Richard Sheppard, for example, observes that Sebald was deeply influenced by, and accepted, the central thesis of \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}.\textsuperscript{46} Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa connects \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} with Sebald’s article on Charles Sealsfield in \textit{Unheimliche Heimat} and sees Sebald’s animal imagery as an attempt to avoid anthropocentrism and speciesism.\textsuperscript{47} Rebecca Walkowitz attributes to Sebald a “Horkheimian gaze” in her comparison of three canonical modernists (Conrad, Joyce, Woolf,) and three contemporary authors (Ishiguro, Rushdie, Sebald,) who all “employ a double consciousness…reflection on reflection” that reminds her of the Frankfurt School.\textsuperscript{48} Simon Ward notes the centrality of \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} in all of Sebald’s works,\textsuperscript{49} as does Ben Hutchinson, who asserts that Sebald remained stylistically indebted to the book throughout his literary career.\textsuperscript{50} Graham Jackman goes one further, arguing that the critique in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} is on “virtually every page” of Sebald’s last major prose work, \textit{Austerlitz} (Jackman 462). What these scholars (and others) are sensing is the echo in Sebald’s oeuvre of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s famous diagnosis that the process of enlightenment, by which the

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\item It is interesting to note that Sebald underscored and bracketed several passages in the book with a red felt pen, some with a soft pencil, and some with a harder pencil—which implies that he reread the texts a number of times. Since this volume is obviously so central to Sebald’s understanding of modernity, I have included for reference purposes at the close of this study a complete transcription of Sebald’s annotations in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} (Appendix A).
\item Simon Ward, “Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W.G. Sebald,” (Long and Whitehead 65-66)
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mythic world was replaced with a scientific one, had necessitated disposing of the notion of a meaningful universe.

Sebald’s careful reading of and resonance with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Critique of Instrumental Reason* is evident in the kinds of markings he made in his own well-worn copies. His method of reading was highly interactive. He underlined phrases, circled words, placed brackets around particularly meaningful passages—one such bracketed passage extends over three pages—and fairly often wrote notes to himself in the margins of his books. In Sebald’s copy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* there are almost 160 such annotations, which is somewhat astonishing, since the book contains only 275 pages. This means, of course, that there are far more notes than can be addressed within the scope of this study, but a few examples serve to illustrate the kinds of ideas Sebald found important. Early on in the book, for example, he placed his characteristic brackets around a sentence that neatly sums up what Horkheimer and Adorno found so disturbing about the Enlightenment. “Aufklärung” they write “ist totalitär” (enlightenment is totalitarian, DA 12/DoE 4). This statement could be rather shocking when one remembers, as did Jean Améry, for example, that the European Enlightenment brought about the dawn of our most basic notions of tolerance and freedom. But Horkheimer and Adorno mean by this a very particular kind of totalitarianism. Just previous to making this statement they had observed that even the most serious attacks on enlightenment from the quarter of myth actually acknowledge its rationality and thus strengthen it. Thus, enlightenment weathers and comes to dominate even the most earnest detraction simply because engaging enlightenment thinking in argument only reaffirms the dominance and validity of argumentation and hence rationality itself. And Sebald’s own texts reflect this analysis. In *Rings of Saturn*, for example, we read that

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51 The statement Sebald bracketed is specifically singled out by Améry as “[containing] opposition to logic, irrational fury against the technological, industrial world, the fundamentally mistaken attitude that the historical Enlightenment was none other than the instrument of a brutal bourgeoisie ensuring its supremacy” (Améry 235).
the silk industry in Germany had been ‘rationalized’ to a destructive, “despotischen” degree (RS 340/287). This is Sebald’s take on the principle of domination inherent in enlightened thinking, which Horkheimer and Adorno blame on the origins of enlightenment itself: the awakening of subjectivity. This “Erwachen des Subjekts” (awakening of the subject), Horkheimer and Adorno contend in another sentence from the book’s initial chapter, which Sebald also bracketed in his copy, “wird erkauft durch die Anerkennung der Macht als des Prinzips aller Beziehung” (is bought with the recognition of power as the principle of all relationships, DA 15/ DoE 5). And the sources to which they point in antiquity (Genesis, Archilochos, Solon), show that even in myth, humans were ranked above nature.

Sebald also highlighted several pregnant passages that deal with the sacrificial victim, especially those that speak to the victimization not only of humans, but also of nature. Perhaps the most striking appears on page 58. Horkheimer and Adorno are discussing the manner in which Odysseus employs rational deceit to substitute sacrificial victims for himself:

Der ehrwürdige Glaube ans Opfer aber ist wahrscheinlich bereits ein eingedrilltes Schema, nach welchem die Unterworfenen das ihnen angetane Unrecht sich selber nochmals antun, um es ertragen zu können. Es rettet nicht durch stellvertretende Rückgabe die unmittelbare, nur eben unterbrochene Kommunikation, welche die heutigen Mythologen ihm zuschreiben, sondern die Institution des Opfers selber ist das Mal einer historischen Katastrophe, ein Akt von Gewalt, der Menschen und Natur gleichermaßen widerfährt.

The venerable belief in sacrifice is probably itself a behavior pattern drilled into the subjugated, by which they reenact against themselves the wrong done to them in order to be able to bear it. Sacrifice as representative restoration does not reinstate immediate communication, which had been merely interrupted, as present-day mythologies claim; rather, the institution of sacrifice is itself the mark of an historical catastrophe, an act of violence done equally to human beings and to nature. (DA 58/DoE 41)

The phrase, “historical catastrophe” is particularly telling, since it is a description Sebald later employs in several of his works, most prominently on the last page of The Rings of Saturn. That
the victimization touches not only humans, but also the rest of nature seems to be what attracted Sebald’s attention. The world is broken on the altar of human interaction with it.

Another passage that Sebald bracketed places this observation more securely in the context of European civilization. “Jeder Versuch, den Naturzwang zu brechen, indem Natur gebrochen wird, gerät nur umso tiefer in den Naturzwang hinein. So ist die Bahn der europäischen Zivilisation verlaufen” (Any attempt to break the compulsion of nature by breaking nature only succumbs more deeply to that compulsion. That has been the trajectory of European civilization, DA 19/DoE 9). In context, Horkheimer and Adorno are claiming that even the Hitler Youth movement is not a regression into barbarism, but the triumph of repressive egalitarianism—the repression of individuality. Sebald seems to have been especially drawn to the phrase, which he not only bracketed in red marker, but also marked with pencil in the margin. The notion that an attempt to break out of the power of nature “only succumbs more deeply to that compulsion,” and that this principle is legible in the course of European civilization seems to have struck a particular chord with Sebald, who gives special place in his work to those instances where attempts to break out of natural bonds only enthralls humans more securely to instinct.

In addition to intensely reading Dialectic of Enlightenment and Minima Moralia, Sebald clearly digested Max Horkheimer’s Critique of Instrumental Reason, which states the case against the Enlightenment slightly differently. In a long passage Sebald bracketed, Horkheimer puts it this way:

Was sind die Konsequenzen der Formalisierung der Vernunft? Gerechtigkeit, Gleichheit, Glück, Toleranz, all die Begriffe, die, wie erwähnt, in den vorgehenden Jahrhunderten der Vernunft innenwohnen oder von ihr sanktioniert sein sollten, haben ihre geistigen Wurzeln verloren. Sie sind noch Ziele und Zwecke, aber es gibt keine rationale Instanz, die befugt wäre, ihnen einen Wert zuzusprechen und sie mit einer objektiven Realität zusammenzubringen. Approbiert durch verehrungswürdige historische Dokumente, mögen sie sich

52 Published in the United States also as The Eclipse of Reason, New York: Continuum, 2004.
Horkheimer’s critique, which aims equally at Pragmatism, Scientism and liberal democracy, which he sees as inexorably drawn to fascism, questions here whether the values dear to enlightened societies are supportable when those societies rest only on science.

The marginalia and reading marks give an indication of how intensely Sebald read the most important works of the Frankfurt School, and a glance through his own academic writing reveals how often and in what context Adorno and Horkheimer informed his view of the world and of literature. He references Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, for example, repeatedly his essays from the 1970s and 80s, such as “Thanatos: zur Motivstruktur in Kafkas Schloss” (404), “The Undiscover’d Country: The Death Motif in Kafka’s Schloss” (27; cf. “Das unentdeckte Land”
But even where Sebald fails to cite them, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s influence is still palpable. His 1988 essay on Charles Sealsfield, “Ansichten aus der Neuen Welt” (UH 17-39), is a good example of this. Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa has observed that Sebald’s analysis is itself merely an elaboration on the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Schmidt-Hannisa’s estimation, Sebald’s “sketchy reading” of *Cajütenbuch*, which sees in Sealsfield’s book an “Indiz für das Verhältnis von Mensch und Natur in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts” (evidence of the relationship between humans and nature in the first half of the 19th century, UH 35), is “based on the insight formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer that the pre-enlightened subject preserves itself by keeping nature at a distance because it is inconceivable and threatening” (Schmidt-Hanissa 37). For that matter, much of Sebald’s terminology is directly indebted to Adorno, such as, for example, his use of the expression “falsche Welt,” which Helmut Schmitz and Jonathan Long both point out is a play on a sentence from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*: “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” (Wrong life cannot be lived rightly, *Minima Moralia* 48/39; Schmitz 316 n.30; Long, *Image*, 158). Thus, though Sebald never mentions Adorno and Horkheimer by name in the essay, their work influences not only his analysis, but even the words he chooses to conduct this analysis. It is this deep influence of the Frankfurt School, not only on a thematic, but even a syntactical level, that Ben Hutchinson’s recent monograph, *W.G. Sebald—die dialektische Imagination* (2009) goes to great lengths to demonstrate (4-8).

Another essay in which the Frankfurt School texts play both a direct and indirect role is Sebald’s “Schock und Ästhetik—zu den Romanen Döblins” (1975), in which he takes that author
to task for what Sebald considers excessive depictions of violence. In addition to the seven citations that directly relate to Adorno or Horkheimer—which is significant considering that the brief essay has only 22 notes—Sebald borrows notions from the two without attribution. Citing Horkheimer on page 246, Sebald notes that the “unerlöste Dialektik” (unresolved dialectic) of pain and pleasure that characterizes life under the sway of myth is also a sign that regression has overthrown enlightenment and that however powerless the protest of philosophy had been, it only testifies to the intention of keeping thought from withering in fear (246). And then Sebald concludes, “Hinter diese Schule zurückzulaufen, bedeutet die Anerkennung der dem Mythus stets zugehörigen, unverstellten Gewalt als dem superioren Organisationsprinzip von Natur und Gesellschaft” (246, emphasis mine) which is in essence an unattributed reformulation of a sentence from Dialectic of Enlightenment that Sebald had himself underlined, “Das Erwachen des Subjekts wird erkauft durch die Anerkennung der Macht als des Prinzip aller Beziehung” (The awakening of the subject is bought with the recognition of power as the principle of all relationships, DA 15/DoE 5). Sebald has observed that Döblin believed the task of a writer was to first apprehend reality and then “massacre” it. Then, citing Adorno’s Minima Moralia, Sebald writes, “Die Romane Döblins stehen sämtlich dafür ein, daß dieses theoretische Postulat getreu in die literarische Praxis übersetzt wurde. In ihnen wird Leben verwandelt ‘in eine zeitlose Folge von Schocks…, zwischen denen….paralysierte Zwischenräume klaffen’” (Minima Moralia 63, Schock 242). Citing Horkheimer’s description of Francis Bacon in Critique of Instrumental Reason, Sebald writes “Die Folter als ein Mittel zur Erforschung der Wahrheit wird hier zur erkenntnistheoretischen Methode erhoben” (torture as a means of investigating truth is elevated here to an epistemological method, 245). Sebald has internalized the argument that the search for knowledge in an enlightened world entails that world’s vivisection and destruction. On the
facing page, Sebald quotes directly from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in fact, the last sentence he had marked in his own copy: “Den Körper lähmt die physische Verletzung, den Geist der Schrecken” (The body is crippled by physical injury, the mind by fear, Schock 247; cf. DA 274/DoE 213). Somewhat later, Sebald references Adorno’s negative comments on Kafka (from *Notes to Literature*) and claims that these observations actually apply to Döblin (248). Later in this same discussion, Sebald also quotes a passage from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* in which Adorno claims that the depiction of gruesomeness or cruelty in literature, for which Sebald was criticizing Döblin in this article, actually underscores the insufficiency of art to comprehend cruelty:

Erhebt in neuen Kunstwerken Grausamkeit unverstellt ihr Haupt, so bekennt sie das Wahre ein, daß vor der Übermacht der Realität Kunst a priori die Transformation des Furchtbaren in die Form nicht mehr sich zutrauen darf. Das Grausame ist ein Stück ihrer kritischen Selbstbesinnung: sie verzweifelt an dem Machtanspruch, den sie als versöhnte vollstreckt. Nackt tritt das Grausame aus den Kunstwerken hervor, sobald ihr eigener Bann erschüttert ist.

If in modern artworks cruelty raises its head undisguised, it confirms the truth that in the face of the overwhelming force of reality art can no longer rely on its a priori ability to transform the dreadful into form. Cruelty is an element of art’s critical reflection on itself; art despairs over the claim to power that it fulfills in being reconciled. Cruelty steps forward unadorned from the artworks as soon as their own spell is broken” (*Ästhetische Theorie* 81 / *Aesthetic Theory* 65)

Sebald closes the essay with yet another quote from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: Regression into unbelief—not in God, but in the meaning of human existence—which the formal and substantial elements of the shock-aesthetic demand, “shadows all opposition to affirmative culture. Spiritualization in art must prove its ability to rise above this threat of regression and to recover the suppressed differentiation; otherwise art deteriorates into a violent act of spirit” (*Aesthetic Theory* 121).
Unavailable Responses

These examples from Sebald’s reading show that Sebald came to see the modern world as broken. However, the typical strategies for dealing with this condition were not available to him. He took, for example, no solace in religion, since he could see no hope in rehabilitation by means of its total claims. Sebald had left the Catholic Church in his teens and continued to reject organized religion for the rest of his life, though, as Richard Sheppard maintains, he retained a “residual religiosity” that expressed itself in his interest in (as we will discuss in the following chapter) Jewish messianism. As he explained in a letter to Gershom Scholem 2 June 1972, he had developed enough familiarity with the Church to desire to escape it. “Ich bin 1944 in Südbayern geboren,” he writes, “und habe dort eine katholizistische Kindheit und Jugend durchgemacht, weshalb ich mit der Praxis der Orthodoxie und dem Wunsch ihr zu entkommen in gewisser Weise zumindest vertraut bin” (I was born in 1944 in southern Bavaria, and there went through a Catholic childhood and youth, for which reason I am, in a certain way at least, familiar with the practice of orthodoxy and with the wish to escape it).

Sebald’s disdain for the Church can be seen, for example, in his excoriation of the “lisping” and “sanctimonious” Catholic priests whose religious instruction is vehemently erased by Paul Bereyter in The Emigrants (Au 53-54/E 35). He even goes so far as to accuse Christ of a “böser Kunstfehler” (serious error of judgment) in his retelling from Rings of Saturn of the Gadarene exorcism from the Gospel of Matthew (RS 86/67; cf. Matthew 8:28-32, Mark 5:1-13, Luke 8:26-33). In Sebald’s last prose work, it is the Catholic side of Austerlitz’ family that has always been eccentric and crazy (A 127/84) and, as Jonathan Long notes, the evangelistic brand of Catholicism practiced by Austerlitz’ uncle

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53 Richard Sheppard “Dexter Sinister” 424. Sheppard indicates that Sebald left the church at age 17 and relates the following explanation: “A close school-friend of his told me in 2005 that a major reason why [Sebald] did so was his sense of outrage at a religious system which sought to keep children obedient and deferential to authority by means of the fear of damnation” (“Reception” 366).
54 Letter to Gershom Scholem 11 June 1972, DLA
Evelyn, which motivates him to fund missions to the Congo, is only another form of imperialism (Long, Image 45 n.16; cf. A 130/84-85). Clearly, the kind of redemption promised by religious belief was insufficient to Sebald, primarily because it offered no alternative to domination as “the principle of all relationships.” Indeed, it was the authoritarian structure of the Magisterium that seems to have alienated Sebald from organized religion, especially Catholicism. Sebald reserved his most vitriolic censure for those authors, such as Döblin, who adopted Catholicism in response to the ruptures of modernity.

On the other hand, Sebald also rejected political engagement as a means of bringing about the kind of secular “Verbesserung der irdischen Lage” (improvement of the earthly situation, MZ 60), which, as we will discover in the following chapter, lies at the heart of Jewish messianism. Other members of his generation had opted for the solution of political activism, but Sebald was not optimistic enough about the potential for positive change through politics. Though Sebald’s interest in an ethical literary response to history implies engagement, he curiously eschewed overt political activism. What makes this noteworthy is the fact that he actually would have belonged quite neatly in the ranks of the Student Movement of 1968.

Of course, the “68er” movement was by no means one-dimensional, nor even cohesive, but, as Sabine von Dirke has pointed out, there were some features that characterized a majority of the student movement leaders and enable us to identify general categories of activists: “traditionalist socialist” and “anti-authoritarian” (von Dirke 32-33). Sebald was caught, so to speak, between these camps. Like the early anti-authoritarian wing of the movement, Sebald embraced the Frankfurt School and was influenced by a revival of Freudian theories (via Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich). But this wing of the Student Movement gradually gave way to the traditionalist socialists, a more orthodox socialist development, which fell more strictly into
Marxist, Marxist-Leninist and Maoist camps—none of which seemed to appeal to Sebald. Nevertheless, there were notable points of consonance between the positions mapped out by leading figures such as Rudi Dutschke, Bernd Rabehl and Peter Schneider and those espoused by Sebald. They shared a distrust of the dominant culture, a disgust at the uninhibited, (even nuclear) postwar rearmament and sadness over the failure of Vietnam War protests to arouse sympathy for its victims and a change in policy. They also shared, importantly, an awareness of the taboo of the Nazi past and the perception that former Nazis had been seamless reintegrated into postwar society—an awareness kindled in part by the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1965). Like these student protesters, Sebald became convinced that late-capitalist society was fed by, as Adorno put it, the culture industry. Another point of consonance between Sebald and the more radical students of his generation was their shared distaste for the hierarchical university system, as Richard Sheppard, a UEA colleague of Sebald’s, has pointed out (“Woods, Trees” 87). Like many in the student movement, Sebald also became convinced that only art had the power to resist capitalism’s reality principle (von Dirke 41), which is a consonance further explored in chapter two of this study.

Nevertheless, there were significant points of dissonance between Sebald and his contemporaries. The student movement remained, for the most part, optimistic about the possibility of change in the late-capitalist society. As Uta Poiger has pointed out, the student activists hoped that youthful intellectuals could work in solidarity with third-world activists “through the power of their reason and sentiment” (Poiger 162-63). In the movement’s early days, there was as yet no apocalyptic tone in its rhetoric, as von Dirke observes (37). Sebald, on the other hand, struck a melancholic note throughout his career. Also, whereas many in the Student Movement rejected avant-garde art as subjective and individualistic and championed
openly propagandistic, working-class art, Sebald saw value in the shattered, schizophrenic poetry of Ernst Herbeck, very much against the stream of his day.\textsuperscript{55} Seemingly hermetic, damaged art held creative and revolutionary potential for Sebald. But, perhaps the most important difference of perspective between Sebald and some members of the Student Movement was their respective stances regarding technology. Specifically, a number of SDS luminaries, such as Dutschke and Rabehl had come to believe that what was wrong with what Adorno famously called the Culture Industry was not the problem of manipulation and self-feeding domination (which was, after all, Adorno’s original point), but rather its goals and structure. As Bernd Rabehl put it, “Therefore this technology as it now exists must be destroyed, eliminated […] Not the knowledge that it contains, not its domination of nature, but its current structure and goals must be eliminated” and “technology, under truly democratic control, […] could be liberating” (Rabehl et al., 1968 as cited by von Dirke 37, emphasis mine). By contrast, Sebald was more deeply troubled by the domination of nature and was highly skeptical – even dismissive – about the possibility of a technological solution to a problem that he believed had been caused by the evolution of a technologically driven world. Sebald did engage in a literary critique of ideology, as Martin Klebes observes:

“Routinely striking the post of a muckraking investigator of critical commonplaces fossilized as self-evident truths since time immemorial, Sebald goes about his business of exposing ‘progressive’ literary figures as traditionalists, and neglected ones as unrecognized groundbreakers, operating in the mode of a relentless critique of ideology.” (Klebes 65)

However, his method of critique remained notably uncommitted politically. Thus, despite their shared concerns about the conditions of modern life, Sebald was conspicuously out of step with his contemporaries, or at the very least, as Anne Fuchs has recently put it, “a rather reluctant 1968er” (Fuchs, “Memory Contests,” 172).

For example, on the 14 December 1968, Sebald wrote to Adorno asking for a recommendation letter to support Sebald’s application for a scholarship to attend Cambridge University (Atze and Loquai 15); it was assistance which Adorno did not render, and for understandable reasons. The offices of the Institute for Social Research had already been invaded on the 8th of December by student activists at the University of Frankfurt as part of their infamous “Spartakus-Seminar” sit-in. As Marcel Atze and Sven Myer point out, Sebald must have simply neglected to read the newspapers, or perhaps lived in an island of personal concerns (Atze and Myer 32-33). At any rate, he seems to have misjudged or maybe simply dropped out of the spirit of the times. Instead, he retreated to a comfortable bourgeois life in Norfolk, England, restoring a “dilapidated rectory in Poringland” and teaching at UEA (Sheppard “Reception” 357).

Sebald differed from his generation in his lack of political engagement and he differed from Adorno in that he did not trust reflective reason to correct the damage of instrumental reason. For that reason, while Sebald’s assessment of the Enlightenment is indebted to Horkheimer and Adorno, he does not merely reiterate their project, which remained committed to the intellectual toolkit of the Enlightenment (that is to say, doubt, hypothesis, and experimentation to discover causal relationships). Christopher Rocco points out in his reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that, though it promises freedom, enlightenment subjects its practitioners to a “‘second’ nature, (in the form of economic, technical, and bureaucratic necessity); it provides us with the power to fashion our world and our identities, yet it reveals our impotence and self-ignorance [...]. Enlightenment thus paradoxically brings both liberation and slavery, freedom and constraint, self-conscious transparency and ignorant opacity about what it is we are doing to ourselves, to our world, and to others” (Rocco 79). It is this self-ignorance
that is perhaps the most unexpected consequence of myopic Zweckrationalität, and that which Horkheimer and Adorno then set out to amend. If enlightenment can somehow be enlightened about itself, then the entwinement of myth and enlightenment might be undone.

Ironically, with that scheme in place it becomes apparent that Horkheimer and Adorno are continuing to operate in the framework of the European Enlightenment even as they try to disentangle enlightenment from myth. They design their narrative to elucidate causal relationships in history, proposing explanations of phenomena based on supposed real connections between them, which they had themselves identified as that which rendered the mythical world “already enlightenment” (DA 17/DoE 8). And when they find the cause of enlightenment’s descent to barbarism, they do not shrink from offering a solution (in the form of their own book): the application of non-objectifying rationality to rationality gone amok. Indeed, it was Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s public commitment to the toolkit of enlightenment, rational critical thought, at the apparent expense of political activism, that ultimately led to hostility between the Frankfurt School and the student activists of the “68er” generation. Ignoring Adorno’s interventions in the public sphere, his naysayers accused him of turning away from politics and resorting to the proverbial ivory tower. But Adorno maintained that his was the more rational path. The danger in action, Adorno responded in Marginalia to Theory and Praxis, is that it becomes irrational (Critical Models, 259-78, esp. 271). Clearly he and Horkheimer remained dedicated to solving the problems of modern society within the framework of reasoned argument. And yet, in their attempt to circumvent the development of instrumental reason or, in Dana Villa’s words, to “prevent this particular fruit from appearing on reason’s genealogical tree” (5), they paradoxically undermined the footings on which the whole apparatus of enlightenment rested: the application of reason itself. Horkheimer and Adorno were faced
with a dilemma. They could forsake rationality entirely, in which case offering critique would be pointless and their entire project would collapse. On the other hand, they could offer a solution based on reason, in which case they would fall into paradox. As Jürgen Habermas put it in his withering analysis, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “denounces the totalitarian development of Enlightenment with its own means—a performative contradiction of which Adorno was well aware” (“Entwinement of Myth,” 22).

Whether or not Horkheimer and Adorno solved this problem depends on one’s interpretation. Habermas concluded that Adorno and Horkheimer had ultimately forsaken the rationalist inheritance of the Enlightenment and embarked on totalizing critique in the tradition of Nietzsche’s theory of power without resolving the contradictions it entailed (*Philosophical Discourse*, 114). But he may have been overstating his case. More sympathetically, Christopher Rocco has proposed that the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* consciously structured their book to criticize its own aims in a way that “precludes reading it as merely a work of total theory” (Rocco 82). Dana Villa has expressed another view still. Horkheimer and Adorno, Villa insists, chose to accommodate the paradox. Since Horkheimer and Adorno asserted that the urge to control nature through reason (motivated by survival) had resulted in alienation from nature itself (and thus from others and the self as parts of nature), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* proposes that the solution to dehumanizing, instrumental reason is to apply more reason to it—a special kind of reason—in order to reconcile with nature, or as Villa puts it:

[For Hegel] the point was not to read humanity back into nature, à la Rousseau. Rather, it was to create a narrative of human and cultural *Bildung* that would enable us to see the necessity of both opposition to and reconciliation with nature […]. Horkheimer and Adorno take up this same broad problematic, even though they reject Hegel’s “spirit-centric” approach. The reconciliation with nature—the nature we ourselves already are—is essential if culture is not to ceaselessly return to barbarism. The lesson of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not that reason must become “reflective” but that it must become nonobjectifying. Then and only then
will the relentless subsumption of the particular under the universal cease; then and only then will human Bildung stop being coeval with domination and self-sacrifice. (44-45)

What Villa has put a finger on is the redemptive motif of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s theory; they envision a way of perceiving the rupture with nature and bridging the rupture by means of, in Villa’s (not Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s) term, “non-objectifying” reason. Nevertheless, the cure for the disease of rationality gone wrong is bafflingly more of the disease itself, a supposedly clearer-headed rationality. Horkheimer and Adorno return to Enlightenment strategies and betray a commitment to the Enlightenment’s rationality even as they attempt to undo its aftereffects.56 Sebald’s scheme, by contrast, neither discards nor relies on rationality, but rather seeks instead a third way—an idiosyncratic method of seemingly irrational juxtapositions by which he hopes to discover meaningful, non-causal connections across time and space.

Toward a Literature of Restitution

The only option left to Sebald was idiosyncratic: a literary engagement that did not mobilize politically or offer a concrete solution (which would have been the avowal of totality). It is this mode of writing that Sebald termed a literature of restitution, and which the following chapter will elucidate as indebted to the Jewish messianic tradition. A number of other researchers have already pointed out the redemptive strain in Sebald’s work. David Darby, for example, locates it in Sebald’s practice of bringing histories to paper (Darby 266). Others, such

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56 It is in this respect that Jean Améry’s various criticisms of Horkheimer and Adorno, of which Sebald surely took note, seem to generally miss the point. When Améry avers that the Enlightenment as the “philosophia perennis…contains all its correctives within itself, so that to dislodge it dialectically is a laborious game” (Améry 232), he is actually mobilizing the same line of thought avowed by Horkheimer and Adorno. His “horror and deep disquiet” (235) upon a second reading of Dialectic of Enlightenment is misplaced, since the book neither “denies the Enlightenment” nor “renounces the education of the human race” (237), but rather places confidence in the power of rationality—provided it is the right kind—to heal itself.
as Russell Kilbourn, point to intertextuality as the site of Sebald’s redemptive writing (“Kafka, Nabokov” 34 and 63). Taking a different tack, Amir Eschel has noted what he calls a “poetics of suspension: a poetics that suspends notions of chronology, succession, comprehension, and closure” (Eschel 74) and thereby opens the possibility for gaining, in Sebald’s words, “an empathetic insight into history” (76). This is similar to what Richard Gray refers to as “writing at the Roche Limit” by which he means that zone of tension where Sebald can maintain a precarious balance between entropy and cohesion (“Roche Limit” 41). Another of Sebald’s readers, Helen Finch, has focused on Sebald’s use of landscapes as a kind of redemption (Finch 179-97, esp. 181).

I believe that these observations all hold true but they fail to fully take into account influence of Jewish messianic traditions, which will be the subject of the next chapter. Sebald gathers stories that illustrate the brokenness of the world and makes connections between them implicitly by means of juxtaposition and explicitly in speculations about their connectedness that do not rely on rational explanations. This is importantly not the avowal of irrationality, but rather a simple unwillingness to rely on verifiable causality in making connections between the disparate phenomena Sebald collects and records. His reluctance actually echoes a sentiment of which Sebald took notice in Horkheimer’s Critique of Instrumental Reason. In his copy, Sebald bracketed a quote from Bertrand Russell: “Ein inkonsequentes System kann durchaus weniger Falsches enthalten als ein konsequentes” (An inconsistent system may well contain less falsehood than a consistent one, Kritik 19/Eclipse 6). The notion that inconsistency might insulate philosophical and (one presumes) literary systems from falsehood is curious, because one of the foundational concepts of logic is the principle of non-contradiction. But what Horkheimer is getting at is not the avoidance of logical fallacy, but rather the avoidance of
human falsity, the pretense to knowledge which a logically consistent system may temporarily
disguise, for the claim of totality may turn out to be more dangerous than error. As the
remainder of this dissertation will seek to demonstrate, tracing Sebald’s resonance with the
anguish represented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and other classic Frankfurt School texts is
easy enough.

In a passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, around which Sebald placed his
characteristic brackets, Horkheimer and Adorno write: “Der mittägliche panische Schrecken, in
dem die Menschen der Natur als Allheit plötzlich innewurden, hat seine Korrespondenz
gefunden in der Panik, die heute in jedem Augenblick bereit ist auszubrechen: die Menschen
erwarten, daß die Welt, die ohne Ausgang ist, von einer Allheit in Brand gesetzt wird, die sie
selber sind und über die sie nichts vermögen” (The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly
appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is
ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue,
to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are
powerless, DA 35/DoE 22). As we will see in the following chapters, Sebald’s discomfort with
the human abuse of nature emerges in his poetry (Chapter Three), dramatic compositions
(Chapter Four) and prose (Chapter Five). This apocalyptic vision permeates Sebald’s oeuvre,
doing much to explain the saturnine disposition—the melancholic dread—that Sebald transmits,
for example, in *The Rings of Saturn*. Alienating rationalization is omnipresent. It is hard to
escape, for example, the traces of *Zweckrationalität* on humans and the animal world in the
recurrent motif of silk from *The Rings of Saturn*, with which Sebald problematizes humanity’s
interaction with animals under the influence of instrumental reason.57

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57 For an in-depth study of the theme, see Sara Friedrichsmeyer, “Sebalds Heringe und Seidenwürmer,” Martin and
Wintemeyer 11-26.
Sebald’s fascination with the animal world does not seem to be centered on a concern for animal rights, but on the problem of human cruelty and pain in general. The vivisection of herring is just another example of the human capacity for inhumanity which reached its zenith (at least in that it comes closest to hurting humanity itself) in mechanized genocide. While it is going too far to claim that the herring and silkworms are ciphers for the victims of the Holocaust, or that Sebald equates their suffering to that of humans—Sebald leaves the exact nature of animal suffering open when he observes that we do not know what a herring feels (RS 75/57)—we can safely say that in Sebald’s construction, cruelty to animals is part of the same phenomenon that leads to genocide. The films to which he alludes in reference to both herring and silkworms were produced in Germany at the height of Nazi power. He seems to be saying that inhumanity is the same whether it falls on herring, silkworms, or other humans and that the influence of instrumental reason is to blame for it.

Meaningful connections that do not rely on causality are important to Sebald and, as Chapter Five will further elucidate, this is especially apparent in The Rings of Saturn. As Sara Friedrichsmeyer points out in her recent contribution, “Sebald’s Elective and Other Affinities,” Sebald is engaged in a project of making sense of the world through the use of coincidence (Denham and McCulloh 77-89, esp. 88-89). Dialectic of Enlightenment is important to understanding Sebald’s works, but the main point of divergence between them and Dialectic of Enlightenment is evident in the solutions they propose.

In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno, who approach enlightenment for causal analysis, Sebald seems to be asserting a meaning that does not rely on causality and so escapes the bind Adorno and Horkheimer are in when they use the tools of the Enlightenment to try to fix the damage done by civilization. In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, Sebald indicated that “all our
philosophical systems, all our systems of creed, all our constructions, even the technological ones, are built in that way, in order to make some sort of sense, which there isn’t, as we all know” (Schwartz 97). Rather than construct a new totality to make sense of the world, Sebald reacts to this kind of dissatisfying reductionism and reliance on formula and probability by setting up historical connections that are impossibly improbable, non-formulaic and non-causal in their relationships. But he asserts them and inserts them into his text as though this lack of real relationship between two strings of narrative does not matter (which is bold given the rationalistic, causal mode in which narrative has traditionally worked since the Enlightenment.) Without proposing a new kind of mysticism, he explores the idea that there is a pattern that will always remain hidden beyond the human perception, but that nevertheless exerts an influence on human existence.

So what conclusion can be drawn from Sebald’s eclectic, apparently associative, but certainly non-causal strings of coincidence? Sebald needed to escape the dehumanizing “Cartesian gaze” to which he attributes both humanity’s mistreatment of animals as well as the horrors of the Holocaust (RS 27/17). But in accomplishing this, he will not replace one structure of ‘rationalized’ totality with another more to his liking. Rather than proposing a new system, Sebald uses the occasion of unsystematic reflection to chart the process by which he makes sense of the world.

In this chapter, we have pursued a thesis based on a fact that many researchers have already pointed out, namely, that Sebald was deeply affected by his encounters with the canonical texts of the Frankfurt School. The markings he made in his own copies of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* reveal the kinds of notions that shaped his negative appraisal of modernity. But as this chapter has demonstrated, the diagnosis that the world had
been broken by the application of instrumentalized rationality brought Sebald to an important
decision that would guide his literary response. The solutions suggested by religion, political
activism and even Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reflective rationality proved either distasteful or
insufficient to Sebald. In response, he developed an idiosyncratic, non-systematic literature of
restitution. However deeply influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* proved
to be, perhaps the most pregnant passage from the Frankfurt School that Sebald selected for
emphasis comes at the end of Adorno’s aphoristic reflections on exile, *Minima Moralia*, a copy
of which Sebald acquired in 1965. In the closing pages of these “Reflexionen aus dem
beschädigten Leben” (reflections on a damaged life), Adorno closes with a long contemplation
on the future of moral philosophy. Here is how it appears in Sebald’s copy:

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*Zum Ende.*—Philosophie, wie sie im Angesicht der Verzweiflung einzig noch zu
verantworten ist, wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom
Standpunkt der Erlösung aus sich darstellen. Erkenntnis hat kein Licht, als das
von der Erlösung her auf die Welt scheint: alles andere erschöpft sich in der
Nachkonstruktion und bleibt ein Stück Technik. Perspektiven müßten hergestellt
werden, in denen die Welt ähnlich sich versetzt, verfremdet, ihre Risse und
Schründe offenbart, wie sie einmal als bedürftig und entstellt im Messianischen
Lichte daliegen wird. Ohne Willkür und Gewalt, ganz aus der Fühlung mit den
Gegenständen heraus solche Perspektiven zu gewinnen, darauf allein kommt es
dem Denken an. Es ist das Allereinfachste, weil der Zustand unabwendbar nach
solcher Erkenntnis ruft, ja weil die vollendete Negativität, einmal ganz ins Auge
gefaßt, zur Spiegelschrift ihres Gegenteils zusammenschießt. Aber es ist auch das
ganz Unmögliche, weil es einen Standort voraussetzt, der dem Bannkreis des
Daseins, wäre es auch nur um ein Winziges, entrückt ist, während doch jede
mögliche Erkenntnis nicht bloß dem was ist erst abgetrotzt werden muß, um
verbindlich zu geraten, sondern eben darum selber auch mit der gleichen
Entstelltheit und Bedürftigkeit geschlagen ist, der sie zu entrinnen vorhat. Je
leidenschaftlicher der Gedanke gegen sein Bedingtsein sich abdichtet um des
Unbedingten willen, um so bewußtloser, und damit verhängnisvoller, fällt er der
Welt zu. Selbst seine eigene Unmöglichkeit muß er noch begreifen um der
Möglichkeit willen. Gegenüber der Förderung, die damit an ihn ergeht, ist aber
die Frage nach der Wirklichkeit oder Unwirklichkeit der Erlösung selber fast
gleichgültig.
Finale.—The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only first be wrested from what is, if it shall hold any good, but it is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. (333-44/247)

The impossible, yet necessary philosophical work Adorno describes here leads us to the next phase of this dissertation.
Chapter Two

Melancholia or Violence? W.G. Sebald and the Dangerous Promise of the Messiah

Abstract

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Sebald’s reception of texts from the Frankfurt School led Sebald to view the world as basically broken by modernity’s employment of instrumental reason, and how Sebald’s views on a possible remedy differed from Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s own solution of reflective rationality. In this chapter, I will outline how Sebald’s vision for mending the world corresponded to, and grew out of, Sebald’s early academic work, in which the Jewish messianic tradition played a pivotal role. Examining Sebald’s use of messianism as an interpretive tool will reveal the aesthetic-ethical standards against which he judged both artworks and their creators. The sense of Sebald’s poetics which we will derive in this chapter will in turn help us to understand the style of his subsequent literary attempts at restitution, which will be the subject of the following chapter.

A number of Sebald’s readers have already demonstrated that his scholarly writing was rather seriously flawed. He refused to adhere to the rigors of academic writing and insisted on closing the gap between reader and author, which tends to rob his critical work of critical distance. Thus, his essays—and they grew increasingly essayistic over the course of Sebald’s career—are often less interesting as scholarship than as evidence of his own standards for literature. This teeters admittedly in the direction of a fallacy, namely that the author’s utterances are authoritative regarding his own text. But I hope to insulate this essay from such methodological missteps by examining not Sebald’s conscious engagement with his own work’s interpretation,

58 Ulrich Simon has recently argued compellingly that Sebald’s most provocative essays, especially those dealing with the allied air raids in Germany, were inflammatory precisely because of Sebald’s inability to maintain the appropriate distance from his subject, (“Der Provokateur als Literaturhistoriker: Anmerkungen zu Literaturbegriff und Argumentationsverfahren in W. G. Sebalds essayistischen Schriften,” in Sebald Lektüren, Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai, eds., (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005): 78–104). Others have taken similarly critical stances of Sebald’s methodology, accusing him of mixing subjective and arbitrary judgments in with his analysis (see Mary Cosgrove’s recent article, “Melancholy Competitions: W.G. Sebald Reads Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer” GLL 59.2 (2006): 217-32, and Martin Klebes’s “Sebald’s Pathographies,” Denham and McCulloh 65-75.) Still others accuse Sebald of simply getting the facts wrong as, for example, Wilfried Wims, (“Speak no Evil, Write no Evil: in Search of a Usable Language for Destruction,” Denham and McCulloh 183-204). Another criticism is that Sebald forsakes the appropriate, sober scholarly register when writing about history (see Andreas Huyssen, “On Rewritings and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature about the Luftkrieg” LiLi 31 (2001): 72-90).
(i.e. his numerous interviews), but rather by studying his approach to other authors as a kind of archeological dig, in which we may piece together this author’s literary sensibilities. It is in this latter sense that this chapter proposes to survey some of Sebald’s relevant scholarly texts.

This proves, however, to be a rather large task. Though Sebald’s academic career began with a focus on Carl Sternheim, the subject of his Master’s thesis, *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelminischen Ära* (Carl Sternheim: Critic and Victim of the Wilhelmine Era), his interests thereafter spanned a great variety of German and Austrian artists and writers. If we count only those articles which went to press, and indulge ourselves in a little “Sebaldian” list-making, we would have to mention Achternbusch, Altenberg, Améry, Andersch, Becker, Bernhard, Broch, Canetti, Döblin, Grass, Handke, Herbeck, Hildesheimer, Hofmannsthal, Horváth, Ibsen, Kafka, Kasack, Kluge, Levi, Mörike, Nossack, Raimund, Gerhard and Joseph Roth, Sealsfield, Schnitzler, Sternheim, Stifter, Jan Peter Tripp, Robert Walser and Arnold Zweig. And this list would necessarily leave unmentioned the authors about whom he composed unpublished drafts of essays, and those whom he only tangentially addresses. Sebald’s interests clearly cut across a broad spectrum of literature and art.

Nevertheless, the majority of Sebald’s earliest scholarly publications focused primarily on two authors: Franz Kafka and Alfred Döblin. Beginning in 1971, he published no fewer than fifteen articles and book chapters dedicated exclusively to Döblin’s novels and Kafka’s *Castle*. In addition to these longer studies, he also published a number of reviews of Kafka scholarship in *Literatur und Kritik* and the *Journal of European Studies*. This degree of focus is noteworthy for a reader with interests as broad as Sebald’s, but what is surprising is that a large number of these compositions from his first years as a scholar employ the discourse of early 20th century

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59 *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelminischen Ära*, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969). Hereafter cited parenthetically as CSt. The title’s English rendering, as well as all subsequent translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.
Jewish messianism as a primary interpretive focus. Sebald’s initial academic efforts are somewhat obsessed with looking for and commenting on the messianic theme in literature. The prevalence of his use of messianism as an interpretive tool leads to two questions with which this chapter will concern itself. First, what exactly did Sebald understand about the messianic tradition he so often addresses? Second, what, (if anything) can examining this notion of messianism tell us about his view of literature?

To answer these questions, this chapter will proceed in two stages. The first will investigate what Sebald understood about the messianic mission, figure, and eventual failure as evident in the way he describes it when dealing with Kafka and Döblin. We will see that in Sebald’s view, the consequences of this failure fall between positive and negative poles; melancholia and resignation emerge as the choices which Kafka and Döblin make. In the second stage, our consideration of these poles will develop a sense of Sebald’s poetics (which is, at any rate, the most rewarding reason to consider Sebald’s own academic writing.)

As it turns out, his literary philosophy posits not only an aesthetic standard by which to measure the success of a work, but also a corresponding ethical mission for literature, by which Sebald judges the authors he studies.

Step One: The Poles of Messianism

I had mentioned that this chapter will concern itself with a notion of messianism that is oriented toward two extremes, one ‘positive’ and the other ‘negative,’ and that Sebald’s

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60 Though Sebald’s academic contributions were largely overlooked or rejected by other Germanists when they were written, they have recently come back into focus with the rise of his literary reputation, and have proven useful for interpreting his fiction. Marcel Atze, for one, termed Sebald’s essays “eine wahre Fundgrube [a real treasure trove]” for analyzing his literary work, (“Koinzidenz und Intertextualität: Der Einsatz von Primärtexten in W. G. Sebalds Erzählung ‘All’estero,’” in W. G. Sebald, Franz Loquai ed., 157). Perhaps the most succinct assessment was made by Andrea Reiter in her 1993 review of Unheimliche Heimat: “Sebald’s almost personal engagement with his texts appears to tell us more about himself, rather than offering a dispassionate approach to literary criticism” in Modern Language Review 88 (1993): 803-04. 804.
awareness of this polarity will become evident in the way he handles Kafka and Döblin. What this means, of course, is that Sebald did not espouse an undifferentiated, affirming view of the possibility of humans to revolutionize their situation. Quite the contrary, in fact. Messianism, in his understanding of the concept, turns out to be an expression of longing that is doomed to disappointment, and the ways in which an author or artist responds to this failure of hope determines which path his or her literature or art takes. In the first step, we will examine Sebald’s readings of Kafka and discover that this author represented for Sebald a constructive response to disappointment—the positive pole of the messianic discourse.

Sebald’s Kafka

Beginning in the early 1970s, and continuing to one degree or another throughout his career, Sebald more or less consistently used conceptions of the Jewish messianic tradition in his scholarly interactions with Kafka and these articles provide the most detailed descriptions of Sebald’s developing sense of the messianic figure and the hope he embodies. In seeming contradiction to what I had claimed at the beginning of this chapter, it must be pointed out that, though Sebald showed an enduring interest in Kafka and wrote informal essays on him as late as 1997, he actually only composed three truly “scholarly” studies of Kafka during his entire academic career: two from the early to mid-1970s and a third from a decade later. But each of these essays actually emerged multiple times in various states of translation, expansion and revision. The first article was published twice in 1972, and reappeared in 1985. The second dated from 1976, but was revised for publication in 1991. The third was only published once, in

In this section, I do not intend to revisit the ground that Brad Prager has so efficiently covered in his so-entitled 2006 essay (Denham and McCulloh 105-25), which concerns itself primarily with inspecting “[Sebald’s] parallel visions of Kafka [as Marxist critic and existentialist] in order to trace the paths, the problems, and finally the limits of Sebald’s own alternately Marxist and existential worldviews” (106). Instead, my survey of Sebald’s reception of Kafka is aimed at casting light on his perception of Kafka as a messianic thinker—a topic, to which Prager gives only scant attention (see p.115 n.16).
German, in 1986, but it had first been composed in a much different English version in 1983. Thus, from three arguments, Sebald fashioned eight essays that reached various levels of fruition and these differing drafts of the same propositions appear in every stage of his career, from his first years as an academic to the rise of his popularity as an author of fiction. Consequently, they also represent a cross-section, if you will, of his thinking during various phases of his intellectual development.

That Sebald’s articles on Kafka continued to reconstitute themselves was actually quite typical of his approach to academic writing. The biography of his earliest composition on the subject of Kafka, a study of the death motif in *The Castle*, is illustrative. As was his practice with many of his later scholarly efforts, Sebald composed the article in parallel English and German versions and then reworked the German article for later publication in a collection of his own essays. We can be sure that Sebald began an English draft the first of these essays, which appeared in print in 1972, sometime before October of 1971, when he submitted a copy to Elias Canetti seeking advice. The finished essay appeared concurrently as “The Undiscover’d Country: the Death Motif in Kafka’s *Castle*” and “Thanatos: zur Motivstruktur in Kafkas *Schloss,*” in two different publications: *The Journal of European Studies* and *Literatur und Kritik* respectively. Despite some minor variations, the two versions are essentially the same essay,

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62 In a letter addressed to Sebald from the 25 October 1971, Canetti refers to what must have been a late draft of the first Kafka piece, though curiously enough, Canetti claims not to have actually received the article Sebald had promised him. Unfortunately, Sebald’s own letter to Canetti from earlier that year, in which he presumably described the essay, is neither among Sebald’s papers at the DLA, nor among those of Canetti in his effects at the Zentralbibliothek Zürich. Sebald had made it his practice to approach authors and scholars he esteemed for counsel on his academic work. His brief exchanges with Theodor Adorno in 1967-68 and Gershom Scholem in 1972 are along similar lines.

and both later became the basis for “Das unentdeckte Land,” a chapter in Sebald’s 1985 volume on Austrian literature, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks.*

Between drafts, so to speak, of “The Undiscover’d Country,” Sebald composed the second essay, “The Law of Ignominy—Authority, Messianism and Exile in Kafka’s Castle,” which he later edited and republished in German as “Das Gesetz der Schande—Macht, Messianismus und Exil in Kafkas *Schloß.*” This second article, like “The Undiscover’d Country,” was also reworked, and significantly shortened, to appear in one of his monographs, *Unheimliche Heimat.*

Sebald continued reading Kafka throughout the 1980s and composed his third article, first in an as-yet unpublished English version, “Animals, Men, and Machines: Reading Kafka in 1983,” and later in the version that eventually made it to press, “Tiere Menschen Machinen: Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten.” This article breaks from the theme of the previous two in that here Sebald examines not *The Castle*, but rather takes the occasion of reading Kafka’s evolution stories, “Investigations of a Dog” and “Report to an Academy,” to show how Kafka’s hope did not reside in technological solutions. Furthermore, in these essays he also chooses not to address messianism directly, but uses some of the same concepts to talk about Kafka’s longing for redemption and for a glimpse of things which lie beyond human capacities for perception.

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In addition to these formal essays, Sebald also composed a number of review articles, which appeared between 1972 and 1982 in *Literatur und Kritik*. These reviews are interesting primarily for the way in which Sebald’s critique of the work of other Kafka scholars reveals his own interests in Kafka. Appearing in the same volume of *Literatur und Kritik* as Sebald’s own article “Thanatos,” his review of Johann Bauer’s and Isidor Pollak’s *Kafka und Prag* reveals the degree to which Sebald’s view of Kafka was filtered through his fixation on the dangers of assimilation and Kafka’s rejection of it in favor of something more mysterious. Sebald’s Kafka knew that catastrophe followed assimilation (422). In 1978, Sebald reviewed Hans Walter’s *Franz Kafka: Die Forderung der Transzendenz*, praising Walter for approaching Kafka’s metaphysics in a more founded and discursive way that other scholars had done, but also criticizing him for failing to explore the messianic qualities of Kafka’s writing. Sebald’s last review of Kafka scholarship appeared in 1982 when he responded to Gerhard Kurz’s *Traumschrecken: Kafkas literarische Existenzanalyse*. In this piece, Sebald condemns what he saw as a reductive attempt to explain everything about Kafka’s work that misses Kafka’s call for rebellion against power.

Sebald’s final interactions with Kafka, (outside of his fiction, where the author and his stories play a significant role,) were published in the 1990s. These are more informal reactions to Kafka. “Via Schweiz ins Bordell,” in which Sebald addresses Kafka’s travel diaries, appeared in *Die Weltwoche* in 1995. “Kafka im Kino,” published in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in 1997, takes the occasion of Sebald’s reading of Hanns Zischler’s book *Kafka geht ins Kino* to examine Kafka’s relationship to cinema and the conclusions Sebald reaches about Kafka’s view of photography, technology and utopia.
What emerges from these essays and reviews is the view that Kafka’s novels and stories, which Sebald opines had been written to explore the idea of messianism, demonstrate three aspects of the messianic tradition. Kafka shows first the potential of the Messiah, which is the hope of ending injustice. Second, his characters are marked by the characteristics of the Messiah, including his contradictions. Third, Kafka’s work points to the failure to which the Messiah is doomed.

Sebald’s decision to view Kafka’s work through this lens was not an obvious choice. Kafka has been appropriated by any number of interpreters and Sebald certainly did not set out to create a similarly “parasitical” reading (Animals 1). Indeed, as the titles of his first essay—“The Undiscover’d Country,” “Thanatos” and “Das unentdeckte Land”—imply, Sebald was initially interested in the death motif in Kafka and only came to view him from a messianic perspective.

69 Sebald writes, for example, “The Castle comprises a number of visual and reflective reminiscences of the messianic tradition and frequently the parallels are so pronounced as to suggest that the author may quite consciously have attempted to represent and analyse the messianic idea” (Law 46). It is intriguing that in the later versions of this essay, Sebald radically reduced his claim regarding K’s messianic character. The corresponding sentence in the version which appeared in Unheimliche Heimat reads thus: “Aus dieser derart in ständiger Metamorphose begriffenen Tradition enthält Kafkas Roman bildliche und gedankliche Reminiszenzen, die darauf schließen lassen, daß der messianische Idee—und ihrer Kritik—im Schloß mehr als eine bloß marginale Bedeutung zukommt” (These pictorial and mental reminiscences, which are continually conceived in the tradition of metamorphosis, allow one to conclude that to the messianic idea—and its critique—is due more than a marginal meaning, UH 91-92). This appears significantly watered down compared to his earlier claim that these “Reminiszenzen” lead one to conclude “daß es ihm nicht zuletzt um Vorstellung und Analyse der messianischen Idee gegangen ist, um die Möglichkeit der Transzendierung also einer hoffnungslosen Lage durch die Hoffnung” (that it was for him not least about the representation and analysis of the messianic idea, thus about the possibility of the transcendence of a hopeless situation through hope, Gesetz 118). Nevertheless, Sebald goes into more detail here about what constitutes K’s messianic identity than in the previous version, and even reiterates his assertion that Kafka intended K as a messianic figure (UH 93).

70 The titles of the first and third are, of course, derived from Hamlet’s famous soliloquy on the uncertainty of existence after death:

[...] Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a dreary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others we know not of.
(Hamlet 3.1.76-82)
because the attributes of Kafka’s land surveyor, K, suggested the notion to him. What he noticed was the promise K’s arrival in the castle’s domain represented. K’s potential, which is to be ultimately disappointed, constitutes the mission of a Messiah, who comes, in Sebald’s view, to “bring a halt, to dissipate the mythic power that reproduces itself in an eternal recurrence by forcing it to change its direction” (Undiscover’d 29; cf. Law 55, Gesetz 120, UH 102). Here, Sebald reorients the meaning of the Jewish notion of Tikkun—the “mending of the world,” which had traditionally meant the ending of Jewish exile (Galut)—in order to emphasize the universality of a Messiah’s mission. Tikkun is, in this sense a “cosmic redemption” as Harris Lenowitz has described it (Lenowitz 4). The messianic idea that Sebald sees at work in Kafka’s texts aims at the reinvention of human interaction with the world, rather than at the personal salvation of the Messiah’s followers, and it is this element, (among others to which we will return below,) that differentiates Jewish messianism from Christology in Sebald’s view. The Jewish messianic tradition is to him primarily political and, (because of its failure to materialize,) a reiterative movement in contrast to the inward, finalistic qualities of Christianity. Sebald observes that K is willing to fight, but for the liberation of an entire community, not for anyone’s individual happiness.72

At this point, it should be observed that Sebald had many sources for his conception of Jewish messianism—among them Isaiah and other ancient prophets (Law 55). But his ideas about the messianic mission and the promise of the messianic figure hearken back not to the

71 Sebald explains in the various versions of “The Law of Ignominy” how he came upon the idea of viewing K as a messianic figure. He relates how he had stumbled across an orthographic similarity between the Hebrew term for “surveyor” (moshoach) and “Messiah” (moshiach) while perusing a Hebrew dictionary. He realized that the difference between these terms consisted of one vowel point, which Sebald observes, can even be omitted in written Hebrew (Law 47; cf. Gesetz 118, UH 93). Interestingly enough, Sebald does not here comment on another orthographic similarity, which he very likely would have noticed as well: moshiach is very close to mashi, the Hebrew term for “silk,” and the difference between the two is only the absence of a final consonant.

72 Law 48; cf. Gesetz 118, UH 94. Sebald likely gleaned this concept of the Messiah’s potential through his reading of Hermann Cohen’s Jüdische Schriften which he cites in Der Mythus der Zerstörung (MZ 68) and Gershom Scholem’s contribution in Major Trends in Judaism (Thema 432-33).
Jewish redemption traditions of antiquity (e.g. Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the Maccabean revolution, or the Bar Kokhba revolt,) nor to models from the early modern (e.g. the 17th century apostate Sabbatai Zvi,) but rather to the discourse of Jewish messianism as it was practiced at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries in the German speaking world.

The revolutionary agendas of such a diverse assortment of Jewish intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig and the like—most of whom Sebald studied or encountered in his reading—73—informed his perception of what messianism could mean. Messianism in the mode of classic Modernism is a kind of utopian thinking; however, it was not merely utopianism in the sense that Sebald himself used the term. Utopianism is a mode of contemplating a better world, which might correspond in some way to what he had defined as the messianic mission, but Sebald would later excoriate it as escapism. Utopianism, in his view, was simply “die bestmögliche Verfassung der Gesellschaft als Gegenstück zu ihrer tatsächliche Korrumpiertheit” (the best-possible composition of society as the foil to its actual corruption, BU 23). By contrast, messianism as Sebald defines it recognizes both the need for a better world and the impossibility of its actualization.74 Messianism is to Sebald the “median point between societal reality and utopia” (Law 46), or as he reformulated it later:


73 Sebald cites Benjamin almost as often as Scholem, though the latter’s views on messianism were certainly more systematic. His bibliographies include notable books—many of which he owned and annotated—such as Scholem’s Judaica I, II and III, his Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums; Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim; Benjamin’s Collected Works especially his critical reviews and Theological Criticism; Bloch’s The Principle of Hope, as well as the lesser-known Jizchak Fritz Baer’s Galut.

74 In this sense, Sebald’s notion corresponds quite nicely to the original meaning of “Utopia” as it was coined by Thomas More; his combination of οὐ (not) and τόπος (place) indicates the impossibility of utopia becoming reality.
When power and impotence once complete each other in a seamless system, then its revolutionizing is excluded from the get go [...]. [Kafka’s] manner of representation nevertheless implies that a revolution is necessary, even unavoidable, the more impossible it becomes to translate its notions into practice, by which token the indifference point between societal reality and utopia is marked. (Gesetz 118; cf. UH 90-91: Sebald’s emphasis)

Thus messianism is everything other than escapism represented by utopianism, since it is an active mode of thinking about real-world change.

Sebald’s sources for this sense of messianic thinking come straight out of what Anson Rabinbach terms “Modern German Jewish Messianism.” This discourse represented, as Rabinbach expresses it, a “new Jewish spirit, a product of the ‘post-assimilatory Renaissance,’” which was characteristically “radical, uncompromising, and comprised of an esoteric intellectualism that is as uncomfortable with the Enlightenment as it is enamored of apocalyptic visions—whether revolutionary or purely redemptive in the spiritual sense” (Rabinbach 80). And so, it is in this spirit that Sebald explains the mission of the Messiah to be dispelling darkness, and quotes as his reference point Walter Benjamin’s “Theological Criticism” (Gesetz 121; cf. UH 102, unattributed in Law 56). It is not aimed at bringing oneness with the divine or with some metaphysical principle. The mission Sebald outlines for a Messiah as he reads Kafka’s Castle is decidedly related to this world and political. This kind of messianic thinking, stripped of its metaphysical or theological content remains above all an active mode of societal engagement operating above an ethical imperative.

Consequently, for Sebald’s notion, it is important that the Messiah offer redemption not through an inner, personal renewal (the model of Christology in his estimation), but through outward confrontation with mythic, “irrational power,” as he puts it in “The Law of Ignominy”

(Law 42, cf. Gesetz 117, UH 88). “Pressing for a solution,” he explains, “the messianic figure is the agent of the unceasing endeavor of man to revolutionize his situation” (Law 56, cf. Gesetz 120, UH 102). Looking back at what we had diagnosed as Sebald’s discomfort with modernity, awakened by his reception of the Frankfurt School, these descriptions make clear that what he is perceiving as at work in Kafka’s *Castle* is also one of his own desires: a reversal of the regression to myth, representing the fusion of power and truth claims (i.e. ideology), which modernity undergoes in the process of enlightenment. Of course, as Richard Sheppard has pointed out, Sebald’s terminology is rather indistinct when it comes to ideas like “myth” and the other bits of jargon he picked up from Horkheimer and Adorno. Sheppard considers it roughly equivalent to “primal violence, the monstrous, the irrational, the Unconscious, Nietzsche’s Dionysos, Conrad’s “the horror”—i.e. everything that is opposed to the values of liberal bourgeois culture” (Sheppard, “Reception” 355). Consequently, Sebald’s articles tend to use myth, *Galut*, exile, and injustice more or less synonymously. For Sebald, *Galut* has ceased to be the plight of the Diaspora but of modernity. The Messiah he identifies in Kafka’s work appears in order to end injustice, or, as he puts it, to achieve “Erlösung aus der Geschichte” (redemption from history, Gesetz 118, cf. Law 46, UH 91).

This revolutionary figure, which Sebald identifies in Kafka’s ostensible land surveyor K, is marked not only with a political mission, but also with three principal characteristics that define him. First, Sebald sees the Messiah as a wanderer of indefinite provenance, who wears a knapsack and carries a walking stick (Undiscover’d 23; cf. Law 46, Gesetz 118, UH 92). He encountered this image in Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* (1949), in which Buber relates

stories about the pseudo-messianic figure of the Zaddik from Hassidic traditions. 77 Identifying a wanderer as the image of the Jewish Messiah also contextualizes the epigraph from Beckett’s Molloy about being “abroad alone, by unknown ways, in the gathering of the night, with a stick,” with which Sebald opens “The Undiscover’d Country” (22). The image of a nameless, originless wanderer emerges in a number of other articles Sebald wrote, and though not all of them appear explicitly under the aegis of Jewish messianism, Sebald’s observations in the Kafka articles give cause to ponder what connections he was making as he observed, for example, that the image of a wanderer “mit Stock und Mantelsack” (with a staff and portmanteau) could illustrate Stifter’s work, or when he highlights the wandering in Peter Handke’s The Lesson of Mount Sainte-Victoire, or when he notes that the eponymous figure of Kaspar in Handke’s play is similarly “fremd und ohne Genossenschaft” (foreign and without comrades) and without origin. 78 This image proved so indelible that it appeared not only in other essays Sebald composed, but also in his own later fiction. Though the image of a wanderer invokes a number of other associations, (of which Sebald was surely aware,) from tropes of pilgrimage, to the dubious Ahasver figure, to death itself, Sebald consciously contextualizes it here as an image of the Jewish Messiah.

Second, in addition to being a wanderer, this messianic figure is characterized by a somewhat paradoxical conglomeration of opposing qualities; he swings between kingliness and

77 Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, Germ. Erzählungen der Chasidim, (Zürich: Manesse, 1949; Tales of the Hasidim, New York: Schocken Books, 1975, trans. Olga Marx). Sebald’s own copy of the German volume, which he received on 24 December 1970, contains ca.120 annotations, many of which highlight this image, such as on p.418, where Buber describes the appearance of a mysterious figure in the context of tales about Rabbi Schnëur Salman (Der Raw). The wanderer in this tale “zog mit Stock und Ranzen im Land herum und saß schweigend in den Wirtshäusern, bis er trunken war, dann sprach er Weisheit um Weisheit” (roamed through the countryside with a staff and knapsack and drank silently in some inn until he was drunk; then one wise saying after another came from his lips, Buber 418; trans. Olga Marx, Vol. 1 The Early Masters 269). Sebald marked the sentence with a marker stroke in the margin.

beggarliness, between righteousness and criminality, between representation and “Außenseiterum” (non-conformity, Gesetz 118, cf. UH 91). According to this reading, the messianic figure is fluid, contradictory and can “hardly be ascertained” (Law 46, cf. Gesetz 118, UH 91). Here, Sebald sees the constitutive elements of the messianic figure in terms of dualities. Power and impotence, aspiration and weakness, restlessness and passivity, political goals in metaphysical manifestation, sedition and surrender, moral contradictions like truth and deceit, merit and guilt, submission and violence. He sees the tradition in a constant state of flux without any fixed dogma or theology (Law 46, cf. Gesetz 118, UH 91). Sebald gleaned this notion not only from Buber’s Hassidic tales, (especially p.63, which he bracketed in his own copy, Vol.2 pp.9-10 in Marx’s translation,) but also from Bloch’s study of Thomas Münzer and from the history of Jakob Frank (Gesetz 120).

Third, this wanderer with contradictory qualities sinks to the level of the oppressed, identifying with them, and eventually becoming identical to them (Undiscover’d 29-30; cf. Law 49, Gesetz 119, UH 95). In this respect, Sebald’s concept seems indebted to the Christian doctrine of kenosis as expressed in two Pauline epistles (Phil. 2:5-11 and II Cor. 5:21) and by the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 2:14-15), which proposes that Christ sank to the human level, emptying himself of his divine attributes in order to take on human frailty, only to later transcend human finitude and reassert his divine privilege. But, by contrast, the sinking of what Sebald identifies as the Jewish messianic figure, (i.e. of Kafka’s K,) is a terminal process which corresponds to a Jewish tradition that when the Messiah is closest to offering redemption, he is personally farthest from it (Undiscover’d 31).

This quality of being unsuited to his task, as well as the origin of messianism in disaster and despair (which Sebald adopts from his reading of Gershom Scholem), lead to yet another
feature of the messianic tradition which Sebald considers central: there is a disparity between the promise of messianism and its end. The Messiah fails almost before he has begun. Harris Lenowitz says as much when he asserts that:

The Jewish Messiahs have failed to achieve cosmic redemption; they have failed to guide their followers through the apocalypse to youth, wealth, and eternal life. Nevertheless, the fact that they continue to arise...suggests that they do not fail to achieve what they meant to achieve; they do not fail to be Messiahs. (Lenowitz 4)

Sebald determines that this failure to materialize comes from the “pathological origin” of messianism in doom, or as he puts it elsewhere, the “Schwäche, die den innersten Kern des Messianismus ausmacht” (weakness that constitutes the inmost core of messianism, Law 52-53 and Gesetz 120 respectively; cf. UH 101-102). In Sebald’s reading of Kafka, messianic hope only exists “in a maze of illusions” (Law 46), and might be a misunderstanding after all, since Sebald is careful to observe that K’s messianic identity is attributed to him by others (Undiscover’d 29). He might even be a charlatan, since Sebald notes that all messianic figures are under the stigma of being imposters (Law 53; cf. Gesetz 120, UH 99).

But even charlatans can have a positive function in Sebald’s notion of the messianic idea: they keep hope alive (Law 53). Though, in Sebald’s estimation, Kafka himself was skeptical about the “possibility of transcending the human condition” (Undiscover’d 29), Sebald does not believe Kafka stopped at his Messiah’s eventual failure and the realization that hope is an illusion. In his examination of Kafka’s disturbing view of our collective evolutionary future, Sebald opines that Kafka’s greatest contribution is not that he demonstrated the illusory nature of messianic hope—its quality of delusion—but rather his insistence that we must continue to search for redemption even where there does not seem to be any possibility of its realization (Tiere 199). This is the key difference between messianism as portrayed in Kafka and Döblin (which we will investigate further below). Kafka’s disappointment does not transform into
resignation. Though Sebald’s Kafka is darkly melancholic, and his vision of the future is pessimistic, Sebald nevertheless insists that this does not represent despair. In a review of a book by Gerhard Kurz, Sebald asserts that:

Im Schloßroman zeigt Kafka, daß das Leben nach dem Tod genauso aussieht wie das zuvor, und daß wir also, wollen wir die Perpetuierung des Unrechts verhindern, die Bedingungen des Lebens vor dem Tod ändern müßten, was eine kryptogrammatischen Aufforderung zur Rebellion gleichkommt. Von solchen Ideen, die in ihrer Verbindung von Metaphysik und Politik unmittelbar an die Tradition des jüdischen Messianismus anknüpfen, hat Kurz kaum einen Begriff.

In The Castle, Kafka shows that life after death looks exactly like life before death and that we must thus change the circumstances of life before death if we want to hinder the perpetuation of injustice, which comes close to a cryptogrammatic call for rebellion. Kurz has no concept of these ideas which, in their connection of metaphysics and politics, directly refer to the tradition of Jewish messianism.\(^79\)

This endurance of hope within hopelessness is vital to defining the positive pole of messianism. Sebald points to Ernst Bloch’s The Principle of Hope and Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption as examples of its importance.\(^80\) In the later drafts of “The Undiscover’d Country,” Sebald proposes that death represents for Kafka a possible fulfillment of the longing for peace, but he is nevertheless not resigned to it, and, as Sebald observes, “Kafka hat den Tod nirgends hypostasiert” (Kafka never hypostatized death, Rev. of Kurz 99). By the same token, Sebald asserts that Kafka, who had been estranged from the religion of his forbears by their assimilation, did not resign himself to the loss, but wrote The Castle in part to gain access to the spirituality of his ancestors, despite its inaccessibility (Undiscover’d 32; cf. Thanatos 408). In this respect, Sebald’s view of Kafka and Kafka’s messianism could not be more different from his analysis of the same in the work of Alfred Döblin, which we will now examine.


\(^80\) Law 53, cf. Gesetz 120, UH 99. It is unclear how familiar with Rosenzweig’s book Sebald actually was. There was no copy of it in among his effects and it is not known that he ever owned one.
Sebald’s Döblin

Sebald notes in his analyses of Döblin the same messianic characteristics he had seen at work in Kafka. He especially emphasizes that the messianic figure Döblin portrays is contradictory and doomed to fail. But unlike Kafka, Döblin’s work regresses into resignation and violence. Sebald’s interactions with Döblin run parallel to his essays on Kafka, and so his observations are based on the same basic understanding of Jewish messianism. His first, rather informal (and his last favorable) reading of Döblin appeared in 1971 under the title “Ein Ding, das nicht seinesgleichen hatte” in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Two years later he completed his doctoral dissertation “The Revival of Myth: A Study of Alfred Döblin’s Novels,” out of which he would develop his 1980 monograph *Der Mythus der Zerstörung im Werk Döblins*. During this process, two sections of the text, “Zum Thema Messianismus im Werk Döblins,” and “Schock und Ästhetik—Zu den Romanen Döblins,” appeared as independent articles in 1975. Thereafter, two rather more damaging articles were printed in 1986. “Preußische Perversionen” and “Alfred Döblin oder die politische Unzuverlässigkeit des bürgerlichen Literaten” were papers delivered in 1981 and 1983 respectively, which continued to engage what Sebald saw as Döblin’s artistic flaws.

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81 At this point, I should mention that Richard Sheppard has recently contributed a very thorough study of Sebald’s views on Döblin, in which he describes in great detail the arguments in (as well as the differences between) Sebald’s doctoral dissertation on Döblin, the 1980 monograph, and his later essays. Though I will not here recapitulate Sheppard’s work, my summary of Sebald’s arguments in his work on Döblin is greatly indebted to Sheppard’s insightful analysis. See Richard Sheppard, “W. G. Sebald’s Reception of Alfred Döblin,” Davies and Schonfield 350-76.

82 Sheppard has pointed out that this piece was begun as early as 1968 (Sheppard, “Reception” 351).

83 The dissertation (University of East Anglia, 1973) was not published as such and though some drafts are among his papers in Marbach, the only extant final copies remain in the UEA archives. *Der Mythus der Zerstörung* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1980) is cited hereafter parenthetically as MZ.


In these articles Sebald observes the “unerschöpfliches Thema [inexhaustible theme]” of messianism in Döblin’s work the same features he had identified in Kafka’s oeuvre (Thema 421, not in MZ 60). Here is, for example, the same longing for a “Verbesserung der irdischen Lage” (improvement of the earthly situation, Thema 422, not in MZ 60). That Döblin shared a revolutionary’s desire to end injustice—the messianic mission Sebald had outlined in Kafka’s Castle—is an observation Sebald is careful to make in his studies. Döblin’s narratives evince what Sebald calls a “kritisch[e] Einstellung zur spätbourgeoisen Gesellschaft, deren extreme Entwicklung er einzig unter metagesellschaftlichen, historischen, wo nicht gar naturgeschichtlichen oder mythischen Kategorien darstellen zu können glaubte” (critical relations with the late-bourgeois society, the extreme development of which he believed himself capable of representing only in meta-societal, historical, where not natural-historical or mythical categories), or as he described it later, a “Bedürfnis nach einer Reform in der Gesellschaft” (need for a reform in society, MZ 15 and 60 respectively). Döblin offers a critique, so Sebald, of the “Elend der Gegenwart” (suffering of the present), the catastrophic convulsions that rippled through Wilhelmine, Weimar, and eventually Nazi Germany (14). He shared the impulse for real societal change, for concrete political action that Sebald saw as core to the messianic mission, even if, as Sebald claims, this impulse was undermined by Döblin’s failure to engage politically (Unzuverlässigkeit 134-35). Sebald identifies Döblin’s use of tropes from this messianic tradition as constituting a “messianische Religion des Exils, die auf Erlösung in der Geschichte abzielte” (messianic religion of exile that aims at redemption in history), and reminds us that this messianism, “mit dem politischen Entwurf des utopischen Sozialismus, der Döblin so nahelag, sich durchaus produktiv hätte vereinbaren lassen” (with the political scheme of utopian
socialism, which was so dear to Döblin, could have allowed a thoroughly productive arrangement, if only Döblin had remained true to it (MZ 68).

Here, too, is the same wanderer of dubious origins Sebald had observed in Kafka’s *Schloss*. He sees this figure traversing all of Döblin’s fiction from *Die drei Sprünge des Wanglun* (1915) through to *November 1918* (1950) (Thema 423, cf. MZ 59-70). Sebald points to notes on the back of the manuscript of *Wang-lun* in which Döblin comments on wandering as “das jüdische Motiv” (the Jewish motif) and quotes Walter Muschg’s observation that this was Döblin’s “Identifikation” (identification) with the Chinese heretic (Thema 424, not in MZ). But with Döblin, Sebald focuses primarily on the nature of the Messiah as a paradoxical combination of opposites, which he describes as a “Spannungsfeld der messianischen Idee” (field of tension of the messianic idea, Thema 424, cf. MZ 62). He even sees paired figures, such as Wallenstein and Emperor Ferdinand, as expressing together the two sides of the messianic character (Thema 424-27, cf. MZ 62-66). In detailing the messianic characteristics of Döblin’s figures, Sebald puts it this way:

Der die messianische Idee auszeichnende Wille zum Guten, der so gerne dem Bösen sich verschreibt; die unbändige Sehnsucht nach einer Verbesserung der irdischen Lage, die fortwährend in metaphysische Manifestationen umschlägt; der allgemeine Zustand in- und auswendiger Getriebenheit und eines Zwangs, der die Dualismen der Seele, Aktivität und Passivität, Leiden und Handeln, Zerreisen und Zerrissenwerden, Demut und Aggression auflöst; all diese dem Messianismus einbeschriebenen Antinomien müssen einer Wissenschaft, für die der Höhepunkt des Dämonischen im Pakt Fausti mit einem zivilisierten Teufel besteht, prinzipiell fremd sein.

The will to the good, distinct to the messianic idea, which so gladly gives itself over to evil; the uncontainable longing for an improvement of the earthly situation, which continually changes into metaphysical manifestations; the general condition of inner and outer drivenness and of a compulsion that dissolves the dualisms of the soul, activity and passivity, suffering and acting, tearing and being torn, humility and aggression; all these antinomies inscribed into messianism have to be principally strange to a science for which the high point of the demonic consists in a Faustian pact with a civilized devil. (Thema 422)
In the corresponding, revised passage from *Mythus der Zerstörung*, Sebald observes that:


In the complex that emanates from this theme in Döblin’s novels, writings, and biography, diagnostic perspicuity and pathological decay, the objective need for a reform of society and subjective dreams of redemption blend unmediated together and form an overstressed drive structure, in which activity and passivity, suffering and acting, humility and aggression, tearing and being torn no longer function as dualisms but rather are identical to each other.” (MZ 60)

This version of the messianic idea emphasizes the heretical side—incarnated in the figures of Sabbatai Zvi, Jakob Frank, Thomas Münzer and Jakob Böhme—that binds together the good and evil, dualities and contradictions into an ultimately unstable character. Ernst Bloch’s study of Thomas Münzer serves as an example of a messiah, this time in the heretical mode of Christianity, who combines these tendencies to destruction (Thema 422, cf. MZ 60). The history of Sabbatianism gives him another example of a messianism that leads not to redemption but apostasy (Thema 427, cf. MZ 65). Sabbatai Zvi, whose conversion to Islam ended his brief claim to messianic stature, but whose followers continued to revere him nevertheless, stands for an antinomian stream in the Jewish messianic tradition that Sebald connects to Döblin’s Wang-lun and the character pair Wallenstein/Ferdinand. These figures are antinomian in the sense of ignoring or contravening the law in order to outwit evil by overshooting it—a supposed tenet of Sabbatianism—which also finds an echo in Buber’s stories about Rabbi Schalom, who tricks the devil into revealing the secret of redemption for exiled Israel by disguising himself as sinful (MZ 66, cf. Buber 70/II,14-15). Indeed, it is in this apostasy that these messianic figures fail to
achieve their mission in Döblin’s work, since they are overcome, as we will explore below, by the dark side of their character. In contrast to the messianic figure in Kafka’s *Castle*, Döblin’s characters succumb not to weariness and melancholia, but to a resignation to death and a capitulation to their apocalyptic, destructive tendencies.

The consequence, in Sebald’s view, is that Döblin’s messianic figure becomes increasingly dark, and yet loses the rebellious flavor of Jewish messianism. Instead, these characters become merely reverse images of the Messiah presented by Christology and eventually evaporate into the catalysts for grotesque, apocalyptic violence. As Sheppard has recently demonstrated, Sebald identifies this aesthetic choice to recreate gruesomeness as the consequence of Döblin’s choice to assimilate into the very authoritarian society his novels critique (Sheppard 354-55). This is the same criticism Sebald had leveled at Carl Sternheim in his Master’s thesis. Döblin’s work represents the negative pole of the messianic tradition and the choice of this pole as an orientation for Döblin’s fiction affords Sebald an opportunity to criticize Döblin’s ethical position, as we will now discover.

**Melancholia and Resignation**

The conclusions to which Sebald comes in the examples of Kafka and Döblin show that his idea of the messianic element in literature is not uncritically affirmative, but recognizes two possible consequences to the eventual failure of the Messiah. On the one hand, disappointment leads to melancholia accompanied by continued longing. On the other, it ends in resignation accompanied by increasingly “perverse” instantiations of violence. The negative gradient of messianism toward failure, and the determination of (Sebald’s) Kafka to nevertheless pursue hope are easy enough to follow. But what deserves some further exploration is the notion that
resignation in the face of the failure of the messianic revolution to materialize leads (in the case of Döblin) to a kind of pornography of violence.

To begin with, Sebald insists that the resignation he attributes to Döblin (MZ 27-30) is a symptom of the author’s succumbing to the pressure to assimilate, which entails the betrayal of his Jewish heritage and its associated messianic tradition. He observes:

Döblins Werke erscheinen unter diesem Aspekt als bestimmt vom Bemühen eines Außenseiters, im bürgerlichen Dasein sich zu legitimieren, und die großen Romane, mit denen er in regelmäßigen Abständen aufwartet, als der Tribut eines Fremden an die Macht, die ihn beherbergt.

Döblin’s works appear under this aspect as determined by the efforts of an outsider to legitimize his bourgeois existence, and the great novels, with which he paid homage in regular intervals, (appear) as the tribute of a stranger to the power which accommodates him.” (MZ 76)

In other words, Döblin's work is flawed from the first by the author's desire to accommodate and a society that only barely tolerates him as an outsider.

This pressure to attend on a generally hostile society leads Döblin to depart from his Jewish heritage. His messianic figures grow increasingly Christianized and resigned, or as Sebald puts it:

die im sabbatianischen Messianismus wie in der Figur Ferdinands angelegten Tendenzen zur Apostasie und Imitatio Christi, in denen der Berufene am Ende resignierend seines Amtes sich zu entledigen sucht, sollten in den späteren Romanen Döblins das Modell des jüdischen Messianismus mehr und mehr in den Hintergrund drängen zugunsten einer immer weitergehenden Christianisierung des Erlösungswunsches.

the tendencies invested in Sabbatian messianism, as well as in the figure of Ferdinand, to apostasy and Imitatio Christi, in which the Called One resignedly seeks to discharge his office, supposedly forced the model of Jewish messianism in Döblin’s later novels more and more into the background to the advantage of an ever more progressing Christianization of the wish for redemption.” (Thema 429)
This betrayal leads, in Sebald's view, to a guilty conscience, for which the author compensates by adopting a belief in renewal through apocalyptic violence (MZ 46-53 and 61). Sebald observes that it is important that after everything has been destroyed in Döblin’s apocalyptic writing, he leads all the survivors together “und sie in schöner Einhelligkeit mit der jetzt wieder ganz idyllischen Nature in zweites Leben beginnen läßt” (and has them begin a second life in a more beautiful unanimity with a now once again completely idyllic nature, MZ 58). Through destruction, it seems, life can begin again. But because this belief is also unsustainable, Döblin abandons it as well.

The resulting vacuum leaves only the increasingly obsessive reenactment of what has now become obscene violence. “Der schockartige Effekt,” Sebald claims, “mit dem der literarische Radikalismus vielleicht der Lethargie des Publikums beizukommen meint, führt sich selbst in die Irre, weil er—wie Beispiele leicht zeigen werden—offensichtlich dem Zwang unterliegt, unablässig sich zu wiederholen, solange, bis er weiter nichts ist als eine grauenhafte Gewohnheit” (The shock-like effect, with which literary radicalism thinks to possibly cope with the lethargy of the public, itself misleads, because it—as examples will easily show—obviously succumbs to the necessity to relentlessly repeat itself until it is nothing more than a gruesome habit, Schock 242; cf. MZ 155). Sebald also observes in his later essays that what is often described as a form of art supposedly ‘freed’ from notions of beauty is in fact nothing less than a pathological preoccupation with eroticized violence, which he finds especially distasteful when it comes to the scenes of sexual violence he sees in Döblin’s work (Perversionen 234). The truly gruesome, gratuitous scenes Sebald points to, such as the skinning of a live cat in Wallenstein, the detailed description of Sanherib killing his enemy in Babylonian Journey, or the brutal rape and murder of a girl in The Black Curtain are acts of literary terror—self-propagating rituals of
violence that subject the reader to torture (Schock 242; cf. MZ 154). This is more than naturalistic description, Sebald avers. It is virtuosic, inane interest in gruesomeness (Schock 243-44; cf. MZ 156). Döblin may have thought, in Sebald’s view, that this was a critical demonstration of the “Schrecknisse des Lebens” (horrors of life), but it goes over into an incantation of it.

Step Two: A Program for Literature

These choices—melancholia or violence—reveal a kind of aesthetic program behind Sebald’s assessment of literature. His poetics proposes not only an aesthetic standard for art, but also an ethical mission for literature against which, fairly or not, he judges the artists themselves. There are at least three propositions that emerge in Sebald’s essays. These bear on almost any author or visual artist he evaluated and are frequent enough in his essays to form an elementary view of his poetics.

In Sebald’s view, aesthetic choices have as their basis ethical choices. Thus, a questionable aesthetic gesture betrays an equally suspect ethical stance. I say that this is Sebald’s view, but it is clearly one he adopted from Hermann Broch’s essays, especially “Evil in the Value-System of Art” (1933) and “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” (1950), to which Sebald refers a number of times. Sebald first makes use of Broch’s notion in the Sternheim thesis where he points to Sternheim’s “kitschy” literature as evidence of that author’s neurosis (CSt 28). Later, Sebald quotes Broch in his 1981 lecture on Döblin, “Die politische Unzuverlässigkeit

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86 Both essays, “Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst” and “Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches,” are cited below from Sebald’s volumes of Broch’s Gesammelte Werke, Essays I, (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1955,) hereafter cited parenthetically as “Böse” and “Bemerkungen” respectively. Unfortunately, though Sebald’s copies are from the same printing that he cited in his academic work, these particular volumes contain no annotations. Their flyleaves bear the characteristic embossed seal, with which Sebald identified items in his library later in life. The volume containing Broch’s essay on kitsch is in pristine condition and even contains the original promotional bookmark with which the book was shipped. Consequently, it is safe to conclude that these are late acquisitions that Sebald never actually read. His frequent allusions to Broch, dating from as early as 1967, must indicate that he borrowed the book from a library or simply discarded his old volume when he acquired nicer copies.
des bürgerlichen Literaten,” in which he asserts sharply that Döblin’s *November 1918* is aesthetically flawed and that “das Versagen auf ästhetischer Ebene, wie Hermann Broch erklärt hat, zumeist zurückzuführen ist auf ein unbewältigtes ethisches Defizit” (the failure on an aesthetic level, as Hermann Broch has explained, can for the most part be ascribed to an unresolved ethical deficit, Unzuverlässigkeit 133).

To understand how an aesthetic failing could be seen as an ethical problem, it is useful to retrace the steps Broch takes in his essay. Broch addresses the idea of kitsch to show that kitsch and Romanticism actually grew out of the same “*Geisteshaltung*” (attitude). He traces their common origin to an exuberance born out of the Reformation’s granting to humans the responsibility of perceiving revelation (Bemerkungen 299-300). This exuberance attempted to elevate life to ‘absolute’ or ‘pseudo-absolute’ spheres and to make the unattainable, platonic ideal of beauty “unmittelbar und handgreiflich” (immediate and palpable) in individual works of art. The result is that what according to Broch had been an open system of art (in that the goal after which is strives lies outside the system) closes off and becomes kitsch (303-306).

Art, in this argument, is open, irrational and original, which allows artists to operate humanely (*menschlich handeln*) within general guidelines that they often transgress. Kitsch, on the other hand, is a closed system of rational imitation with fixed rules that the artist may not disobey. Within this closed system, which has become an aesthetic game, the “Kitsch-Mensch” is freed to behave unethically—the aesthete is deaf to the cries of victims, Broch asserts, and enjoys, as Hitler and Nero did, the bloody and saccharine together as equally “schön” (beautiful, 308). Thus aesthetic failings—for Broch, kitsch, but for Sebald also the grotesque—represent not ability, nor limitation on the part of the artist, but an ethical flaw.  

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87Broch made clear in his 1933 essay that the *Kitsch-Mensch* is “kein Nichts- oder Wenigkönner, […] sondern er ist ein ethisch Verworfener, er ist ein Verbrecher, der das radikale Böse will” (348).
connection so wholly that he even turned the formulation on Broch himself, questioning the ethics of what he considered Broch’s ‘kitschy’ *Bergroman* (UH 124). He notes the particular tragedy in the arch-critic of kitsch peddling the same object of his own scorn (125).

Sebald applied this critique not only to Döblin, Sternheim, and Broch, but also to Charles Sealsfield (the pseudonym of Carl Postl), whose literature is rife with contradictions that are “sowohl ethischer als ästhetischer Art” (of an ethical as well as aesthetical kind). In Sebald’s view, Sealsfield, whose failed attempts to ingratiate himself to the authoritarian Habsburg regime led to a self-imposed exile in America and Switzerland, failed to really confront injustice because of this ambivalent stance toward power. Though Sealsfield did publish a damning assessment of Metternich’s regime in his 1827 *Austria as it is*, Sebald asserts that this reflected his accommodation of the book’s English readership more than an authentic critique (24). He had insight into the destructiveness of the system, but was enticed by power (25), and was not altogether unhappy to see the revolution of 1848 fail as he had predicted it would (27). Correspondingly, Sealsfield’s literary engagement on behalf of Native Americans, whose extermination he describes in his American novel *The Cabin Book*, is evidence to Sebald of Sealsfield’s own acceptance of racist ideology rather than a willingness to identify with the victim and act on his behalf. Sebald opines:


Were Sealsfield in the further course of his literary development to have actually become a spokesman for the Indians, who were being ever more reduced with

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unheard of ruthlessness, he would have occupied a unique position in the 19th century. However, as a true son of the Josephine Enlightenment and as the political and private agent of the approaching high capitalist era, he is convinced of the inherent logic of the developing historical tragedy. (UH 30)

Sealsfield’s failure to move beyond the ideology of his time and take the part of its victims is, in Sebald’s view, the central aesthetic-ethical flaw in his work, which expresses itself also in his affirming depiction of the antagonistic relationship between humans and nature. Sebald accuses Sealsfield of representing violence almost as a divine creative act that brings order to nature and saves it from being merely wilderness (36). Thus, the significance of Sealsfield’s work to Sebald is not in the precision of his nature description, but in the fact that in it nature can no longer be seen as the natural home of humans (37).

But whereas Sebald’s criticism of Sealsfield is damaging, his treatment of Gerhard Roth is even sharper. In Sebald’s view, Roth’s aesthetic sense was so flawed in his Winterreise as to warrant being termed pornographic. Not only does Roth use stereotypical means to manipulate his characters (UH 152), but he creates an unintended ‘system’ that cancels his audience’s freedom of thought; a “negative Kollusion” (negative collusion) of the author and his narrator is intensified by the use of another “Kunstgriff” (gimmick)—explicit and formulaic descriptions of sexual encounters (153). Roth’s use of hackneyed sexual escapades in his Winterreise is so at odds with the otherwise elevated aesthetic of his prose, that Sebald sees no difficulty in condemning the whole product as an outright failure. In addition to the “entworfenes Frauenbild” (projected image of women, 155) that emerges, the story’s characters “verstoßen gegen die Regeln erzählerischer Diskretion” (transgress the rules of narrative discretion, 162). Roth’s work becomes unethical because it is aesthetically disjointed and badly done. Sebald even offers Roth an alternative from within the work itself. Towards the narrative’s end, Roth’s

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description of a tryst between Nagl and an older woman shows “daß der fürs Erzählen unabdingbare effet du réel nicht vom Wahrscheinlichkeitsgrad des Erzählten abhängt, sondern von den gedanklichen Möglichkeiten, die der Text sich eröffnet, indem er dem, was er beschreibt, allegorische Bedeutung verleiht” (that the effect of reality, unavoidable for narration, does not depend on the narrative’s degree of likelihood, but rather from the conceptual possibilities that the text opens up, in that it confers to that which it describes allegorical meaning, 163). But this scene is an anomaly in an otherwise merely pornographic text.  

It is the aesthetic tone of discretion Sebald posed as lacking in Roth’s Winterreise that he sees as making possible a responsible literary depiction of violence. But he excludes the traditional novel as a form in which this can be done appropriately. Sebald eschews the novel for its manipulation of the reader and its collusion with bourgeois power structures that propagate myth. Novel writing and reception depends, Sebald claims, on familiarity with societal and cultural relationships. It mythologizes the real world, and in the case of some authors such as Kasack, irrationalizes destroyed life. On the other hand, pure documentation, which simply reports reality, relies on strangeness and unfamiliarity to work (Zwischen 352-53). For this reason, Sebald prefers a documentary style to a novelistic one. His analyses of Kafka do not ignore the execution of Joseph K., the torture apparatus in the Penal Colony, and the self-violence of the ape who would be human in Report to an Academy. But he is damning when it

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90 It is interesting to note that though Sebald condemns Roth’s aesthetic sensibilities in Winterreise, he appreciated the novels in the Archive des Schweigens cycle, especially Landläufiger Tod, which he praised highly in Unheimliche Heimat (145-61; cf. “In einer wildfremden Gegend—Zu Gerhard Roths Romanwerk Landläufiger Tod,” in Manuskripte 92 (1986): 52-57). In this respect, though he agrees with Bloch’s connection of aesthetics and ethics, he breaks stride with Bloch when the latter asserts that kitsch is not about art, but about the “Kitsch-Menschen” themselves, who want only evil (Bemerkungen 295; cf. Böse 348). Despite the fact that Sebald often collapsed the distance between author and text, his opinions changed—sometimes dramatically, as in the case of Alfred Döblin—and he was willing to rehabilitate an author who came to see the light, so to speak.  
comes to authors whose writing he considers inauthentic, as in the case of Alfred Andersch, and, to a lesser degree, Kasack. Of the latter, Sebald claims that, in his depiction of the air war, Kasack had adopted a Döblin-esque, pseudo-epic, trans-real style (Zwischen 348). By contrast, Sebald points to the limited success of Nossack’s work on the same subject, observing that Nossack consciously attempted to neutrally record an experience that transcended the imagination and scrupulously avoided “berauschende Bilder” (intoxicating images, Zwischen 352).

He praises authors who also reject the novel, such as Canetti (Schock 247), or whose writing is too damaged to hold novelistic, bourgeois assimilation potential, such as Ernst Herbeck or Robert Walser. Herbeck, a schizophrenic inmate of a mental institution from 1946 until his death in 1991, composed work in which, as Sebald puts it, disorder became the source of regenerative energy, but in which interferences (due to his medical condition) excluded it from the realm of “sanktionierten Literatur” (sanctioned literature). Similarly, Robert Walser, to whom Sebald devotes a chapter in Logis in einem Landhaus, wrote literature with the ephemeral quality of leaving its readers unsure of what just happened after hours of reading. Sebald’s rejection of the novel comes from his belief that the suggestive power of this form of literature is too easily susceptible to misuse. It recreates violence instead of merely depicting it. For that matter, Sebald claims that the reader cannot learn in any productive way from such depictions. Thus, there is no justification for this kind of literary practice, since it does not conform to what Sebald saw as the purpose of literature.

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Sebald’s description of the messianic tradition, and his adoption of Broch’s aesthetic-ethical link lead to the conclusion that he believed in a purpose for literature that, at least at this early stage—and we shall see later whether it continues in this vein in his own literary efforts—is at least threefold; good literature identifies with victims, confronts power, and seeks to reverse the self-propagation of myth. Literature that is of weight (e.g., Canetti’s) is characterized by a willingness to identify with the downtrodden, the victimized, and the dead. Sebald observes of Peter Weiss, for example, that the latter’s work is an ongoing visit with the dead (Zerknirschung 266). This is a description that, as we will see in the following chapters, can easily describe Sebald’s own work. Weiss’s “Solidarität” (solidarity) with the dead leads him to a literary and pictorial fight against forgetting—a fight, which Sebald indicates is the only way to justify survival “im Schatten des Berges der Schuld” (in the shadow of the mountain of guilt, Zerknirschung 266).

Engagement on behalf of the dead in the service of their memory, or on the part of the vanquished, is also perhaps the only plausible reason to inflict pain on the reader. By way of justifying this, Sebald quotes (more than once) Nietzsche’s observation in Genealogy of Morals on the role pain plays in memory; Nietzsche had asserted that “vielleicht ist nichts furchtbarer und unheimlicher an der ganzen Vorgeschichte des Menschen als seine Mnemotechnik. Man brennt etwas ein, damit es im Gedächtnis bleibt: nur was nicht aufhört, weh zu thun, bleibt im Gedächtnis” (perhaps nothing is more frightful and eerie about the whole prehistory of man than his mnemonics. One burns something in so that it stays in the memory: only what does not cease to cause pain remains in the memory).95 Since only what causes pain survives in the memory,

inflicting it can serve to invoke and secure a memorial to the victim. That Sebald bought into this idea is evident in that he even went so far as to employ the sense of engagement on behalf of the victim to make his critique of Sternheim seem more acceptable (CSt 11). His painfully sharp analysis is thus, paradoxically enough, a memorial to Sternheim as a victim, since it also confronts the power that twisted Sternheim into what Sebald thought was an indefensible ideological knot.

Sebald’s notion of good literature is that it yearns for a confrontation with power. This is the principal cause of Sebald’s affinity toward Elias Canetti, for example, whom he praises, among other authors such as Jarry, Kafka, Beckett, Genet and Bernhard, for recognizing that history is always written from the perspective of the stronger, of the powerful, of all that could be described as “ein geschlossenes System” (a closed system). It is hard to miss the similarity between his terminology here and that he used in his essays on Kafka. The confrontation with systems of power, which survive on victimization, was one of the ways he had described the mission of Kafka’s messianic figure. From this standpoint, Sebald’s view of the aesthetic virtue of a work of art is inseparable from its quality of being called—sanctified in the original sense of the word—to a mission of opposing injustice. Thus, excellent literature strives for a reversal of myth’s self-propagation. To accomplish this revised version of the messianic mission to mend the world, Sebald envisions a literature which tells truth about the catastrophes and victims of the world humans have created through their reliance on domination and estrangement from nature.

**Conclusion to Part One**

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What emerges, then, from Sebald’s analyses of Kafka, Döblin and other authors is a sense of how literature should be written, and it centers on what Sebald apparently saw as a mission for literature, which, if not carried off in an aesthetically and ethically defensible way, threatens to do more harm than good. Sebald obviously had a keen sense for the hope which can be expressed in literary form, and of the limitations this form imposed on the realization of hope. Messianism, then, is simply a specialized vocabulary of images and motifs that can evoke hope and point to the need to pursue it despite its having been forlorn from the start. Messianic thinking holds out the promise of either a return to some previous idyllic state of existence, or leaps forward to a time not yet appearing when the estrangement between humans and nature (both inner and outer) is done away with. In either case, it is not the contemplation of something which is, in an ontological sense, and hence it represents an escape valve for Sebald. And yet, as his analysis of Alfred Döblin shows, Sebald was aware of the danger inherent in messianic thinking. When utopia inevitably fails to emerge from the ever-receding horizon, hope can descend either into contemplative melancholia that continually looks after a forlorn hope, or into the hopeless instantiation of violence. In the following chapter, we will begin to read carefully Sebald’s own fictional creations to see how he navigated between these polarities and to determine whether or not Sebald’s literary work can indeed be described in some way as messianic. Richard Sheppard has proposed that the chiliastic urge to revolutionize the world, which fascinated Sebald in his early days, turned inward, ending his “radical” phase and producing his literary work. This strikes me as correct in every respect, except perhaps that I rather like to think of Sebald’s desire to see an end to injustice as continuing, following that secret, subterranean path described in Buber’s Hassidic Tales—which Sebald marked in his own

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copy and cited frequently—by which the Messiah knows how to free the victims of injustice “durch Höhlen und Löchter [sic] unter der Erde” (through caves and holes under the earth, Buber 120/I, 41). It is this path which we, too, will follow in the following chapters.
Part Two

The Mission Takes Shape
Chapter Three

First Moves Toward a Literature of Restitution: Sebald’s Poetry

Abstract

In the preceding chapters, I explored Sebald’s sense of the brokenness of the world (Chapter 1) and his response, which emerged from his scholarly interest in Jewish messianic traditions (Chapter 2). In what follows, I will trace the ways in which this interest in a literature of restitution took shape in Sebald’s own creative writing. The remaining three chapters will proceed chronologically, examining the most pertinent works from Sebald’s oeuvre according to their composition date. As it turns out, this will also lend itself to generic organization, since, though Sebald continued to dabble in a variety of genres throughout his career, he clearly progressed through phases of interest. Chapters 4 and 5 will focus on Sebald’s brief theatrical forays and his most productive genre, prose, respectively. However, as the title of the present chapter suggests, I will begin where Sebald began—with poetry—which represents his first attempts at composing literature that takes a restitutionary, ethical stand against the victimization of the natural and human world. Poetry afforded Sebald a highly condensed forum for expressing his mistrust of the rationalized, enlightened world and his forlorn hope for an alternate way of organizing and memorializing human experience that dignified the otherwise nameless victims of history.

To begin with, it must be admitted that beginning this second part of the present study with poetry may strike some readers as odd. W.G. Sebald’s reputation does not rest on his poetic work. Indeed, as an author, Sebald became fairly synonymous with a particular kind of allusive, meandering prose—so much so that his reputation for an “inimitable” style prompted a spoof from British parodist Craig Brown. In fact, this assignment of Sebald to the category of prose writer was a perception to which he himself contributed. In an interview from 1993, he claimed rather emphatically, for example, “my medium is prose.” And, as it turns out, this had been his practice for some twenty years. He rather misleadingly represented himself as a raw beginner when he submitted several poems to Merkur in 1973. “Was die ‘Primärliteratur’ betrifft,” he writes, “so sind die Gedichte meine erste Exkursion, und ich weiß noch wenig Bescheid über die

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98 Craig Brown, *Private Eye* 4 September 1998: 25. The parody was reported to have “quietly chuffed” its target, according to the recollections of Boyd Tonkin in 2002. See “W.G. Sebald: The gentle ghosts of a tragic history,” *The Independent* (13 April 2002).

99 “Wildes Denken,” Interview with Sigfrid Löffler, *Profil* 19 Apr 1993. Of course, in this interview, Sebald was specifically seeking to distinguish himself from the category of *novelist*. The complete quotation is “My medium is prose, not the novel.” Nevertheless, in emphasizing this, he obscured the fact that, by the time of this interview, he had already been publishing poetry off and on for almost 30 years, whereas his first prose publications come much later.
Legitimität meiner Bemühungen in diesem Distrikt” (Concerning ‘primary literature,’ the poems are my first excursion and I do not know about the legitimacy of my efforts in this district). Even more confusing was his assertion in interviews from the late 1990s that he had only begun writing in response to the burdens of university teaching. In reality, Sebald had already been publishing such work since his days at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg (Breisgau), when several of his poems appeared in the Freiburger Studenten-Zeitung in 1964 and 1965. For that matter, though his submission to Merkur failed, he continued to write small, characteristically unrhymed and metrically irregular poems for the rest of his literary career. Perhaps for that reason, his long “Elementargedicht” (elemental-poem) After Nature, which was barely noticed at its publication in 1988, has since received less attention than his other works. Even less well-known are his other, smaller volumes of poetry. For Years Now appeared in the same year as his death and intersperses 23 of Sebald’s English “micropoems” with geometric abstract screen-prints by Tess Jaray. To my knowledge, no scholar has yet engaged this text. Only slightly more familiar is Unerzählt (2003), published in translation by Michael Hamburger as Unrecounted (2004), which similarly pairs 33 extremely brief miniatures with engravings, this

101 A good example of Sebald’s misleading self-styling can be found in his interview with The Observer in which he stated that he had begun to write “somewhere around my mid-forties, not even quite 10 years ago.” (“W.G. Sebald: ‘Characters, plot, dialogue? That’s not really my style...’” The Observer 7 June 1998. Observer Review Page, 17.)
102 McCulloh claims that Sebald had “established his reputation” in Germany with the publication of After Nature and Vertigo “both of which received considerable critical attention” (McCulloh 53). But this is simply not true of the first book. Vertigo was indeed reviewed in the major news organs in Germany, though not extensively, but After Nature was largely ignored. As Claudia Albes points out, After Nature was only seriously engaged in two reviews at the time of its publication: once in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (11 February 1989) and once in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (2 March 1989) (Albes “Porträt” 47n2). And, as the first reviewer, Thomas Anz, observed, a full six months had elapsed without review since the initial appearance of After Nature (Loquai 58). It was only after the publication of Vertigo that After Nature received wider attention.
103 Michael Hamburger notes that this was Sebald’s designation for these miniature compositions (U 7.)
104 McCulloh mentions this text without specifically examining its content (McCulloh 175). The same should be observed of J.J. Long’s and Anne Whitehead’s introduction to their Critical Companion (Long and Whitehead 4) and Deane Blackler in Adventure and Disobedience, though Blackler is obviously familiar with the volume, since she quotes from it at the beginning of her second chapter (Blackler 53, 70 and 77). Alan Corkhill comes closest to assessing this work in his essay “Angles of Vision in Sebald’s After Nature and Unrecounted” where he quotes from the work in support of his analysis of the other volumes (Fischer 367).
time by Sebald’s longtime friend, Jan Peter Tripp. The many other short poems, which he sporadically published until his death in 2001, have received even less attention despite their republication in Sven Meyer’s 2008 edition, Über das Land und das Wasser. And yet, this is actually quite surprising, since Sebald’s poetic compositions represent the earliest and longest lasting of his literary pursuits and consequently one of the best opportunities his readers have to assess a broad cross-section of his artistic production. They offer us an ideal occasion to test the thesis that has been developed thus far, namely that Sebald’s writing represented a reaction to the brokenness of the world and a literary “attempt at restitution” conceived of in the tradition of tikkan olam.

As was established in the previous chapter, the impact of messianic traditions on Sebald was the impression he developed that works of art—especially literature—had a particular ethical imperative. Sebald’s criticisms and praise of other authors came down to an assessment of how poorly or well they mobilized literature to confront systems of power, identify with the victims of history and attempt a reversal of self-propagating myth. Acceptable texts evinced, in Sebald’s view, melancholia (rather than resignation) and made use of images and motifs that evoke an (albeit forlorn) hope.

But how does this work itself out in Sebald’s own literary production? In what respect can it be said to be messianic? In order to detect a redemptive thread in Sebald’s work according to these criteria, we must first establish that it points to the break between humans and nature and

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105 Corkhill has examined the short poems in conjunction with After Nature under the aspect of vision, which he interprets very much in line with my argument in this study. Corkhill’s assessment is that Sebald’s “preoccupation” with the physical eye and the mind’s eye and his play with point of view “can be understood metaphorically as a quest for the right set of life’s perspectives” (347). This set of perspectives is, indeed, the hoped for restoration in Sebald’s quasi-messianic mission. See “Angles of Vision in Sebald’s After Nature and Unrecounted,” in Fischer 347-67. Among others who had looked at this text is Marcel Atze. See his 2003 review, “Geschichte der zugewandten Gesichter” (Literaturkritik.de).

thereby seeks to counteract the ongoing systematic fusion of enlightenment and myth. But what prevents this from simply constituting extended cultural criticism will be the presence of messianic topoi mobilized to conjure simultaneously a sense of hopefulness and the dashing of hope, as well as the sense that Sebald’s work seeks some kind of idiosyncratic mechanism to reverse the process in some kind of halting and recursive way. In other words, it is not enough to merely identify melancholia and its intertextual references in Sebald’s work, which has by now been thoroughly investigated by his readers. What we will need to see is the degree to which this melancholia functions as a kind of reader-oriented catalyst to restitutionary action. To establish this, what follows will take two steps. In the first, we will consider Sebald’s earliest poems, since it is here that he begins to put his notion of literary restitution into practice. We will also consider his later poetic works, most of which return to the brevity of his first work and make for interesting parallels. Then, in the second phase of this chapter, we will consider Sebald’s longest poem, which emerged in the middle years of his academic and literary career, (though at the very beginning of his literary renown), *After Nature*. This poem, I will argue, includes all the elements of what would later find fuller fruition in his prose (Chapter Five), and constitutes a kind of programmatic statement upon which he would build in the rest of his career. It will thus be the contention of this chapter that Sebald’s poetic works, widening the clear development of a quasi-messianic mission, represent his first moves toward literary restitution.
Early Poetry (1964-65)

It is significant, then, to observe that in Sebald’s first published work, “Schwer zu verstehen” (1964), his sense of estrangement from nature is already acute, and that this estrangement appears to be the consequence of human approaches to nature:

Schwer zu verstehen
ist nämlich die Landschaft
wenn du im D-Zug von dahin
nach dorthin vorbeifährst,
während sie stumm
dein Verschwinden betrachtet.

What’s hard to understand
is, namely, the landscape
when you ride by in the express
from here to there
as it silently
observes your disappearing.

(ÜLW 7)

In this unrhymed, metrically irregular miniature, Sebald inverts the relationship between landscape and observer, which since antiquity had been unproblematically anthropocentric. Sebald’s depiction of nature is, as Anne Fuchs has pointed out, anything but uncomplicated and represents a retort to the concept of “idealised landscape,” which grows from modernity’s conception of nature (Fuchs, “Hauptkapitel” 121-38). Fuchs points to Sebald’s interest in Adalbert Stifter’s nature depiction and concludes that both authors “engage with the problematic of perception and subjectivity from a phenomenological perspective. Thus, in reproducing the narrator’s perception and thought-processes while passing through a particular landscape, Sebald highlights that subjectivity is an essential prerequisite to an experience of nature” (122-23). The most natural way to understand a landscape, according to this model, is as a setting and context for human activity, an object of human perusal and contemplation, an aesthetic object quite inextricably intertwined with human experience. Fuchs proposes that this model is at work in Sebald’s various literary invocations of landscape. And yet here, in his earliest work, Sebald’s

107 Interestingly enough, the third section of After Nature begins with a very similar formulation: “Schwer zu entdecken sind nämlich / die zwischen den Schiebertafeln / eingelagerten geflügelten Wirbeltiere / der Vorzeit […]” (71).
recipient, anonymized as “du,” is at the same time a grammatical subject and a thematic object of the landscape’s observation. Subjective ruminations of the observer are strikingly absent. As the express train, an archetypal product of rationalized, modern exploitation of nature, carries this objectified subject “from here to there,” the landscape observes him, remaining silent and inscrutable. The subject-object inversion means that what passes from view is now what normally would be the protagonist and what remains—viewing—is the nameless, undefined “Landschaft.” This rhymes with what Colin Riordan has argued in his essay, “Ecocentrism in Sebald’s After Nature” (Long and Whitehead 45-57). Riordan observes that nature (and by extension, landscape) is a human construct that “does not exist separately from us, but only as a necessary pendant to human society and human identity” (47). And yet, he attests, for Sebald “nature is not represented as a primarily aesthetic object; that is, it derives its value not solely from the perceptual impact it makes on the observer, but from within itself” (46). It is this very independence of nature, and the distance that humans have technologically placed between themselves and nature, that is at stake even in this first published poem. In his essay on Sebald’s “Miniature Histories,” J.J. Long has made similar observations regarding the railway in chapter two of Rings of Saturn (Long and Fuchs 111-20). Looking back at the history of locomotives and their impact on culture, Long notes that “Railways destroyed the physical contact between traveler and landscape, and reconstituted the traveller as a distanced spectator. As a result, the landscape itself was no longer perceptible as a totality but became reduced to a series of isolated fragments” (115). This perspective Long explicates here becomes even more pointed in a later draft of this poem from the “Poemtrees” collection in Sebald’s estate at the DLA in Marbach, which suggests that the author continued to rework the piece long after its publication. In this

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108 I have reproduced Sven Meyer’s 2008 edition here, but it must be observed that Meyer’s editorial choice at times is rather opaque; here he rather logically reprints the version of the poem that appeared in the Freiburger Studenten-
later copy, Sebald has made changes to both the structure and content of this poem. “D-Zug,” for example, becomes (more succinctly and generally) “Zug” and the expression “[…] von dahin / nach dorthin […]” is rather nicely replaced by “aus ihr,” which underscores the subject’s departure or extraction from nature and only deepens the poem’s implications. Thus, even in his earliest poetic work, the dynamic of estrangement from nature, presumably due to technological advances, is at work. This confirms the first part of the thesis that was developed in chapter one of this study, namely, that Sebald detected a rupture between humans and nature and that he attributed this rupture to the application of scientifically purposed reason.

It is no surprise, then, to discover that this same dynamic of estrangement also operates in Sebald’s other poems from these early years. Thus, in “Schrebergartenkolonie” (1964) we read:

Schrebergartenkolonie
Hügelan in den Herbst.
Zu Haufen gekehrt
Ist das Laub.
Bald – samstags –
wird ein Mann
es verbrennen.

Allotment garden colony
Uphill in the fall.
Raked into piles
Are the leaves.
Soon – Saturday –
A man will
Burn it.

(ÜLW 8)

Readers of Sebald’s later work will immediately recognize here his discomfort with, as he puts it elsewhere, the fact that “Verbrennung…das innerste Prinzip eines jeden von uns hergestellten Gegenstandes [ist]” (Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artifact we create, RS 202/170). The poem turns its focus first to the foliage raked into piles for burning. The similarly anonymous “Mann” lacks any kind of empathetic engagement with nature. He is merely tending the garden, presumably for his own purposes, and ridding it of detritus. This and many other
early poems, which we unfortunately do not have space to consider here, underscore the rupture between humans and nature. These works are evidence that Sebald, from the very beginning of his literary career, is concerned about the consequences of human dominance over the natural order.

These early works also make clear that, in Sebald’s estimation, traditional attempts to heal this rupture fall short. One of his early miniatures, “Wintergedicht” (1965), indulges in what might at first seem to be rather innocuous, soothing, wintertime imagery:

Das Tal hallt wider
Vom Klang der Sterne
Vom Ausmaß der Stille
Über dem Schnee und den Wäldern.

Das Vieh ist im Stall.
Gott ist im Himmel.
Das Jesuskind in Flandern.
Wer glaubt wird selig.
Die heiligen drei Könige
Gehen auf der Erde.

The valley echoes
With the sound of the stars
With the intensity of the stillness
Over the snow and the woods.

The cattle is in the stall.
God is in heaven.
The Christ-child in Flanders.
Whoever believes is blessed.
The Three Kings
Walk the earth.

(ÜLW 20)

And yet, what at first appears innocent in this poem takes a sinister turn in an intriguing example of Sebald’s rewriting. A to-date unpublished work from 1968, “Ballade vom Licht der Welt,” reuses these lines and pulls no punches regarding the hope available in Christianity. In this poem—one of Sebald’s few rhymed and metrically rigorous works, though admittedly not his best—he pillories the kind of wide-eyed credulity that is willing to suspend awareness of the bleakness of life in order to celebrate Christmas:

Ja der Winter ist schwer
& es weihnachtet sehr
& um Mitternacht
hat der Bauer g’schlacht

Yes, the winter is hard
and Christmas is on its way
& at midnight
the farmer slaughtered

109 See, for example, “Nicht mehr bewegen” (ÜLW 9) and “Epitaph” (12).
& zwischen rußigen Balken
fressen sich Tauben und Falken
& between the sooty timbers
the pigeons and hawks feast

ganz schwarz sind die Zäun
& das Blut friert am Stein
& the fences are black
& the blood freezes on the stone
& das Blut wird zu Harz
& die Zäun sind ganz schwarz
& the blood turns to pitch
& the fences are completely black
& auf den Feldern liegt Schnee
aus himmlischer Höh
& on the fields lies snow
from the heavenly heights
& der Has rückt ins Holz
& am Ast hockt der Golz
& the hare shifts in the wood
& on the branches, a finch perches

& zwischen die Spitzen
Lichterlein blitzen
& between the treetops
little lights blaze
& der Stern hellt im Morgen
versinkt voller Sorgen
& the star brightens in the morning
sinks full of cares
& der heilige Klaus
fährt beim Kamin ein und aus
& saint Nicholas
goes in and out of the chimney
& im Stall steht der Schimmel
& Gott ist im Himml
& in the stall, the white horse stands
& God is in heav’n
& der Herr Jesus in Flandern
bei alle die andern
& Lord Jesus in Flanders
by all of the others
& immer noch bitten die Weisen fürs Kind
& draußen weht schon die Schweinblas im Wind
& still the wise men ask for the child
& outside the pig bladder blows in the wind

Any redemption, if such is to be found, lies not in the espousal of blind faith like that of the shipwreck victims in the short story from Balzac, *Jésus-Christ en Flandre* (1831), to which Sebald ironically alludes at the close. Here also is an ironized echo of the famous lines from Robert Browning’s 1841 verse drama *Pippa Passes*: “God’s in his heaven. All’s right with the

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110 I have taken the text for this piece from a typescript located in a mixed lot of prose dating to 1968. It is unclear whether or not this version of the poem represents Sebald’s dissatisfaction with his earlier publication. What is plain, however, is that here, as elsewhere, Sebald makes use of his own previous composition to elaborate on a new theme.
world.” In Sebald’s words, “Gott ist im Himml,” but any sense that all is right with the world is illusory. Instead, the business of killing the natural world proceeds apace. The image of congealing blood freezing on the stone and the blackness of a fence, repeated and inverted at the end of the first third of the poem, render the rather more comforting images that follow a jarring and markedly insufficient response to the horror of slaughter. Though the wise men may still roam the earth, seeking a Christ-child, Sebald reminds his reader of cold reality. An inflated pig’s bladder, the traditional accoutrement of a carnival fool in Sebald’s southern Germany, is blowing ominously in the wind.

But what we have examined thus far constitutes only half of Sebald’s concern. The break with nature also inexorably leads to human victimization, a fact to which his first longer poem clearly points. In the center of a poem from 1965, “Erinnertes Triptychon einer Reise aus Brüssel,” one of Sebald’s ciphers for domination, expansionism and the attenuating victimization of people makes his first appearance: Napoleon. Of Napoleon, Sebald stated quite emphatically:

Napoleon und alles Napoleonische tauchen in fast allen meinen Büchern auf, als historisches Paradigma, das etwas mit der Europa-Idee zu tun hat, die damals erstmals auf brachiale Weise durchexerziert wurde. Was mich daran wiederum interessiert, ist die Tatsache, dass man in Deutschland dann rund 130 Jahre später dasselbe noch einmal versucht hat, mit noch brachialeren Methoden, diese Idee einer deutschen Hegemonie, die sich von Wilhelm II. bis in die Jahre 1939/40/41 zieht. Schauen Sie sich doch die Europakarte von 1941/42 an: Da ist sozusagen alles Deutschland, mit Satelliten.

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111 The passage from which this is quoted actually sounds very like that written by Sebald, both in meter and in content:

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven---
All's right with the world! (Browning 24)

It is also fascinating to note, though surely only anecdotal, that Pippa sings these words on the doorstep of Ottima and her German paramour, Sebald, who operate the silk mill in which Pippa works.
Napoleon, and everything Napoleonic, appear in almost all of my books as an historic paradigm that has something to do with the idea of Europe, which, for the first time, was brutally put into practice. In turn, what interests me about that is the fact that in Germany, about 130 years later, one attempted once again with still more brutal methods the idea of German hegemony that continued from Wilhelm II through the years 1939/40/41. Look at a map of Europe from 1941/42: there is nothing, so to speak, but Germany with satellites.  

Indeed, the French emperor makes an appearance in almost every major work, and, as Richard Sheppard points out, represents the destructive dream (or nightmare) of turning Europe into an orderly, totalitarian state (Dexter Sinister 422). Napoleon’s presence in this poetic travel report indicates that Sebald’s concern that the victims his regime oppressed be memorialized. In this poem, Sebald invokes the battlefield at Waterloo, and the blood of lost “Marie-Louisen” (the notorious 19th-century nickname for French soldiers) over which dun-colored grass grows (14). But these fallen Frenchmen are not the only indications that he is concerned now with human victims. He stays in the hotel room of a student from Missouri (15), who, in another draft of the poem entitled “Triptychon mit Bildern aus Brüssel,” is killed in a traffic accident. “Im obersten Stock von Madame Müllers Cafeteria” we read in this draft, “Bewohn ich das blaue Zimmer / Von Martin Marks aus Missouri / Verunglückt im Herbst 64 auf der Strasse nach Charleroi” (in the uppermost story of Madame Müller’s Cafeteria / I inhabit the blue room / of Martin Marks from Missouri / who met with an accident in the fall of ’64 on the road to Charleroi).  

These examples from Sebald’s early poetry attest to the long duration of his concern about the abuse of

113 See for example, Sebald’s description of Stendhal’s Napoleonic military service in *Vertigo* (SG 7, 23 / V 3, 18); his travels to the monument at Waterloo and other invocations of Napoleon in *Rings of Saturn* (RS 150-53/123-26, 274/230, 304/256); André Hilary’s enthusiasm for Napoleon in *Austerlitz* (A 105-13/69-74) the miniature “It is said” from *For Years Now* (FYN 9, cf. U 49/61) and, of course, Sebald’s own excursion to Napoleon’s birthplace in Ajaccio, Corsica in *Campo Santo* (CS 9-17/5-14).
114 This version is from the “Poemtrees” collection in the Nachlass. It is clearly not the version Sebald eventually decided on, but shows some of his strategies in composing the poem.
nature and the victimization of humans. It is therefore safe to conclude that from his earliest
days as a composer of literary work, Sebald’s perspective had already taken a gloomy turn.

The early poetry also contains many of the images that would later reappear in Sebald’s
better known prose. For example, another school days composition, “Nymphenburg” (1964),
examines the same kinds of abandoned human landscapes and architecture that readers have
come to expect from Sebald. The castle and courtyard are overgrown with hedges and
“vergessen seit Zeiten” (forgotten for ages, ÜLW 11). The only figures moving through the
eerie “Bibliotheken verstorbener Fürsten” (libraries of dead princes) are ghostly, mumbling tour-
guides. Sebald’s descriptions of Dr. Selwyn’s overgrown garden in The Emigrants (AG 12-14 /
E 6-8) and of the run-down Ashbury estate in The Rings of Saturn (RS 249-63/209-21) spring
immediately to mind. Similarly bleak is “Schattwald in Tirol” (1965), in which Sebald’s narrator
and several fellow travelers presumably await the bus traveling between Schattwald and
Innsbruck, which he later describes in Vertigo (SG 195-209 / V 171-176). Here, as in that later
work, we encounter a landscape that would otherwise seem quite idyllic re-written blackly
against the “Papyrus des Winters” (papyrus of the winter, ÜLW 13). It is also intriguing to note
how fond Sebald apparently was of the term Ruß (soot) and all its derivatives, which appears in
this poem for the first time. A number of scholars have already observed how frequently dust
and ash appear in his work,115 and Sebald commented on its significance in an interview with
Eleanor Wachtel (Wachtel 58-59). Soot is hardly less common in his work, occurring several
times in every major composition.116

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115 See Santner 99-106, for example.
116 Ruß and related terms (i.e. rußig, gerüßt etc.) appear three times in Vertigo (SG 73, 198, 284 / V 64, 182, 259),
four times in The Emigrants (all in the context of the Max Aurach/Ferber narrative: AG 223, 263, 316, 348 / E 151,
176, 211, 232), twice in The Rings of Saturn (RS 41/29, 131/108), and four times in Austerlitz (A 16/8; A 53/33; A
57/36; A 189/128).
Middle Years (1966-1988)

One of those sooty cross-references is to “Bleston: A Mancunian Canticle,” a long poem in which the griminess of Manchester takes center stage (ÜLW 22-26). The poem was, to my knowledge, not published during his lifetime, and yet its subject could not have been more clearly traceable to Sebald’s years in Manchester beginning in 1966. Thus, it marks the beginning of his middle years of poetry. Whereas the earliest works are characteristically short, Sebald’s middle poetry takes on more epic proportions, culminating in After Nature, which we will examine in a moment. These longer pieces are also closer in style to Sebald’s prose, since here he begins writing in the highly allusive, intertextual mode for which he eventually became renowned. “Bleston” is paradigmatic of this new style. However, some lines are nearly impossible to puzzle out, which is not characteristic of his later work, where intertextual connections serve an illustrative purpose or illuminate a deeper-reaching significance underlying a more apparent reading. In “Bleston” and After Nature, there are passages that are quite simply hermetically sealed against a reader without access to the specialized store of knowledge Sebald brings to bear. Nevertheless, “Bleston,” like the other works Sebald wrote during these years, continues to betray his diagnosis of the brokenness of the world and his interest in memorializing the human and non-human victims of this break. As Jo Catling has pointed out, the title is obviously an allusion to Michel Butor’s L’Emploi du temps (Passing Time, 1956), which Sebald acquired in 1966 (Catling, “England-Deutscher,” 32). In Butor’s novel, the protagonist, Jacques Revel attempts to make sense of his existence in the confusing warren of Manchester, which increasingly seems to him like being trapped in one of the looms for which the city had become famous during the Industrial Revolution. But, whereas Revel’s mishaps eventually convince him

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117 This is a phenomenon Richard Sheppard observes at the close of the Ambros Adelwarth episode of The Emigrants (Woods, Trees 114).
that some “malevolent will” had conspired against him (Butor 47), and his narrative becomes increasingly self-absorbed, Sebald’s poem turns outward, identifying not the speaker, but the city itself and its inhabitants as the victims for whom he needs to speak. In the poem’s first section, “Fête Nocturne” (night party), we catch glimpses of a disrupted natural world: it is “Eine verschlossene Welt stumm / Und ohne Bilder […]” (a closed world without pictures, ÜLW 22, lines 2-3); the starlings have forgotten their way of life and stay in Bleston instead of migrating (lines 4-6); though it is a lightless December, there is no snow (line 7); the trees are sooty (line 9). At the end of this stanza, the narrator exclaims “Jetzt ist der Tod alles Leben” (now death is all of life, line 17) and he finds himself asking after the death of animals, none of which he has yet seen (lines 18-20).

The second stanza is hardly less bleak. This section, entitled “Consensus Omnium” (universal consent), begins with the narrator’s observation that eternity makes experiences bitter. He muses on the history of Manchester, observing that in the ages following its founding ca. A.D. 60-80, the city appeared “[…] verlassen und / Trostlos” (abandoned and disconsolate, 23, lines 6-8). This condition, however, has not truly improved in the intervening years. “Bleston kennt eine Stunde,” he intones, “Zwischen Sommer und Winter / Die niemals vergeht […]” (Bleston knows an hour / between summer and winter / that never passes on […], lines 9-11). This no-man’s-land between summer and winter is the ongoing caesura that marks time in Manchester. Sebald’s reaction is not merely hyperbole. Manchester, which had seen a population explosion during the Industrial Revolution, had been steadily declining and falling into decay since the end of the Second World War. During Sebald’s stay in the late 1960s, the

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118 As has been pointed out on Christian Wirth’s excellent online lexicon, this is possibly an allusion to Cicero’s Philippic 4.9. See http://wgsebald.de/lexueb.html. Accessed 25 March 2011.
119 This is doubtless an allusion to the fact that no settlement appears to have been maintained in Manchester following the Roman departure until the medieval period (Kidd 2).
situation must have certainly seemed terribly bleak to its inhabitants. Manchester historian Alan Kidd, for example, relates that between 1966 and 1972 a third of all manual manufacturing jobs and a quarter of factories in Manchester disappeared (Kidd 192). It makes sense, then, that Sebald would point back to the inscription made at Manchester’s founding: *Dis Manibus Mamucium / Hoc faciendum curavi*, literally, “The ghost-gods have had Manchester erected” (lines 18-19). Manchester appeared to be rapidly becoming a ghost town.

It makes sense, then, that the third stanza, “The Sound of Music,” begins with an ironic invocation of empathy: “Eine fremdartige Klage / Und ein Verwundern daß es / Traurigkeit gibt – die eigene / Niemals die fremde derer die leiden / Derer die ein Recht darauf haben” (a strange complaint / and amazement that / there is sadness – one’s own / Never the alien [sadness] of those who suffer / of those who have a right to it; 24, lines 1-3). In the center of the stanza, it becomes clear who these victims are. Not only are the out of work Mancunians to be pitied, but “Von Zeit zu Zeit,” he writes, “dringt / An mein Ohr das Geschrei / Der Tiere der zoologischen Abteilung” (From time to time penetrate / my ear the cries / of the animals in the zoological department; 24, lines 11-13). And here also we hear not only his sense of this brokenness, but also his dissatisfaction with religious answers. The sick, he notes, are gathered for healing at “Sharon’s Full Gospel,” presumably a Pentecostal church, and, as he reports, “[…] the sick are / Miraculously healed before our eyes” (lines 17-18). But these miracles are short-lived. “Draußen auf dem Wasser,” he continues ominously “liegen / Die Schiffe im Nebel und warten” (Outside, on the water, / The ships lie in the fog and wait; lines 19-20). It is clear that these allusions to the ferryman of Hades, awaiting the inevitable end of supposedly miraculous recoveries, dismantle any religious pretensions to salvation. The members of “Sharon’s Full Gospel” will undoubtedly succumb and be transported on Charon’s bark.
The fourth stanza, “*Lingua Mortua*” (the language of the dead), contemplates the fate of those who succumb to death, or, in his allusion to Kebad Kenya (25, line 1), who are buried alive.\(^{120}\) The years of humanity lie piled up in their thousands, Sebald’s narrator intones, white, erratically in the moonlight and silently leaned against the stream of time (lines 2-5). Then Sebald makes a series of complicated allusions. He references the Pythagorean Hipassus and his discovery of musical relationships ca. 500 B.C.E., then cites Vergil: “and the valleys echoed the sound to the stars,” the sound of which Pythagoras claimed to have been able to hear. But Bleston’s valleys, he observes, have no echo (lines 6-12). Its inhabitants can only await the “thread of Ariadne,” who hanged herself, until their blood is “Derjogt – mit opgekelte schottms” (caught with cooled-off shades, lines 13-15). He follows this by quoting Heinrich Meibom (1555-1625): “Alma quies, optata, veni! nam sic sine vita / Vivere, quam suave est, sic sine morte mori” (Come, gentle sleep! How sweet it is to live though seeming dead and, without dying, to die, lines 16-17).

And it is to Ariadne’s cord that Sebald returns in the final stanza, *Perdu dans ces Filaments* (lost in these threads). He finds proof that a human heart can be crushed in the dying words of Jesus. “Aber doch die Gewissheit /” he intones, “Daß das Herz eines Menschen / Zerdrückt werden kann – Eli Eli” (But truly the certainty / that the heart of a man / can be crushed – Eli Eli, ÜLW 26, lines 1-3). What can so easily get lost in the threads is the story of each victim who dies in despair. Thus, Sebald styles himself as on a chronicling quest; he is searching the libraries of Bleston for a book: “A World Bibliography of Bibliographies” (line 12). And in this search, he reminds the reader that “On ne doit plus dormir” (one should no

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\(^{120}\) Kebad Kenya, who figures in a tale told by Klemens Fitte, the ship’s carpenter in Hans Henny Jahnn’s novel *Das Holzschiff* (1949, revised 1959), allowed himself to be buried alive in order to redeem himself of an unnamed sin. He does not meet death but returns to haunt his neighbors and, naturally, continue sinning. See Hans Henry Jahnn, *Das Holzschiff*, Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1959, 133-147.
longer sleep). Here, though Sebald is ostensibly quoting Pascal, the reference is actually to Adorno’s essay “Commitment,” where Adorno had invoked Pascal to emphasize that real suffering does not permit forgetting (Commitment 85). In this crucial essay, Adorno accepts Enzensberger’s response to the former’s statement that writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. “Enzensberger’s retort also remains true,” Adorno admits, “that literature must resist this verdict...not surrender to cynicism [...]”. This suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it” (84-85). Thus, Sebald’s narrator intones that sleep is no longer permitted, because the work he is undergoing stands under an ethical imperative not to “surrender to cynicism.” And what remains to be told, that for which he must be registered, is also clear. There is a gap in the history within these books. Sebald continues:

Überständig ist längst ein Revision
Aller Bücher im Inneren des Vulkans
In dieser Höhle im Inneren einer Höhle
Bleibt kein Blick zurück in die Zukunft
Sternzeichen lesend muß man winters
Aus Kopfweiden schneiden auf
schnellösen
Feldern Flöten des Todes für Bleston

Long overdue is a revision
of all books in the heart of the volcano
In this cave in a cave
No view back into the future remains
In the winter, reading zodiacal signs,
one has to cut flutes of the dead
from willows on snowless fields
for Bleston

(ÜLW 26, lines 14-20)

And it is exactly this memorializing, the fashioning of musical (or poetic) voices for the dead to which his longest poem, After Nature, to which we will turn at the end of this chapter, is dedicated.

**Late Poetry (after 1988)**

Most of Sebald’s attention after the mid-1970s was directed to the genres of drama and prose, which we will discuss in the following chapters. And yet, as I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, he continued to turn occasionally to poetry. “Ein Walzertraum” appeared in 1993.
Two more poems, “Am 9. Juni 1904” and “Neunzig Jahre später,” were published in 1996 in the *Weltwoche* supplement. In addition to these individual publications, the collections *Unerzählt* and *For Years Now* were printed in 1999 and 2001 respectively. In these later years, Sebald’s poetry continues to exhibit his concerns for nature and the hidden victims of history. Thus, in the miniature that gave its name to the 1999 collection we read:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Unerzählt</em></th>
<th><em>Unrecounted</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bleibt die Geschichte</td>
<td><em>always it will remain</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>der abgewandten Gesichter</td>
<td><em>the story of the averted faces</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(U 69/81)

Palpable here is the urgency of conducting a literary excavation of sites of suffering. “The story of the averted faces” is in threat of annihilation. To be fair, this poem and the other miniatures in *For Years Now* and *Unrecounted* are difficult to interpret within the scheme we have been developing because of their brevity. Nevertheless, when we read of the dormouse, for example, there is the same tangible anguish over seemingly insignificant, yet ghastly fates that await creatures of all sorts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Des Sieben Schläfers Schatten</th>
<th><em>The Dormouse</em> mouse’s shadow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ist</td>
<td><em>is</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>der Tod</td>
<td><em>death</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(U 37/49)

This is a pure statement of fact, seemingly stripped of the emotional content we normally associate with death. But we have come to read such expressions not merely as evidence of Sebald empathy, but also of his awareness of the guilt humans share in this fate that lies before—or in this case, under—the creature.
And we now see in these later poems some of the familiar intertexts that emerged in the prose he had been composing by this point. Thus in “Ein Walzertraum” we see an oblique reference not only to Kafka’s Jäger Gracchus (whom Sebald had invoked frequently in _Vertigo_) but also Rembrandt’s _Anatomy Lesson_ (which figures in the soon to appear _Rings of Saturn_):

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Ein Walzertraum

An der Grenzstation
angelaingt ist jetzt
endlich der Reisende

Ein Zöllner hat ihm
die Schuhbänder gelöst
die Schuhe ausgezogen

Auf den gehobelten Brettern
des Bodens herrenlos
steht das Gepäck

Das schweinslederne Köfferchen
ist aufgegangen, die arme
Seele entflogen

Den Körper, das letzte
Umsiedlungsgut erwartet
eine peinliche Untersuchung

Gleich kommt der Dr. Tulp
mit dem schwarzen Hut und
dem Prosekturbesteck in der Hand

Oder ist der Leib bereits
ausgehöhlt und gewichtlos und
schwebt, nur von den Finger-

spitzen ein wenig gesteuert
hinüber in das Land das
man nur barfuß betreten darf?

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_A Waltz Dream_

At the border station
the traveler has now
finally arrived

A customs official undid
his shoe laces
removed his shoes

Abandoned on the ground
on top of the planed wood
the luggage

The little pigskin suitcase
has opened, the poor
soul taken off

The body, the last
resettlement property, awaits
an embarrassing investigation

Soon Dr. Tulp comes
with the black hat and
the dissection instruments in the hand

Or is the body already
hollowed out and weightless and
floating, only by finger-

tips steered a little
over into the land that
one may only tread barefoot?

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121 As Markus Zisselsberger has pointed out, the title alludes ironically to Oscar Straus’s 1907 operetta of the same name, the “happy reconciliation” of which Sebald puts into question (Zisselsberger _Undiscover’d 9_).

122 The English rendering of lines 1-12 is from Markus Zisselsberger’s _The Undiscover’d Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel_ (2010), which he reproduces with permission from Penguin Books (Zisselsberger, _Undiscover’d 8_). The rendering of subsequent stanzas is my own.
Sebald had already pointed to the figure of Kafka’s Jäger Gracchus who is “exempt from the passage of time” as emblematic of the Messiah (Law 49). Here we have a similar character, seemingly undead, but yet now a “body,” lying in wait of the dissectors scalpel and saw. This is clearly a reference to the same character Sebald later considers in *Rings of Saturn*: Aris Kindt, who is dissected in Rembrandt’s famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson* (RS 22-28/12-17). At the end, however, we see the hint at levitation that became an essential part of Sebald’s restitution-oriented literary project. We catch a glimpse of this traveler’s weightlessness. But, as Zisselsberge points out, his destination, the land one may only tread barefoot, is not unambiguously to be wished for. We do not know what awaits him in there (*Undiscover’d 9*).

There is also one more feature of Sebald’s later poetry that, though it does not specifically relate to the central argument we have been following, represents a potentially important course-correction in Sebald scholarship and thus simply must be mentioned. In Michael Hamburger’s introduction to *Unrecounted* (2004), which also contained a number of poems originally published in the English volume *For Years Now*, Hamburger claims that Sebald had told Tripp that he would never compose a literary text in English and that Tripp thus supposed the English versions to be the work of an anonymous translator (U 8). However, lest this line of reasoning find a foothold, it must be noted that Hamburger did not then make use of the Sebald *Nachlass*, which contains a mustard-colored notebook in which Sebald composed and translated a number of poems for those volumes. Vitally, that notebook also contains a number of works that only exist in English, such as, for example, the following micropoem. It reveals Sebald not only as a German writer, but in his own right as the author of English poetry.

**Paper Tiger**
with long black hair
he liked to roam
the streets of San Diego

he wore white tennis
shoes and was arrested
fifteen times and

even spent a week
in jail for failing
to identify himself.\textsuperscript{123}

And here, too, the final lines of this poem hit on the rebellious tone that characterizes Sebald’s messianic mode. Here again we see his desire to contribute to the mending of the world by awakening our sense of ethical responsibility, by pointing out the injustice of systems of power—here presumably an unjust police officer—and by encouraging us as readers to identify with the victim.

\textit{Nach der Natur}

As we have seen, Sebald’s early poetry bears the mark of a quasi-messianic mission in that it confronts systems of power, exposing the domination that creates victims. His later poetry, too, reveals the lasting nature of this obsession. However, though Sebald’s smaller works of poetry prove to be illuminating, it was in his longer work, \textit{Nach der Natur} (translated by Michael Hamburger as \textit{After Nature}, 2002), that the most distilled and considered attempt at restitutionary poetry emerges. In some respects, it is quite surprising that the piece holds together so well, since it was composed and published in various forms over the course of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{123} The page does not bear the characteristic “X” which appears on the texts that were eventually published in \textit{For Years Now} and \textit{Unerzählt}. This may indicate that Sebald did not consider it finished, or it may be that he simply did not submit it for Jaray’s and Tripp’s consideration. At any rate, this version did not appear in print.}
several years. Its interwoven narratives are stitched together from disparate parts, or perhaps mounted together as a triptych, and demonstrate the degree to which Sebald remained preoccupied with the themes of loss and redemption. The poem appeared in three parts before being compiled as one volume by Greno in 1988. What eventually became the work’s center, “Und blieb ich am äußersten Meer,” in which Sebald considers the eighteenth-century botanist Georg Wilhelm Steller, was the first to be published, and appeared in Manuskripte in 1984. Another poem, featuring contemplations on the life of a Renaissance-era German painter, Matthias Grünewald, appeared next in 1986 and would later be incorporated in After Nature as its opening section, “Wie der Schnee auf den Alpen.” The poem’s crescendo, “Die dunkle Nacht fahrt aus,” in which a narrator sharing much of Sebald’s own biography examines his experiences, appeared in 1987 as Sebald was in talks with Greno and other publishers. As has often been observed, After Nature is often viewed as the odd-man-out among Sebald’s oeuvre, indeed as a literary oddity. Nevertheless, it represents a text that sets forth in many ways the program that would characterize Sebald’s subsequent works.

In this respect, it is interesting to note something rarely mentioned in the secondary literature regarding this work. The multivalence of the original German title, Nach der Natur,
has been addressed by a number of critics. Almost universally, however, these scholars point to its two principal implications: the poem can be understood temporally (the sense conveyed by the English title, After Nature) or modally (the mimetic sense conveyed in the phrase From Nature). There is, however, a third connotation rarely mentioned: Metaphysics. As Claudia Albes points out, Nach der Natur is a plausible literal translation of the word metaphysics (Porträt 53). The title Metaphysics may have been given to that famous work of Aristotle simply because it followed Aristotle’s work on the natural world, that is to say Physics. But the implication goes more than skin deep. Metaphysics as a philosophical practice can be thought of as the placing into two general categories, ontology (the study of the nature of being) and cosmology (the study of the organization of the universe) of basic things. As has often been pointed out, the subtitle of Sebald’s work that makes it difficult to assign the work to a discreet genre also hints at its elemental qualities. In this respect, Albes’ assertion that After Nature presents the core of Sebald’s poetics, which later unfolds in his prose, seems especially perspicacious (Porträt 48).

I only make these remarks, which might seem to divert our attention from the subject at hand, in order to point out the fact that this work contemplates, in a way that his poetry up to this point only hints at, the possibility of organizing our existence on earth in such a way that it takes

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128 Beginning with Gunhild Kübler’s review of Nach der Natur in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (2 March 1989; reprinted in Loquai 60-63, see esp. p.61), the observation of this doubly implicated title has become common enough now that listing even the most influential critics who have commented on this dual reading would be a fruitless use of space.

129 One notable exception is Claudia Albes in “Porträt ohne Modell” (Niehaus and Öhlschläger 47-75).

130 Andronicus of Rhodes (ca. 80 BCE) is supposed to have been the first to name the work based on his organization of the book in a curriculum of philosophy. My description is based on that in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which is now available online at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/. But this is only one explanation, the other being that the text went beyond Physics, which is another plausible meaning for meta. See in this regard Peter van Inwagen’s entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia. Michael Loux also very lucidly discusses the problems with this title, and its (non)relationship to the subject Aristotle engaged, in his Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 3-5.

into account an unexpected interconnectedness, that then takes a specific cosmological stance. The three narrative threads that Sebald draws out in this work all come together at Windsheim, which binds the three protagonists together across time and space. As in Sebald’s prose, this is not a connection that can be scientifically proven. Nor is it subject to independent verification, but, Sebald’s work seems to invite us to believe, it is simply and inexplicably there. As we will later see in *The Rings of Saturn*, this interconnectedness will bring with it ethical concerns (in Chapter Five). Though Helen Finch has contemplated Sebald’s yearning for redemptive literature in her essay “Die irdische Erfüllung” (Fuchs and Long 179-97), she also expresses her reservations about this interpretation. “[…] To read Sebald’s fictions as philosophical expositions,” she writes, “whether of theological redemption or a historical metaphysics, is a grave category error. Sebald is a metaphysical poet, not a systematic philosopher of history” (197). Forewarned then, we must proceed cautiously. Finch is correct in making the distinction between “systematic” philosophy and literature. However, as a glance at *After Nature* will show us, the implications of connecting characters and events across time and space in ways that are decidedly unsystematic allowed Sebald to turn our attention not only to the shared relationship of suffering in these figures, but also to awaken us to the possibility of discovering hidden kinships with them.

So, how does this work fit into the scheme which we have been developing up to this point? The messianic strain in *After Nature* consists, as elsewhere in Sebald’s poetry, in the memorializing of victims, the identifying of systems of victimizing power and separation from nature that accomplishes not only this memorialization but also constitutes an act of hopeless resistance, and the achievement of moments of levitation that offer a glimpse of an alternate way.

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132 Some critics have been more daring in reading Sebald from a particularly philosophical angle, such as Peter Arnds, whose essay on “Wandering in the Field of Lethe” takes a Heideggerian approach.
of organizing our existence on this planet. Each of the poem’s three sections also traces a career of education in this awareness that, at least in the case of the first two protagonists, ends in death. At least two of these characters, then, the elusive figure of Matthias Grünewald and the eighteenth-century explorer and botanist Georg Wilhelm Steller, can be read as victims whose fate Sebald rescues from the obscurity of history. But there are others, of course. In the first section, “Wie der Schnee auf den Alpen” (NN 6-33 / AN 4-37), we also encounter an art historian, Wilhelm Fraenger, whose books, Sebald informs us, the Nazis burned (8/6). He takes special note of the persecution of Jews in Frankfurt (12-13/12-13), one of whom, Sebald suggests, may have been married to Grünewald himself. Furthermore, Sebald makes it clear that Grünewald himself is decidedly on the side of victims, giving his portrait of Saint Dionysius the face of Tilman Riemenschneider, a sculptor who, following the Peasants’ War of 1524-26, was imprisoned and tortured at the behest of the Bishop of Würzburg. This gesture of solidarity with the sufferer, Sebald notes, represents only one example of the pain that had long since become a part of Grünewald’s imagery (8/7). Later, after the battle of Frankenhausen, when “die geschärfte Sichel / durch das Leben eines Heers von fünftausend [zog]” (the whetted sickle / passed through the life of an army of five thousand, 31/34), Grünewald closes himself up in his house, wearing “eine dunkle Binde / vor dem Gesicht” (a dark bandage of his face, 31/35). As we have seen before, the hermitic retreat from life and exile is a temptation for the forlorn messianic character, and this reappears in Grünewald’s depiction of St. Anthony, which, Sebald speculates, represents Grünewald’s understanding that “[...] eine Erlösung / des Lebens” (redemption of the / living) only comes in the escape from life itself, (22/25). Sebald contrasts this with the apocalyptic consequences of taking concrete action. The battle of Frankenhausen

133 Sebald’s claim is that a certain “Enchin,” a Jewess who grew up in the Frankfurt ghetto, had married the painter Mathis Grune, with whom Sebald blends the character of Grünewald, as Engels points out (23).
had been caused by the pseudo-messianic pretensions of Thomas Münzer, whom Sebald had described in his essay on Alfred Döblin’s messianism (Thema 422). There, Sebald had identified Münzer as on the negative pole of messianism, which seeks redemption in the apocalyptic violence rather than adopting, as Kafka’s Land Surveyor did, a melancholic form of resistance.

Münzer and the Drummer of Niklashausen, Hans Böhm, who was burned at the stake, Sebald notes (NN 30 / AN 34), went astray with the “Versprechen / irdischen Glücks” (promises / of earthly happiness, 30/33). Grünewald, and Sebald himself, make no such promises, but strive instead to make (ineffectual) change through mourning.

But, this does not entail shying away from confronting systems of power, which, as we had mention previously, constituted a central motivation for Sebald’s notion of a literature of restitution. This first section also marks Sebald’s efforts to expose (and thereby oppose) power structures. In examining the previously mentioned persecution of the Frankfurt Jews, he takes special note of the efforts of the Frankfurt city council, which, “im Zuge der bürgerlichen / Ordnungsverwaltung und der damit fortschreitenden / Reform und Hygenisierung den Juden / am Wollgraben ein eigenes Ghetto gebaut, / vierzehn Häuser und eine neue Synagoge” ([…] in the train / of civic reform, progressive order / and hygienisation, a ghetto of their own / is built for the Jews by the Wollgraben / fourteen houses and a new synagogue, 12-13/13). It is under the institutionalization of order and hygiene that cruelty moves forward. It is clear here that Sebald’s critique of institutional authority is motivated by his identification with the oppressed. As in his earlier poetry, he is clearly at work constructing a literary response to the exploitation and alienation, but the first section concerns itself with narratives that predate or are perhaps concurrent with the beginning of modernity. Can we also detect his discomfort with alienation from nature that Horkheimer and Adorno had diagnosed as the consequence of enlightenment?
Sebald’s uneasiness with the modern condition lay, as I argued in Chapter One, in the estrangement from nature that comes from the application of instrumental reason. And it is in keeping with this ongoing obsession with this critique that the second section of After Nature turns Sebald’s focus to Georg Wilhelm Steller. This second panel of the triptych, as it were, “Und blieb ich am äußersten Meer” (36-68/41-78), traces the career of this budding theologian who gives up his studies to turn to science (38/44). Steller finds inspiration in Paracelsus’ reformulation of the Gospel admonition to search the Scriptures for truth: “perscrutamini scripturas, / soll das nicht heißen, / perscrutamini naturas rerum?” (perscrutamini scripturas, / shouldn’t that read, / perscrutamini naturas rerum? 40/47). Rather than searching the Scriptures, Steller is motivated to read the book of nature. This choice leads him to join the expedition of Vitus Bering to the eastern limits of Siberia and beyond. His journeys take him initially to St. Petersburg, which gives us a moment of pointed insight into how Sebald viewed the project of the Enlightenment. The “hallend[e] Leere der Zukunft” (future’s resounding emptiness) is echoed in St. Petersburg, where structure is artificially applied in order to fight off the “Angst / vor der Weite des Raumes” (terror of the vastness of space, 41/48). However, this attempt to order the universe, undertaken by Russia’s iconic Enlightenment monarch, Peter the Great, turns out to be gruesomely dystopian. In this ‘enlightened’ city, criminals executed publicly and brutality seems to reign supreme (41/49). Furthermore, as we learn when the expedition sets forth, its tools include weapons (46/54)

Once the voyage begins in earnest, Sebald’s makes it clear that the situation in St. Petersburg was no anomaly. He contemplates the comments of Adalbert von Chamisso, who, on

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134 As Engels has pointed out, the two Latin phrases represent several layers of quotation. Sebald is quoting the 1538 Septem Defensiones of the Renaissance botanist Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (whom we know as Paracelsus), which in turn quotes (with the variation) Augustus’ Tractatus adversus Judaeos, which was quoting John 5:39 (Engels 66).
a later expedition through the Bering Strait speculated on the usefulness of training whales as draft animals (52-53/61-62). As Colin Riordan points out in his analysis of the passage, this reference truly distorts Chamisso’s thoughts (Long and Whitehead 53), but his assertion that the steam engine is the only warm-blooded creation of man (NN 53 / AN 62), is consonant with Sebald’s own reference, in his essay on Kafka’s animals, to the “Maschinen, die unserer Obhut entwachsen sind” (machines that have grown out of our care, “Tiere” 197). There, Sebald also portrays machines as the next phase of evolution, almost as if they, too, had ascended from organic life.

But this dystopian vision of the misguided attempt to dominate nature technologically is momentarily lifted, which brings us to the next characteristic of Sebald’s quasi-messianic mode of writing, which had not been as evident up till now. Here, as in his prose, (see Chapter Five), there are moments of levitation, of lightness that break through the despair of Sebald’s modernity critique.\(^{135}\) We see, for example, the animals that approach Steller unperturbed when he finally gets a chance to go ashore and conduct his scientific observation (54/63). In recounting the discovery of Alaska indulges in an idyllic scene of nature undisturbed:

\begin{verbatim}
Ein schwarzer Himmel
überhing jetzt das Meer, und die schneebedeckt, zerissenen Zinnen Alaskas prangten,
dünkte Steller das richtige Wort, in rosaroten und violetten Farben.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
A black sky
now overhung the sea and the snow-covered, ragged merlons
of Alaska loomed ‘resplendent,’
the word seemed right to Steller, in rosy red and purple colours
\end{verbatim}

(51/59)

It is important to note, however, that this “resplendent” scene is not a truly possible world of harmony. The glimpse is brief and the moment of lightness is immediately crushed. Sebald

\(^{135}\) Ben Hutchinson takes a closer look at the aspect of levitation in his 2006 essay “Die Leichtigkeit der Schwermut” and toward the end of his monograph on Sebald’s \textit{dialektische Imagination} (143-65).
signals what is to come in the figure of Bering, who falls into depression even amid the jubilation of his crew (51/59-60). This is echoed in another, later scene, where the landscape, glimpsed from the shipwreck-parts boat is untouched by man and particularly beautiful (61/70). For Steller, entry into this idyll is cut short explicitly by his devotion to science. He wanted to go off into the mountains, Sebald’s narrator reminds us:

\[\ldots\] aber die Konstruktionen der Wissenschaft in seinem Kopf, ausgerichtet auf eine Verringerung der Unordnung in der Welt, widersetzten sich diesem Bedürfnis

Sebald is clearly lining out the possibility of access through the mechanism of rational discovery to a harmonized world. Interestingly, curiosity plays a positive role here, in contrast, for example to Sebald’s description of a destructive “Wissensdrang” (thirst for knowledge) that leads to ghastly animal experiments in *The Rings of Saturn* (RS 74/57). The thirst for knowledge would have likely taken Steller into the wild—perhaps to his own destruction. But his commitment to science and rationalized discovery (i.e. proceeding according to plan), forestalls this entry. However, as we discover next in this narrative, it is not only science that takes victims. I mentioned just now that Steller’s venture into the wilderness of Alaska, were he to have broken through his devotion to science, would probably have led to his death. And this is important if we are to properly interpret the moments of lightness in Sebald’s messianic mode, since the other way of viewing the world he presents—or, formulated slightly differently, the view of another world he lets us glimpse—is not real. It is not even possible, because of an important fact pointed out by Anja Johannsen. As I mentioned in the introduction to this
Johannsen has observed that there are two ‘natures’ at work in Sebald’s literature; dystopic and utopic nature concepts struggle within his work.

Es sind somit, wie es scheint, zweierlei Naturbegriffe bei Sebald dingfest zu machen: zum einen das übermächtige Modell einer zerstörerischen, monströsen Naturverfallenheit und zum anderen das selten aufblitzende Ideal einer positiv besetzten, ‘gesunden’ Natur, das jedoch allein aufgrund seiner Unerreichbarkeit als Moment einer ersehnten widerspruchsfreien Zustands unangetastet bleiben kann und auch als phantasmisches nur um den Preis der Unveränderbarkeit, d.h. der Stillstellung aufrechtzuhalten ist. (Johannsen 78)

Johannsen’s insight into the dual nature of nature in Sebald, and especially her observation of the utopian—which is to say unreal—nature of the latter concept, is another way, perhaps, of speaking about what we noted in Chapter Two regarding the impossibility of the messianic vision. As soon as Sebald allows his characters and readers to glimpse the alternate reality, he must rip it from them—usually with violence directed from nature at humans and at itself—or else he might fall into the trap of avowing a metaphysical principal, or making an ontological statement about this world which would have been highly suspect and the attesting of a new totality. It was the fusion of myth with power (especially in the realm of literature) that Sebald criticizes so vociferously, particularly in Döblin and Sternheim. He would not want to make the same mistake.

And so, it is not merely the historically real end of the Steller narrative, but rather the need to dismantle utopian vision that forces Sebald to depict Bering’s ship being tossed by hurricanes of unimaginable duration and intensity. He had to show “die Natur in einem Prozess / der Zerstörung, in einem Zustand der reinen / Demenz […]” (Nature / in a process of dissolution, in a state / of pure dementia […], 56/65). The crew sickens, medicine cannot help them, and Sebald’s narrator takes this opportunity to ponder the meaning of medicine (science) when it is rendered powerless by nature. If science represents the domination of nature, what does it mean
when the dementia of nature wins (57-58/67)? Sebald leaves this unanswered, it seems. But perhaps the death of Bering, in an odd state of peace given his suffering, and Steller’s reminiscence of the scriptural interpretation of death, “selig seynd die Toten […]” (blessed are the dead, 59/69; cf. Rev. 14:13), might lead us to speculate that Sebald is affirming the rejection of science for theology. But, as any theologian worth his salt—Sebald reminds us at the beginning of the narrative that Steller had been an outstanding student of theology in Wittenberg and Halle—would also know the end of the passage Steller contemplates: “Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben von nun an” (Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on, Rev. 14:13, emphasis mine). This promise applies, according to the scripture, to those who die in the Lord, and Sebald takes pains to let his reader know that Steller is a particularly “gottlose[r] / Lutheraner” (godless / Lutheran, 67/77). Steller’s later benediction over the dead Bering, “Nicht wolest Du, Herr, übergeben / die Seele derer, die Dich bekennen, den wilden Thieren,” (it is not thy will, Lord, to abandon / to the wild beasts the souls / of them that profess Thee, 60/69), is neatly ironized by what follows. Steller looks up from the graveside and gazes out over the still-forbidding ocean and takes stock: “wie weit sie noch sind / vom festen Land” (how far they still are / from land, 60/69). One might add to this, how far afield they are from redemption.

Yet, as Sebald noted in his analysis of Kafka’s Schloss, the Messiah in the Jewish tradition is closest to redemption when he is furthest from it (Undiscover’d 31). At the end of the narrative, Steller takes on more distinctly secular messianic overtones himself. He protests the mistreatment of the natives in Siberia, for example, and suffers the consequences; the result is “daß Verhaftungen erfolgen und daß Steller / jetzt vollends den Unterschied begreift /

136 It is interesting to note in passing that, though this prayer is taken from John Cassian’s commentary on Psalm 74:19, Tanja van Hoorn has pointed out that its reference to devouring the leviathan is taken from Kabbalistic and Talmudic sources, specifically in the 4th book of Esra and the latter Midrashim. The passages in question, she notes, are important in some streams of Jewish messianic eschatology (van Hoorn 120).
zwischen Natur und Gesellschaft” (that arrests follow and that Steller / now wholly grasps the difference / between nature and society, 64/74). But this, too, conforms not to the self-sacrificial, Christological model Sebald rejected, but rather to the messianic character he had identified in his essays on Kafka. Steller identifies with the downtrodden, but he is powerless and a failure. He flees, drinks heavily and catches a fever in an eerie parallel to Kafka’s land surveyor. It is clear from the trajectory that Sebald has been following that the only thing remaining in Steller’s education is death. He succumbs and is buried in a shallow grave under frozen turf (67/77). Nature, Sebald indicates, “prozediert… / mit einem gottlosen / Lutheraner aus Deutschland” (has her way / with a godless / Lutheran from Germany, 67/77). Steller’s epitaph, as it were, precedes his death and it is a grim assessment of his scientific achievement. In the nineteenth canto of this second part we read:

Manuskripte am Ende des Lebens, geschrieben auf einer Insel im Eismeer, mit kratzendem Gänsekiel und galliger Tinte
Verzeichnisse von zweihundertelf verschiedenen Pflanzen, Geschichten von weißen Raben, seltsamen Kormoranen und Seekühen, eingebracht in den Staub einer endlosen Registratur, sein zoologisches Meisterwerk, de bestiis marinis, Reiseprogramm für die Jäger, Leitfaden beim Zählen der Pelze, nein, nicht hoch genug war der Norden.

Manuscripts written at the end of his life, on an island in the glacial sea, with scratching goose-quill in bilious ink, lists of two hundred and eleven different plants, tales of white ravens, unknown cormorants and sea-cows, gathered into the dust of an endless inventory, his zoological masterpiece De Bestiis Marinis, travel chart for hunters, blueprint for the counting of pelts— no, not steep enough was the north.

(NN 66/ AN 76)

Grünewald’s and Steller’s “educations” had brought them to empathy with history’s victims, and in Steller’s case, to questioning the promises of science. In the third section of After Nature, “Die dunkle Nacht fahrt aus” (70-99/81-116), the path of the third protagonist, the narrator
himself, will progress toward a sense of the interconnectedness of his biography with the other two. He begins by contemplating the business of writing as it compares with a scientific pursuit: archeology. “Schwer zu entdecken” he writes “sind nämlich / die zwischen den Schiefertafeln / eingelagerten geflügelten Wirbeltiere / der Vorzeit. […]” (For it is hard to discover / the winged vertebrates of prehistory / embedded in tablets of slate, 71/83). In these first lines, which, as I mentioned earlier, is an echo of Sebald’s first poem, “Schwer zu verstehen” (1964), we see that the narrator, like an archeologist, has been piecing together evidence in these narratives and the results are bewildering. Our brains, he continues, are always busy working at “sei es ganz / schwachen Spuren der Selbstorganisation” (some quivers of self-organisation, however faint,) and the order that arises is “stellenweis schön / und beruhigend, doch grausamer / als der vorherige Zustand der Ignoranz” (in places beautiful / and comforting, though more cruel, too, / that the previous state of ignorance, 71/83). Here we see the dialectic of enlightenment, which promises freedom, but lands us in a state more cruel than before. Sebald then asks, in a passage he later quoted in his first Zürich air-war lecture in 1997, “Wie weit überhaupt muß man zurück, um / den Anfang zu finden? […]” (How far, in any case, must one go back / to find the beginning? 71/83).137 Apparently, it reaches back at least to the marriage of his grandparents in Obermeitingen on 9 January 1905. Sebald’s narrator unfolds the story of his narrator’s ancestry, but still, he remains disconnected from the characters he describes. His only access to them is through photographs they left behind. But though their biological relationship is straightforward enough, they remain unavailable as persons. What was going through their heads, he wonders when contemplating their drive in an open coach. The narrator describes the school photo of his

mother, which bears the motto: “in der Zukunft / liegt der Tod uns zu Füßen” (in the future, death lies at our feet, 72/84). What then, were his grandparents’ children thinking? In speaking about these photos—some of his parents during the waning days of World War Two—he hints that these biological relationships are fading from view, replaced by the unlikely confluence represented by Windsheim, where his mother discovered she was pregnant with him. We remember suddenly that Windsheim was where Steller was born (37/43) and that Grünewald had traveled to Windsheim, after which, on the 18th of May—the narrator’s (76/88) and Sebald’s birthday—he heard of the disastrous outcome of the Battle of Frankenhausen (29-31/32-34). In 1944, the narrator muses, his father had left for Dresden, and could not later remember the beauty that was destroyed in the great air raid the next year. His mother had witnessed the air raid on Nuremberg, but was likewise unable to remember how it looked or how she felt (73/86). Just as the narrator is linked to the distant past, he suggests that he is somehow linked to these events, even though he did not experience them and had no access to firsthand witnessing. These are shadows that extend over the narrator: the distant relationships with Steller and Grünewald, with the air war, with the dark predictions on his grandparents’ class photo, and with the lack of memory. The burning of Dresden and Nuremberg put him suddenly in mind of Altdorfer’s 1537 painting of Lot and his Daughters (who have just escaped the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah and are conceiving Moab), which now hangs in a Viennese museum. He feels like he has seen it all before, and it nearly drives him mad (74-75/86-87). Steven Brockmann interprets the narrator’s shock here as coming “from Sebald’s recognition that he himself emerged from a burning Germany that had already been prefigured in Altdorfer’s painting of a city destroyed by God for its wickedness” (Taberner and Berger 26). And it is interesting to note the effect of these

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138 Engels has pointed out that this line is actually a quote from one of Ernst Herbeck’s poems, “Die Zukunft” (Engels 115).
apparent connections or memories that defy reason: they drive reason out, or, as the narrator puts it, he had “fast / den Verstand verloren” (nearly went out of my mind, 75/87).

What Sebald is getting at in this first canto seems to be the vertiginous effect of realizing that some pattern lying just beyond rational explanation seems to bind one to another person or event across time and space. In the following canto (76-79/88-92), Sebald’s narrator considers the pall under which his life seems to exist. His birth on Ascension Day, seemingly auspicious, turns out to have been less important than the astrological influence of Saturn. Accordingly, tragedy strikes the Ascension Day procession: one of the canopy bearers was killed by a storm (76/88). Nevertheless, despite this, and despite having witnessed a sawmill burn down near his village, the narrator grows up “ohne einen Begriff der Zerstörung” (without any / idea of destruction, 76/89). This description marks, then, a contrast with the narrator’s self-diagnosis that he is a child of Saturn (and thus doomed to that planet’s negative astrological effects.) He indicates that the effect of learning about a non-causal relationship such as those he had mentioned in the first canto is a (perhaps) necessary reinterpretation of one’s life. Becoming aware of seemingly irrational interconnectedness changes the way the narrator interacts with his own history. When the narrator later exclaims, “Was soll da ein armer / Landarzt sich denken? […]” (what’s a poor country doctor / to make of all that? 81/95), the allusion to Kafka’s 1917 short story of the same name, brings this list of associations to an ethical point. Kafka’s story underscores the disastrous consequences of timidly believing oneself to be “kein Weltverbesser” (no world reformer, Kafka 256 / Muir 62). The doctor’s decision not to intervene, but rather to simply attend to his duty, had led, the story suggests, to the rape of his serving girl. And, as Kafka intones, a choice that allows the victimization of others “ist niemals gutzumachen”
(cannot be made good, not ever, Kafka 260/ Muir 65). Sebald seems to be invoking in this passage the theme of restitution and the ethical burden of choice suggested by Kafka’s story.

And this ethical burden continues in his next canto, where he considers the city of Manchester. Here, as in “Bleston,” and The Emigrants, Manchester is bleak. Its ruined, antique landscape resembles “[…] brachen elysäischen / Felder” (fallow Elysian Fields), over which the narrator roams and “das Werk / der Zerstörung bestaunt” (wondering / at the work of destruction). The narrator lists the detritus of industrialism, which has changed the previously idyllic natural world, including the cotton-like clouds, “in die aufgegangen war ohne ein Wort / der Atem ganzer Legionen von Menschen” (into which without a word the breath / of legions of human beings had been absorbed, 84/98). Through his experience of the landscape, the narrator is tied, inexplicably but necessarily, to the fates of those who share that space or have lived there in the past. This is reminiscent of Sebald’s comments in The Rings of Saturn where, speaking of Joseph Conrad’s journey to the Congo, he writes that Conrad’s mere presence in the colony had laden him with guilt (RS 147/120). Here, the narrator considers the Mancunians, whose souls, having fueled the progress of history, now wisp over the City Corporation’s garbage dumps (84-85/99). These images plunged him into melancholia, which he fights by reading Paracelsus in the library, listening to a tenor singing in the music hall, and witnessing miracles in gospel churches (85-86/100; cf. “Bleston” ÜLW 24). He also goes in search of the star-shaped, panoptic Strangeways Prison, but finds instead a no-man’s-land behind the railroad tracks with Jewish surnames on the abandoned low houses (86/101). This city, “ein abgeblaßtes Bild / des großen Diluviums” (a faded picture / of the great diluvium, 88/104), is full of the kinds of seemingly random, or non-causally related associations that bring with them the narrator’s responsibility to the sufferers of history. But he has no illusions about the prospects for success
in confronting the systems that oppressed and victimized them. In a vital passage, Sebald’s narrator observes that “[…] Es sind nämlich / nicht ins Gleichmaß zu richten / die Entwicklungsbahnen großer / Systeme, zu diffus ist der Akt / der Gewalt, das eine immer / der Anfang des andern / und umgekehrt. […]” (for the revolutions of great / systems cannot be / righted, too diffuse are / the workings of power / the one thing always / the other’s beginning / and vice versa […], 89/104-105). This conclusion is underscored by the narrator’s travels through an apocalyptic Suffolk. Though he thinks it safe to venture out on a day-trip, and takes his daughter along (92/107), their travels take them to Sutton Hoo, where he notes that though the king is buried here, his army still hoards weapons nearby in grass-covered bunkers—an allusion to the weapons testing facility at Orfordness (93/108). This dystopian journey through Suffolk has brought the narrator to the low ebb. “Kind,” he writes, “sag mir, / drückt dich dein Herz wie mich / meines […] / […]und dieser Himmel so grau, so gleichmäßig grau, / und so niedrig / hab ich den Himmel / noch nirgends gesehn” (tell me, child, / is your heart as heavy as / mine is […] / […] and this sky so grey? So unremittingly grey / and so low as no sky / I have ever seen before, 94/109). It is interesting that the narrator addresses the child, almost as though he is sounding his melancholia against a neutrality of someone who has certainly seen less of the world and may be less “overdetermined” by their consciousness of history. But an objective danger seems to confirm that this melancholia, which seems to expresses the weight of what has gone wrong in modernity is not merely the result of a gloomy day. One can almost see the child pointing to the freighters on the horizon that are pulling off “hinüber in eine andere Zeit” (over / into another age, 94/110). This next phase of the modern age is measured by Geiger counters, of which the narrator is reminded by the sight of the nuclear power station at Sizewell, “wo sie langsam / den Kern das Metalls / zerstören. Raunender / Wahnsinn auf der Heide / von Suffolk.
Is this the promis’ed end? Oh, you are men of stones” (where slowly / the core of the metal / is destroyed. Whispering / madness on the heathland / of Suffolk […], 94-95/110).

But in the last canto, the narrator nevertheless achieves a kind of levitation, which brings us also to the close of our consideration of *After Nature*. In a scene reminiscent of Sebald’s “Kunst des Fliegens,” which we will consider in the next chapter, he describes breaking free of the earth, flying over the roof of his house and away to Munich, where he views Altdorfer’s 1529 painting “Alexanderschlacht” (“The Battle of Issus”), which portrays Alexander the Great’s victory over Darius III of Persia (333 BCE). His gaze then travel within the painting, floating, as it were, out over the expanse of Egypt into the then unknown interior of the continent. Alan Corkhill has pointed out the important fact that what seems to make this painting important to Sebald is its perspective “the prospect of surveying the natural and social order from a higher vantage point” (Fischer, *Schreiben* 360). The painting distorts space, beginning quite close to the earth in the foreground and growing—impossibly—more distant from the earth’s surface as the background stretches toward the horizon. The educational trajectory of Sebald’s third protagonist, his narrator, is also coming to completion. In his search for meaning—for an organizational principle among the basic elements of history and his own biography—he has come to recognize the disastrous aftereffects of modernity and to confront systems of power. He has also learned to catch glimpses of the interconnectedness of life, which leads to empathy. What we have seen in considering *After Nature* and Sebald’s earlier poetry is the way in which it bears the marks of his fascination with constructing a literature of restitution. What remains to be seen is whether or not this continued to characterize his work in other genres. In the following chapters we will consider Sebald’s largely unknown dramas and his much more familiar prose.
Chapter Four

“Kant and television – they obviously don’t go together”: Sebald’s Dramas

Abstract

In the previous chapter, we examined Sebald’s poetry, especially *After Nature*, for evidence of Sebald’s interest in a literature of restitution. This confirmed in part the theses developed in Part One of this study, namely, that Sebald was troubled by the consequences of modernity (Ch. 1) and that his reception of the Jewish messianic traditions caused him to envision a literary response to the brokenness of the world (Ch. 2). In this chapter, we will turn to an unexpected genre, drama, to determine the degree to which this literary restitution shows up in a broad cross-section of Sebald’s work. As it turns out, Sebald’s dramas also evince a quasi-messianic mission and mobilize imagery to bring an alternate natural history to life—one that rejects the dominant myth of modernity and speaks for its victims.

In the previous chapter, I explored the notion that, though Sebald’s current international reputation rests most securely on his prose, it was actually in poetry that he made his first moves toward redemptive literature. However, it would surely come as a surprise to most of Sebald’s readers, accustomed as they are to reading his longer prose and, increasingly, his poetry, that he also composed and even published dramatic pieces. Between 1969 and 1989 Sebald drafted one monologue and two screenplays that have so far remained almost completely unmentioned in Sebald scholarship. The continuing silence about these manuscripts, which are now catalogued and readily available in the DLA, only indicates how unfamiliar this territory is for Sebald scholars. And yet, these texts deserve a critical examination, because they afford us the opportunity to see the author of *Austerlitz*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants* and *Vertigo* from a new perspective. Furthermore, the thoughts to which Sebald gives voice in his dramatic pieces fit rather neatly into the framework that we established in the previous chapters. In particular, the most complete of his dramatic work, a screenplay on which Sebald worked between 1979

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and 1984, shows Sebald’s continuing interest in composing a literature that confronted systems of power and spoke the truth about victimization. But before examining this text in detail, it is helpful to place it in the context of Sebald’s other, less polished dramatic manuscripts. This chapter will thus proceed in two phases. First, we will consider the two compositions which lie at either end of Sebald’s experiment with the dramatic form: the monologue from 1969 and the aborted screenplay from twenty years later. The monologue proves, despite its flaws and brevity, to contain important points of reference to Sebald’s overarching concerns in his literary work; Sebald’s caricature of an Austrian silk manufacturer illuminates his interest in exposing the remorseless culprits of history’s calamities. By contrast, Sebald’s last attempt at drama, his fragmentary portrait of Wittgenstein, reveals not an unrepentant perpetrator but rather a victim of injustice, whose life emerges.

Second, we will turn to the richer material of Sebald’s portrait of Immanuel Kant, which expands the scope of Sebald’s concerns to the whole of the natural world and explores a number of themes which Sebald would later reprise in his more well-known work. This middle composition turns out to be not only the most well-crafted of the three, but also the text in which Sebald most clearly articulates his pursuit of a kind of alternate natural history mobilized against the dominant myth of the enlightenment world and pursues a literature of restitution.

“Der Traum sein Leben” (1969)

Sebald’s first attempt at drama was a 6-page monologue, “Der Traum sein Leben oder die Geschichte des Fr. v. Sch.” (The Dream, His Life or the Story of Fr. v. Sch.)¹⁴⁰ the sole surviving

¹⁴⁰ The title may be a reference to Grillparzer’s 1834 dramatic fairy tale “Der Traum ein Leben,” which shares an interesting focus with Sebald’s text. Grillparzer’s verse drama, though it is stylistically very different from Sebald’s project, presents nevertheless a hero whose character is flawed in ways similar to Sebald’s Fritz von Schiegl. Grillparzer’s Rustan is, as W.E. Yuill puts it in his introduction to the drama, “a man with powerful appetites, but without the skill, courage or determination to satisfy them. Nor does he have the moral strength to repress his desires. He fails to kill the snake, yet after the briefest struggle is able to accept the reward for the deed and even to
draft of which he composed in May of 1969 while working as a secondary teacher in St. Gallen. Of course, the “Fr. v. Sch.” to which the title refers is not, as one might suspect, the venerable Friedrich von Schiller, but rather an unabashed misogynist and retired silk merchant with a Viennese accent, Fritz von Schiegl, who tells the rambling and fantastically exaggerated story of his life while sitting in a small restaurant in Switzerland. Von Schiegl is accompanied by a pair of older women, Mizzi and Sissi. Besides the anonymous other diners, only one couple is named in the dramatis personae: Max and Marika. As von Schiegl declaims, it becomes clear, much to Max’s horror, that not only the two women in von Schiegl’s company but also Marika and the other female characters are enthralled against their will by the over-the-top vitriol and vigor of this figure, whose animated face is “von einem Führerbär tchen grotesk pointiert” (emphasized grotesquely by a Hitler-moustache, 1). Fritz is reminiscent of a “Hanswurst” (Punchinello) who has somehow become a “Kleinrentner” (diminished pensioner), which lends to his overpowering melancholy “eine doppelte Berechtigung” (a double justification, 1).

Schiegl is dressed in flowery pants, accented by clown shoes and outlandish rings, and his life story is as fantastic as his costume. At one point he claims, for example, not only to have persuade himself that he has earned it. His reputation as a soldier is similarly founded on illusion, yet he shows every sign of arrogance and self-satisfaction. He is revealed as a liar and a braggart who lacks the courage to kill himself when this seems the only honourable way out. His character is seen to degenerate as his power increases: he becomes a tyrant supported by a system of spies. And yet he lacks the courage and ruthless determination of the tyrant; he loses his head in an emergency. He loses, too, all sense of loyalty and tries to put the entire blame for his misdeeds on the shoulders of his accomplice—and is so lost to all sense of pride that he later appeals to that accomplice for help” (Yuill, W.E., Introduction to “Der Traum ein Leben,” 1959, xxi-xxii). Interestingly, Sebald seems to be echoing the moral point to which all of Grillparzer’s dramas point: that integrity must not be sacrificed for temporal happiness.

The typescript in Marbach bears Sebald’s address in pencil in the upper left hand corner of the title page: W.G. Sebald, CH 9000 St. Gallen, Metzergasse 14. In the upper right hand corner, Sebald has scribbled what appears to be a date: 506/69. In a letter dated 1 August 1968 that one of Sebald’s Manchester friends, Reinbert Tabbert, has recently posted online, Sebald explains that the inspiration for this text came from an encounter he had while on vacation in Yugoslavia that summer. He had met a character whose lies were so astronomical that he was contemplating drafting a one-act play about them. See http://wgsebald.de/schwindelbriefe.html. The translation is mine.

The description of this pair as “ältere Frauen” (older women) is still legible in the typescript even though Sebald lined it out.
lost a dozen silk factories in Bohemia following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also to have won $250,000 in a weightlifting contest while traveling in America. Later, Schiegl also tells of having rescued his girlfriend’s Jewish brother during Nazi times, claiming to have bribed a Nazi friend of his. But the reader notes immediately that this particular episode is far too convenient. It has the flavor of after-the-fact self-justification—he claims he would not take her thanks but did it out of the goodness of his heart—and only underscores how closely characters like Fritz collaborated with the Nazis. The reader quickly recognizes in Schiegl a dyed-in-the-wool conservative whose attitude of thinly glazed with self-pity corresponds exactly to the class of Austrians who not only welcomed the Nazi regime, but were more than happy to participate in the genocide. Far from the principled hero he styles himself to be, Fritz von Schiegl is an unrepentant relic “aus einer anderen Zeit” (from another time, 2) who has managed to survive and even prosper despite the changing regimes, war, and economic collapses. Sebald seems to be convinced that those of this stripe always do.

And the manner of his survival is telling. Fritz has much for which to atone, though he seems to have deluded himself on this score. Above all, he emphasizes that “ich hab immer überlebt! Die andern verrecken im Schlamm, hat man mir g’sagt, aber du hast den Kopf immer draußen” (I always survived! The others snuff it in the mud, they said to me, but you always have your head out, 5). Schiegl includes in his story the gruesome details of his experiences during the first World War, and relates an episode in which he punches through the skull of a Russophile sergeant (5). He survived, he explains, because of his superior strength and because, “wo ich hinschlag mit meiner ungeheuren Kraft und katzenartigen Gewandheit, da lebt nix mehr” (where I struck with my enormous strength and cat-like agility, nothing lives there anymore, 5). Fritz’s survival leaves behind a trail of utter devastation, including perhaps the
most disturbing episode, the scenario that eventually brings Schiegl beside himself: his disposal of a young girl from the slums whom he impregnated and then paid to disappear. He loved her, Fritz claims, but:

because she was from the suburbs and I was from one of the best houses, my father says to me, he was a despot, a despot, that is no woman for you, he says to me and holds out a check for me and says, write out for her what you want, and I wrote her, with a heavy heart, because I have always had to think of her, a hundred and fifty thousand Swiss francs. I cried (Sch. talks without crying, but with that artificially peaceful [...] distance with which the schmaltziest passages in hit songs are spoken instead of being sung), I was never sentimental, but I cried, a long time and (the thought occurs to him like a redemption) I gave her money, generous, as I always was with the ladies. (6)

All the while, Schiegl, this self-styled ladies’ man, who has by this point enraptured Marika and thoroughly horrified Max, becomes increasingly agitated, ever more caught up by his own story and the violence of it, so that by the end of his monologue, he beats first his, then all the other tables of the establishment to bits with his bare fists.

This early text shows Sebald above all as an experimenter. He is clearly a little uneasy with the dramatic form—he entitles this piece a monologue when it actually begins with a bit of dialogue, for example—and his narrative is poorly paced. But this initially slow text nevertheless illuminates Sebald’s distaste for the self-satisfied, self-justifying type Schiegl represents and his impatience with the process of coming to terms with the past, which
Proceeded at a halting pace in Austria.\textsuperscript{143} Schiegl indicates that he was “streng katholisch, klerikal, nach den Grundsätzen vom Konvikt erzogen” (raised a strict Catholic, clerically, according to the principles of conviction, 2); he is nevertheless unrepentant about the historical catastrophes through which he somehow came unscathed. “Ich habe nix bereut” (I regretted nothing), he explains. “Heut noch bin ich fröhlich und das Leben freut mich” (still today I am joyful and life makes me happy, 2). Schieg!l seems fully unaware of his complicity in the crimes committed in that “other world” from which he comes, a world of “verschiedene Maßstäbe und verschiedene Moral” (different standards and different morality, 2). Here we read clear echos of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s 1967 study The Inability to Mourn, which asserted that the Germans (and Sebald seems ready to extend this to Austrians) had identified with Hitler to the point that his death threatened their own identity, and plunged their society into melancholy rather than mourning. Schieg!l’s unrepentant, un-mournful biography is detailed but uncanny; his dreamlike tale suffers from selective memory and Schieg!l is unable to perceive the true nature of his survival.

“Leben Ws” (1984-89)

Though there are indications that Sebald may have submitted “Der Traum sein Leben” for publication shortly after its composition,\textsuperscript{144} this attempt failed and he apparently gave the

\textsuperscript{143} This thesis has been advanced by a number of historians and cultural critics, including, most recently, Matthew Berg, “Commemoration versus Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Contextualizing Austria’s Gedenkjaahr 2005,” German History 26.1 (2010): 47-71. Berg demonstrates that due to the pervasive belief that Austria was more a victim than a perpetrator of the Nazi crimes, acknowledging the fact of Austrian complicity has been more difficult than in Germany, where the subject of German victimhood was, as Sebald also pointed out in Luftkrieg und Literatur, for a long time quite taboo. Consequently, Berg asserts that, though the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung “has at times been controversial, but nonetheless quite open in the Federal Republic of Germany, comparable efforts in Austria have tended to proceed in a considerably more hesitant fashion” (48).

\textsuperscript{144} I cautiously deduce this from a letter from 29 October 1969, which is preserved only as an imprint on a draft of Sebald’s “Ballade vom Licht der Welt.” Sebald presumably used this sheet of paper to stiffen a sheet of onionskin while typing the original letter, and the impressions his typewriter left are clearly legible. In the document, which is addressed to a certain “Hanno,” who had some connection to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, (perhaps Hanno
project up, leaving the monologue in its raw, brief state. Some 15 years later, he composed a similarly brief and unpolished script shortly before deciding to devote his time to larger prose work. His last foray into the world of dramatic literature, “Leben Ws,” in which Sebald elaborates on the life of Ludwig Wittgenstein, dates from the late 1980s (though there are indications he may have been working on the text as early as 1984), and exists today as an introduction and two drafts (the second including photographs to be used in the film’s production). Despite its brevity and incomplete nature, this was surprisingly enough the only script to ever find its way into print. In 1989, on Wittgenstein’s hundredth birthday, the Frankfurter Rundschau published a fragment of what was to be Sebald’s last attempt to publish dramatic work on his own, “Leben Ws. Skizze einer möglichen Szenenreihe für einen nichtrealisierten Film” (Life of W. Sketch of a Possible Sequence of Scenes for an Unrealized Film)\(^{145}\)

This list of scenes was attached, along with a long introduction to the project, to Sebald’s application to the Filmförderungsanstalt (Federal Film Board), which he submitted in August of 1986.\(^{146}\) As Sebald indicated in his introduction, the film:

\(^{145}\) W. G. Sebald, “Leben Ws Skizze einer möglichen Szenenreihe für einen nichtrealisierten Film,”* Frankfurter Rundschau am Wochenende* 94 (1989), Zeit und Bild: ZB3+. I say that this represents the last time Sebald attempted this kind of a project on his own, because he did eventually collaborate with several television and radio programs that dramatized his prose works. Among these would be the dramatization of *The Rings of Saturn* entitled “To the Dark Shore” (APT Film and Television, March 1999), which was likewise never realized, as well as the radio plays developed from *The Emigrants*, “Max Aurach,” and “Aurachs Mutter” (adapted and directed by Ulrich Gerhardt), which were broadcast by Bayern 2 Radio in May 1994 and February 1995 respectively.\(^{146}\) Sebald’s application was denied by the FFA on 27 January 1987, because, as the board determined, “Der Wunsch, Wittgensteins Leben in Bildern darzustellen, ist verständlich, jedoch in dieser Form im Kino ohne die geringste Chance. Die Bilderfolge ist nicht mehr als eine lockere Darstellung von biographischen Abläufen, und die reichen nicht aus, ein Publikum zu interessieren, weil sie über die Person Wittgenstein nicht hinausgehen. Im Übrigen wäre eine angemessene Realisierung dieser Szenen-Vorschläge ökonomisch gar nicht zu bewältigen. Damit sind die vom FFG verlangten Voraussetzungen für eine Förderung, nämlich die Qualität und Wirtschaftlichkeit des Projektes, nicht gegeben. Die Abstimmung der Kommission führt zu einer einstimmigen Ablehnung.” (The desire to portray Wittgenstein’s life in images is understandable, but without the smallest chance in this form in the cinema.
soll die Geschichte einer solitären Figur, diejenige des Philosophen Ludwig Wittgenstein erzählen und zwar nicht in der Form einer Dokumentation oder bebilderten Biographie, sondern in der reinen Form von Bildern, aus denen sich das Leben Ws zusammengesetzt hat. Der Natur reiner Bilder entsprechend, geht es also um die Konstruktion eines achronologischen, asyntaktischen ‘Satzes’, in welchem ‘ausgesprochen’ werden soll, worüber W. zeit seines Lebens sich weitgehend ausgeschwiegen hat.

should tell the story of a solitary figure, that of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and indeed not in the form of a documentary or illustrated biography, but rather in the pure form of images, out of which the life of W assembled itself. Corresponding to the nature of pure images, [the film] is about the construction of an achronological, asyntactic ‘sentence,’ in which what W kept quiet for the most part during his life should be ‘expressed.’

The text is thus formally very complicated, beginning with Wittgenstein’s arrival in Cambridge in 1929 and revealing the rest of his life through a complex series of prolepses and analepses interspersed with actual photographs representing Wittgenstein and other characters at different stages of his life. Sebald’s intention, as he expressed it, was to avoid constructing a “konventionellen Erzählstruktur” (conventional narrative structure, LW i) which he did not think suited to the project. But he nevertheless also insisted that “der Anschein des ‘Avantgardistischen’ geflissentlich vermieden werden” (the appearance of the ‘avant-garde’ be scrupulously avoided, LW i). Instead, he wanted to emphasize the creation of a “Zeitstil” (a style of the time, LW i) of the decades in which the scenes take place. “Schon dadurch” he continues “wird sich eine ins Visuelle transponierte Struktur ergeben” (a structure transposed

The sequence of images is nothing more than a loose representation of biographical events and they are not sufficient to interest the public, because they do not extend beyond the person of Wittgenstein. Besides that, an appropriate realization of these scene suggestions would be by no means economically accomplished. Thus the prerequisites set forth for support by the FFG [Film Support Law], namely quality and economic viability of the project are not met. The decision of the commission leads to a unanimous rejection.)

147 “Leben Ws,” Typescript, i. Subsequent quotations will be parenthetically referenced as LW. Sebald’s ambitious descriptions of a film constructed in the “pure form of images, out of which the life of W assembled itself” (LW i) vaguely reminds one of Jean-Luc Godard’s famous desire to “show—just show, not comment on—the moment when a feeling enters the body and becomes physiologically alive” which Robert MacLean has interpreted as an attempt to “[criticize] syntactic habits and causal thinking” (Robert MacLean, “Opening the Private Eye: Wittgenstein and Godard’s Alphaville” Sight and Sound 47.1 (1977): 46-49, here 47).
into the visual will thereby emerge, LW i). He also did not foresee any difficulty in finding visual material for the project, but only the ‘right’ images (LW i).

However, though Sebald composed a long list of scenes—62 to be exact—he never to my knowledge developed a workable script. Other than the typed lists of scenes, only sketches of dialogue, typed and handwritten, remain, such as the following encounter between two of Wittgenstein’s colleagues at Cambridge, John Maynard Keynes and Bertrand Russell:

Keynes am Fenster seines Studienzimmers. Hinuntersehend. Es klopft, Russell tritt ein. Keine Reaktion seitens K’s. (Keynes at the window of his study. Looking down. A knock, Russell enters. No reaction on the part of K.)

R: “Well?”

K, ohne sich umzuwenden (without turning to him): “God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train.”

R. tritt zu K, ans Fenster. Im College Hof W. Er macht eine Photographie des Flügels, aus den K. & R. zu ihm hinabsehen. (R. walks to K at the window. In the College courtyard W. He is taking a photograph of the wing out of which K & R are looking down to him.)

K: “He has a plan to stay here—permanently.” (emphasis in original)

R: “The fatigue is going to be crushing.”

K: “I mustn’t let him talk to me for more than 2 or 3 hours a day.”148

There is precious little to be gleaned from a fragmentary scene in the beginning stages of construction as this one is. We can perceive what Sebald sees as of Keynes and Russell’s disdain for Wittgenstein, the latter’s habit of taking photographs and a sense of Sebald’s intended staging, but the text yields little else. However, the grand arc of the project is clear from the beginning. Sebald wishes to construct from pure images a “Satz” (sentence) that would ‘express’ that about which Wittgenstein remained silent during his life. “Der Kontrapunkt,” (the counterpoint), he indicates at the beginning of his introduction to the project, “nach dem

148 This handwritten scene (labeled 1.1) is among the papers in the Wittgenstein project folder. Clearly here, as elsewhere in his fiction, Sebald incorporates found material into his fictional scene. Keynes’s observation about retrieving Wittgenstein from the 5:15 train is famously from a letter to his wife Lydia Lopokova.
This death concept, as it turns out in the film, derives less from existential angst, though Wittgenstein’s biographers agree that he suffered from a fear of death (Schultz 284), but rather from an ethical concern. He makes clear in *Tractatus* that death is not a thing, nor an event that can be experienced as such (6.4311). In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to indicate that his fear is connected to the notion of the possibility of having lived differently, or, put another way, having lived badly up to the point of death (Cavalier 188-94). Death is, to Wittgenstein, the coming question mark at the end of life which tests the ethics of the life then ending.

A scene Sebald planned to write toward the end of the film makes the connection between Wittgenstein and a critique of systems.

This critique that systems grow catastrophic when carried out to a certain extreme, and the implication that the natural world is that which suffers resonates in Sebald’s most complete dramatic text, which we will now consider.
For one reason or another, neither the monologue nor the Wittgenstein project ever reached any state of polish. Sebald was clearly experimenting when he composed the 1969 monologue, and may have simply left it unfinished because he deemed it beneath his later work. But by the time he stopped working on the Wittgenstein film in the late 1980s, he may have abandoned that project out of pure weariness. By then, he had already spent several years of fruitless endeavor on another script that turned out to be his most complete, and nevertheless unfulfilled, dramatic piece: a planned television film on which he worked diligently between 1979 and 1985. Though the extant drafts bear no dates, Sebald had certainly brought it to a significant stage of development before September of 1981, when he received the text’s first extant rejection letter, of many that would follow. There is also evidence that he had a fairly advanced draft as early as 1979, since he may have submitted it to Suhrkamp at the end of that year. He received a brief note in early 1980 from Suhrkamp indicating that his submission of an unnamed manuscript had been forwarded to the desk of Hans-Ulrich Müller-Schwefe, who subsequently wrote to Sebald in 1983, (that is to say, almost exactly three years later), specifically referring to the script and begging pardon for only just then reading a submission that had been on his desk for a very long time. This was, nevertheless, also a rejection letter.

149 There is some evidence that Sebald revisited the project in the early 1990s as he began rewriting some essays he had composed at the same time as his Kant-scripts. In the file that contained the last of the drafts under consideration here, Sebald also placed a newspaper clipping about Kant dating from 1992, suggesting that he had not given up on the project even a decade after its initial drafting.

150 The letter in question, dated 7 September 1981, was addressed to Sebald from the Filmverlag der Autoren. Apparently Sebald was unaware of the purpose of the firm, which as the letter explained, was to distribute already-produced films to German cinema outlets. The letter advises him to submit the piece to a producer instead.

151 The letters in question are dated 17 January 1980 and 6 January 1983 respectively. Regarding the composition dates, it is also interesting to note that Sebald’s personal library does not presently contain a copy of Thomas Bernhard’s own earlier theatrical treatment of the subject, *Immanuel Kant* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1978). Thus it remains unclear to what degree Sebald’s project was instigated by this work, but it is safe to assume that he knew of the drama. Bernhard was one of the authors to whom Sebald perennially returned, and the volume of essays Sebald edited, *A Radical Stage* (New York, Oxford and Munich: Berg, 1988), lists the work in the short biographical note to Bernhard on page 186. It must be noted, however, that Bernhard’s piece takes a radically
What remains of this rejected project today are three drafts and an exposé, which are catalogued under the title: “Jetzund kömpt die Nacht herbey: Ansichten aus dem Leben und Sterben Immanuel Kants” (Now the Night Descends: Scenes from the Life and Dying of Immanuel Kant.)

A television movie about the most famous 18th century German philosopher? It sounds promising. At the very least it sounds interesting, or so was the opinion of the many publishers to whom Sebald submitted the text—that is, until they actually read his drafts. Then they were,

different approach. Bernhard’s Kant is a caricature with very little relation to the historical figure, whereas Sebald’s version, as its title suggests, explicitly seeks to explore Kant’s historical “life and dying.”

This is the earliest and most consistently used title Sebald gave the project, though he may have considered calling it “Die Entfernung Immanuel Kants” (The Removal of Immanuel Kant) since this was the title to which a rejection letter of 29 February 1984 that he received from the Österreichischen Rundfunk (Vienna) refers. The first line is a reference to Martin Opitz’s Ode IV “Jetzund kömpt die Nacht herbey”, from Oden oder [und] Gesänge, Deutscher Poematum Buch VI (1625). See, Gesammelte Werke: kritische Ausgabe, 5 vols. Vol 2.2, ed. George Schulz-Behrend, (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1979), 664-65 (translation mine).

Jetzund kömpt die Nacht herbey / Now the night descends, Vieh vnd Menschen werden frey / Beast and men become free, Die gewünschte Ruh geht an; The wished-for rest has come; Meine Sorge kömpt heran. My sorrow closes in. Schöne glänzt der Mondenschein; Prettily shines the moonlight, Vnd die güldnen Sternelein; And the little golden stars; Froh ist alles weit vnd breit / Everything far and wide is joyous, Ich nur bin in Trawrigkeit. Only I am in sadness. Zeweene mangeln vberall Everywhere two are missing An der schönen Sternen Zahl; Among the number of the pretty stars; Diese Sternen die ich meyn’ These stars I have in mind, Ist der Liebsten Augenschein. [Are] the glow of my beloved’s eyes. Nach dem Monden frag’ ich nicht / I do not ask after the moon; Tunckel ist der Sternen Liecht; The starlight is dark, Weil sich von mir weggewendet Because she has turned from me, Asteris mein Firmament. Asteris, my firmament. Wann sich aber neigt zu mir / But when she bends to me, Dieser meiner Sonnen Ziehr / The ornament of my sun, Acht’ ich es das beste seyn / Then it seems best to me Das kein Stern noch Monde schein. That neither star nor moon appear.

However, Sebald’s choice of this phrase for the title of his project does not lend itself easily to an intertextual reading, since there is little resonance between Opitz’s baroque love poem and the subject matter of Sebald’s screenplay. It is possible that Sebald chose the phrase because of the ominous mood it conjures, which is in keeping with the script’s negative trajectory.
in the words of one rejection letter, “sehr enttäuscht” (very disappointed). Although Sebald submitted the text to more than twenty publishers, producers, television companies, directors and the like, his piece did not have a chance, since, as the editor of the Norddeutscher Rundfunk expressed it,

Uns scheint nach eingehender Prüfung des Manuskripts, daß wohl jeder Versuch, Kant und einen Teil seiner Gedankenwelt dem Fernsehpublikum zu vermitteln, scheitern muß. Kant und Fernsehen – das geht offenbar nicht zusammen.

It seems to us, after a thorough examination of the manuscript, that truly every attempt to impart Kant and a part of his intellectual world to the television-viewing public must fail. Kant and television — they obviously don’t go together.

But these readers did not reject the work simply because its theme was tedious and incongruous with the medium of television. Sebald’s text simply did not deliver on the intellectual interest its theme had excited. In a letter from the then-editor of the Fischer publishing house, Helmar Harald Fischer, for example we read:

[...] Ihren Intentionen entgegen wirkt das Stück eher langweilig, formal schwach, ohne szenische Energie. Auch ist es wohl nicht mögglich [sic], Kants Philosophie in diese Abhandlung gar nicht aufzunehmen, seine Philosophie ist es doch, die heute wieder mit brennendem Eifer diskutiert wird.

Contrary to your intentions, the piece comes across as boring, formally weak, without scenic energy. Also it is impossible to avoid engaging Kant’s philosophy in this work. It is, of course, his philosophy which is now being discussed again with fiery intensity.

Sebald had, in Fischer’s estimation, busied himself too little with Kant’s real contribution to Western thought, and a brief look through the script seems at first to confirm this judgment. The prospectus and scripts Sebald submitted to publishers present a film of 23 scenes that more or

153 This expression is from a letter Helmar Harald Fischer (S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt) sent to Sebald at his home address in Poringland, Norwich, on 7 May 1982.
154 More precisely, he sent the script to (as far as can be determined) 8 publishers, 8 television companies, 3 theater companies and both the UK and German representatives of the German Film Board (Filmförderungsanstalt.)
155 17 May 1983, Dr. Reinmar Cunis (Television Editor, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg) to Max Sebald (Poringland).
156 7 May 1982, Fischer to Max Sebald.
less present a view of Kant’s everyday life, but that appear to skirt any discussion of Kant’s more famous philosophical treatises. Although Sebald incorporates long quotations from Kant himself, they are on the whole quite banal. The focus is clearly on Kant’s personal life, his growing senility and slow decay. However, a more careful reading of Sebald’s introduction to the text indicates that this had been his intention all along, because there he writes that the well-worn paths of an ever-expanding secondary literature on Kant “bringen einen immer wieder an dieselben Plätze, zu denselben Postkartenansichten unserer Kultur” (always bring one to the same places, to the same post-card views of our culture, EJk 1). These simplistic perspectives were part of a silent agreement, Sebald asserts, “nicht hinter die Kulissen zu schauen” (not to look behind the backdrop, 1 Sebald’s emphasis). The result was, in Sebald’s estimation, that many a philosophy professor ended up spouting banalities and sounding like “ein als Bundeskanzler verkleideter Igel, [der] sitzt und erklärt, wie alles zu verstehen sei” (a hedgehog dressed as the Federal Chancellor,157 who explains how everything is to be understood, 1). Sebald simply did not want to engage the philosophical legacy of Kant, because interpretations of Kant always lead to the same end—a kind of philistinism and moral rigorism that he found embarrassing. Instead, he envisioned a film depicting only the physical processes of deterioration ending in death.

So what kind of a text is this after all? Perhaps more to the point, how does it fit into the scheme of restitution-oriented literature that I sketched out earlier? What system is Sebald going after in this script about Immanuel Kant? A look at five central scenes reveals that what Sebald is up to here is nothing less than deconstructing the modern belief in progress and a view of nature that resulted in the exploitation of the natural world.

157 The Federal Chancellors of West Germany during the early stages of this piece’s composition were Helmut Schmidt (1974-82, SPD), followed by Helmut Kohl (1982-98, CDU). Schmidt’s prickly response to the RAF and bottomless contempt for the “68er” student movement may have led Sebald to make the comparison.
The first scene where this becomes clear is set in 1756. Sebald imagines Kant and an English businessman, Joseph Green discussing the recent earthquake in Lisbon over a game of billiards. In the conversation with Green, Kant proposes that the earthquake had given warning signs—purple rain in Swabia, floods in Bavaria and Lombardy, the loss of mineral water in Töplitz and the worms creeping out of the earth in Cadiz—but to read them was impossible. Furthermore, the earthquake was horrific for the Portuguese, but advantageous for the Töplitzer, whose well was now more productive than ever. He concludes, “So sind die Zufälle beschaffen, welche das menschliche Geschlecht betreffen” (Thus are the coincidences that affect the human race, 2Jk 7). Prompted by this observation that catastrophes could be sensed ahead of time, but not predicted, Green then asks whether or not anything could have been done to prevent the earthquake’s devastation. Kant’s response—actually a hidden quote from a treatise Kant published on the matter in 1756—is surprisingly skeptical of the enterprise of dominating nature. He says:

Es ist nöthig [sic], dass Erdbeben auf dem Erdboden geschehen, nicht aber, dass wir, gerade in den gefährdetsten Zonen, prächtige Wohnplätze darüber erbauen. Die Häuser in Peru sind darum nur in geringe Höhe gemauert. Das übrige besteht aus Rohr. Der Mensch muss sich in die Natur schicken lernen, aber er will, dass sie sich in ihn schicken soll.158

It is necessary that earthquakes take place on the surface of the earth, but not that we should construct stately homes in exactly the most dangerous zones. Thus, the houses in Peru only have short walls and the rest is made with reeds. Man has to learn how to accommodate himself to nature, but he only wants to accommodate nature to him.

158 2Jk 8. The original, slightly differently formulated observation can be found in Kant’s 1756 treatise “Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens welches an dem Ende des 1755sten Jahres einen großen Theil der Erde erschüttert hat,” in Kant’s Werke, vol. 1 Vorkritische Schriften I: 1747-1756, (Berlin: George Reimer, 1910,) 429-61, here 456.
Sebald is marking here the beginning of a narrative arc that will take Kant from a place of skepticism about human expansion to a position rather more affirmative of progress; interestingly enough, this arc runs parallel to Kant’s own mental decay. Thus, in a subsequent scene between Kant and one of his colleagues at the Königsberg Academy, Johann Christoph Bohl, Sebald has Bohl expressing concern over Kant’s health (9). And in this scene, which Sebald sets in the year 1762, a telling change is beginning to show in Kant’s thinking. He and Bohl are discussing an eccentric Polish hermit, whom Kant had visited, when Bohl suddenly quips, “Wir können nicht zurück, ohne von den Motten gefressen zu werden” (We cannot go back [to nature] without being consumed by moths) to which Kant replies, “Zurück sollen wir ja auch nicht. Nur einsehen lernen, was wir verloren haben, indem wir andererseits gewannen” (And we should not go back. Only learn to recognize what we have lost, even as, on the other hand, we have made gains, 10). Later in the same scene, Kant then quotes the French writer Nicolas de Chamfort when he notes that “Auch die fortschreitende Eintheilung der Zeit ist eine Form der Verrückung. La société a ajouté aux malheurs de la nature” (Also the progressive dividing up of time is a form of insanity. Society has added to the evils of nature). But here, though Sebald’s Kant seems conscious of the damage wrought by human society, he is beginning to accept the fate of human transition to modernity and rejecting the quasi-romantic notion of reunion with nature. Instead of returning to nature, he suggests merely acknowledging—perhaps even mourning—its loss even as humans plow on ahead.

By 1777, this transition in Sebald’s Kant is complete. Sebald sets in this year a scene in which Kant convinces his neighbor to have his poplar trees cut down in order to improve Kant’s

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159 Jk 11. Here Sebald’s Kant is partially quoting from Chamfort’s *Maximes et Pensées* Ch.1, Maximes Générales, LXVII: “Les fléaux physiques et les calamités de la nature humaine ont rendu la société nécessaire. La société a ajouté aux malheurs de la nature. Les inconvénients de la société ont amené la nécessité du gouvernement et le gouvernement ajoute aux malheurs de la société. Voilà l’histoire de la nature humaine.” Sebald quotes this passage again in his essay on Thomas Bernhard (BU 108).
view of the tower of Löbenicht. By this stage, Kant is no longer even recognizing what was lost as he gains his unobstructed view. All that matters to him is forming the natural world to suit his immediate aims. And Sebald connects Kant’s attitude regarding inconvenient nature with his treatment of inconvenient people. In the same scene, Kant admits to having pressured the local government to end the rather raucous chapel services that had been held for inmates of the local jail. It is a gesture that Sebald later carries through in Kant’s decidedly demeaning treatment of his butler, Martin Lampe. He seems to indicate here that goal-oriented reason, and its attendant estrangement from nature, leads to disregard for people as well.

Shortly thereafter, in a scene set in 1790, Sebald’s Kant tries on a new invention—an apparatus for holding up his socks—and the narrator comments on the nature of human invention. The narrator observes, that “Bekanntermaßen werden alle unsere Erfindungen schon im Absturz gemacht” (as is generally known, all our inventions are already made in collapse.) The human story—exemplified in the portrait Sebald paints of Immanuel Kant—is primarily a story of stop-gap measures made to prop up what turns out to be a rather precarious existence. In Sebald’s imagination, those sock suspenders Kant wears, which were intended to improve his circulation, in fact only show “mit welch primitiven Konstruktionen die organischen Maschinen ihr Leben immer wieder zu verlängern versuchen” (with what primitive constructions the organic machine seeks again and again to prolong its life, 23). For that matter, inventions bring with them a list of unintended consequences. The narrator observes that even the ‘solutions’ our biological evolution has come up with to keep us alive—our blood vessels, pumps, valves and

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160 Apparently, Sebald was not all too concerned with the concrete facts of Kant’s life. Kant did not purchase this home on Prinzessinstraße in the vicinity of the Königsberger palace until 30 December 1783. For more details on Kant’s housing situation see Gert Irrlitz, *Kant-Handbuch: Leben und Werk*, (Stuttgart: Mezlert, 2002,) 3-4.  
the like—make our circulatory system susceptible to the tiniest obstruction (24). Compared with the simple elegance of photosynthesis, he suggests, our bodies are clumsy, medieval constructions.\(^{162}\)

Sebald’s narrator takes the opportunity of the script’s final scene, set on the day of Kant’s funeral in 1804, to further explore some of those unintended consequences brought on by human interactions with nature. In this scene, the narrator imagines how the history of human expansion might seem to an alien observer viewing the Earth from an orbiting satellite.\(^{163}\) He describes what an alien would be able to see, were the instruments on his satellite only able to resolve objects larger than 3 or 4 meters in diameter. Unable to see individual human beings, this alien would likely conclude, the narrator speculates, that what we know as human civilization is an affliction. At first, some 8,000 years ago, only small blotches in the valleys of rivers, “anfangs spärlich und weit verstreut” (at first sparse and widely scattered) would have appeared, “als hätte unser Planet die Masern bekommen: Dörfer” (as if our planet had contracted measles: villages, 1Jk 40; cf. 2Jk 47). Then, for the last 6,000 years, the alien could have observed another kind of blotch, larger and interconnected: cities. “Neben den Masernflecken” (beside the measles-blotches) Sebald’s narrator continues, “wirken sie als Furunkel” (they seem like boils, 1Jk 41; cf. 2Jk 48). Thereafter, a new form of disease would seem to have spread on the ‘skin’ of the Earth. For the last hundred years “größere Schorfstellen, die an Ekzeme

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\(^{162}\) 2Jk 23. Sebald makes a nearly identical observation in his essay “Tiere Menschen Machinen,” the English text of which he began in 1983: “Verglichen mit dem Wunder der Photosynthese ist die physiologische Konstitution des Menschen ein primitives Machwerk” (198). Similarly, Sebald observes in the English version of this essay: “What we perceive of as life, that is to say its manifest forms, are the results of the other tendency in evolution which is to work, simultaneously, against its own gradient to keep entropy at bay by inventing new and successively more elaborate systems. However, as the history of industrialization clearly shows, nature’s inventions—and these are now almost entirely our inventions while the rest of the natural world just suffers the consequences—also cause entropic patterns to spread” (“Animals, Men, Machines. Reading Kafka in 1983” 6).

\(^{163}\) Interestingly enough, Kant himself considered the existence of extraterrestrial beings in the third part of his Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels (1755) and deduced that those living farther away from our sun must have more refined bodies and thus more advanced intelligence due to the decreased influence of the sun at greater distance (Kant, 351-68, esp. 358).
erinnern: Industriegebiete” (larger lesions reminiscent of eczema: industrial regions), often overcast by a thick layer of dust, would have overspread vast regions (1Jk 41; cf. 2Jk 48).

These few examples show that in his Kant-project, Sebald goes about confronting the legacy of human invention and development. Echoing Kafka, Sebald implies that we humans make our inventions in the process of falling, and our evolutionary story is not a story of progress so much as of the unforeseen disasters that lurk in the products of our ingenuity. In this respect, Sebald rehearses in this screenplay some notions that he would later work out in his essay interpreting Kafka’s ‘evolution stories,’ specifically, Kafka’s “Report for an Academy” and “Investigations of a Dog.” In this essay, “Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen: Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichten,” Sebald registers his deep skepticism about the “Chancen des Überlebens” (chances of survival) that lie in wait for the human species as it continues to evolve (198). Because human history has so far meant competition with and the destruction of nature, Sebald does not hold out much hope for our continued survival. We destroy, he seems to think, those very structures that gave rise to our species and that make our continued existence possible.

Sebald made this program obvious in the letters he exchanged with Jürgen Tomm, his contact at Sender Freies Berlin, who had expressed some interest in the project. In this excerpt he explains why it would be so important to produce a film of this type:

Deshalb, und nicht weil ich zufällig der Autor bin, müsste das Projekt realisiert werden. Es hat den unmittelbarsten Gegenwartsbezug.

About the script itself I would like to immodestly observe further that it with certainty would prove the foundation for a truly unusual sequence of scenes. Simply the content of the text is already in my opinion highly up-to-date. Day after day it becomes more obvious that the human species is compelled, if it wants to survive, to pursue its science and technological accomplishments ever more intensely and ruthlessly, and that this is in direct relation to the crippling—in the literal sense—of human nature and the rest of nature, which no one can ignore. In short, [the text] is about the increase in human cognitive faculties which is in inverse proportion to the survival chances of organic nature. [...] Never before was the fatal connection between the development of thought and the reduction of nature as clear as it is now. Therefore, and not because I happen to be the author, this project has to be realized. It has the most immediate contemporary relevance.

Despite his assertion to the contrary, Sebald’s urgent desire to see this film produced probably influenced his pitch. He states in his letter that he is responding to a telephone conversation, in which what had seemed concrete plans for the film’s purchase were suddenly put into question. Furthermore, a glance through the letter which replied to this plea makes clear that Tomm wanted to produce the piece, but needed a compelling reason to include it in a programming schedule that was otherwise dedicated to treatments of scientific subjects.

Nevertheless, there is a distinct resonance between the sense of dread about the “Überlebenschancen der organischen Natur” (chances for survival of organic nature) which Sebald expresses here and his articles about Kafka’s ‘evolution stories’ which he began composing in 1983. The film project represents nothing less than Sebald’s literary working out of the thesis he had developed in the Kafka essays and presents us with a thread connecting his dramatic work and the poetics we had discovered in the previous chapters.

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164 “Max” Sebald (Poringland) to Jürgen Tomm, (Sender Freies Berlin) 21 October 1983.
165 Sebald’s letter indicates that the company had offered—orally, at least—to pay him 8,000 DM for the script, not an insignificant sum in 1983.
166 Tomm’s letter is dated 25 October 1983.
Kant’s life story becomes, under Sebald’s pen, a portrait—perhaps an allegory—of exactly this process. It is the story of a life already carrying the signs of its own decay. Sebald speaks of the natural history of Kant’s decay,\(^{167}\) which constitutes a subtle reference to Walter Benjamin’s use of the term. Natural history in this usage describes a way of looking at the world that recognizes in civilization the simultaneous coexistence of rise and fall, of building and ruin, of life and death. As René Buchholz points out, the way both Benjamin and Adorno employ this term represents a subtle self-critique aimed at modernity’s central themes of nature, history, freedom and progress.\(^{168}\) What Benjamin read in baroque allegory and saw on the “Antlitz” (countenance) of 19th century Paris—the death’s head of decay present since the beginning—is that same aspect Sebald wishes to bring out in his portrait of Kant: the facies Hippocratica foretelling his physical death and the death spread by his view of nature. It was this Hippocratic face that Sebald would later describe in The Rings of Saturn thus:

_Über jede neuen Form liegt schon der Schatten der Zerstörung. Es verläuft nämlich die Geschichte jedes einzelnen, die jedes Gemeinwesens und die der ganzen Welt nicht auf einem stets weiter und schöner sich aufschwingenden Bogen, sondern auf einer Bahn, die, nachdem der Meridian erreicht ist, hinunterführt in die Dunkelheit._

On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark. (RS 35-36/23-24)

*The Rings of Saturn*, which we will consider in more detail below in Chapter Five, details not only the suffering of human victims of injustice, but also, for example, the inhumane treatment

\(^{167}\) The *Vorbemerkung* to Draft Two clearly indicates that Sebald viewed Kant’s biography through a “naturhistorischen” (natural-historical) lens (2Jk ii).

\(^{168}\) Buchholz 59. Buchholz offers a comprehensive look not only at Benjamin’s and Adorno’s understanding of natural history, but also the historical development of the concept itself, pointing out that Enlightenment and 19th century philosophers were used to maintaining a distinction between nature and history. Buchholz cites Hegel’s claim, for example, that whereas changes in nature are cyclical, changes in human intellect (*auf geistigen Boden*) are the only kind that can be considered new and thus historical (60; cf. Hegel “Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte” *Sämtliche Werke* Jubiläumsausgabe, ed. Glockner, Stuttgart 1965f. Vol. 11 p.89).
of silk worms and herring. In this respect, Sebald’s treatment of Kant’s life rhymes with his later fiction’s obsession with decay. And it resonates with his depiction of Georg Wilhelm Steller in *After Nature*, which we considered above in Chapter Three. It was in that section of the long poem, which he began submitting to publishers in late 1983, that we see the Bering expedition serving as a roadmap for future hunting parties. Clearly, Sebald’s ruminations on the meaning of Immanuel Kant’s biography bled over into his other literary work.

Sebald’s Kant script confronts an injustice, and it thematically resonates with his later work. But this script also promises to revise common perceptions of Sebald. This early text is characterized by some of the same concerns and aesthetic maneuvers as Sebald’s later work, but with notable divergences. There is, of course a formal difference. This is a completely new genre for Sebald studies. The television script bears little resemblance to his later prose style. Here, as in his later work, Sebald makes a number of intertextual references, but they are much more limited in scope than his larger works. He concerns himself primarily with the figure of Kant, and the hidden quotations and allusions for which Sebald is famous relate almost exclusively to Kant’s own writings. Another formal difference is that unlike his later work, which wanders down innumerable side-paths and seems strategically non-narrative, this text contains a clear narrative trajectory and a chronological plot with careful character development and dialogue.

The piece was conceived in the tradition of 1960s documentary theater, and in this respect Sebald may have been thinking of the work of Rolf Hochhuth, Martin Walser, Heinar Kipphardt or Peter Weiss, whose major works of documentary theater appeared during Sebald’s university studies, and whom he singles out for praise in the introduction to *A Radical Stage*, the volume of essays Sebald was editing from 1987-88. Documentary theater, Sebald indicates, had
broken through the barrier of silence about war crimes, and prepared the way for later authors to “make up for the moral and aesthetic deficit which [West German theater] had incurred since the desertification of the minds had been systematized in 1933” (2). And to facilitate thought, like the 1960s documentary dramas and the works that followed them, Sebald’s script is stripped down, denuded of artifice and pretensions. In Sebald’s estimation, a documentary tone—as opposed to the ecstasies of bourgeois novels or melodrama—constituted the only fitting means of talking about history. He explains:


It is only through pictures that we are able to transcend prescriptions and press on to an understanding of [Kant’s] times and work, in which documents, evidence and realia, freed from the scientific apparatus, come into their own right. (Exposé, “Vorbemerkung” 2)

Images, particularly in the context of an “essayistischen” (essayistic) television movie, seem to be capable of “sinnlich nachvollziehbare Repräsentation” (sensibly comprehensible representation), in which excerpts of text serve as illustration. This reversal of the traditional roles of the media—text as illustration to images!—is interesting. Sebald hopes to achieve new perspectives by going through side- and backdoors.


The demonstration of [the film’s] development is supposed to exemplify how much the great civilizing and cultural works of people – which are naturally not directly addressed here – are precarious, unstable constructions, the partially correct insights of which rest on all sorts of incorrect suppositions and which
moreover are constantly problematized by the indifferent processes of nature. (Exposé “Vorbemerkung” 3)

He had explored this notion in an essay he composed at the same time that he began working on the Kant project. In this text, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte: Versuch über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung mit Anmerkungen zu Kasack, Nossack und Kluge,”169 Sebald asserts that an unadorned sobriety, as evident in Nossack’s work, was the only appropriate way to talk about historical catastrophe:

Das Ideal des Wahren, das in [Nossacks], über weite Strecken zumindest, gänzlich unprätenziösen Sachlichkeit beschlossen ist, erweist sich angesichts der totalen Zerstörung als der einzige legitime Grund für die Fortsetzung der literarischen Arbeit. Umgekehrt ist die Herstellung von ästhetischen oder pseudo-ästhetischen Effekten aus den Trümmern einer vernichteten Welt ein Verfahren, mit dem die Literatur sich ihrer Berechtigung entzieht. (LL 64; cf. “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte” 355)

The ideal of truth inherent in its entirely unpretentious objectivity, at least over long passages, proves itself to be the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist. (NH 53; cf. CS 82)

It is this documentary impulse that prompted Sebald to write about the real life and dying of Kant in a way that diverged somewhat from his later style.

But aside from the formal differences between this project and Sebald’s later work, the content of the text itself promises to revise at least one misconception about Sebald, namely that the Holocaust is his primary concern or, as Samuel Pane claims, “the author’s over-arching preoccupation” (40). In this Kant script, Sebald’s focus is clearly on the whole of the natural world, and not only on the individual human victims of history. The Holocaust is not even

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mentioned—in fact human victims of inhuman behavior hardly register at all except tangentially as after-effects of a change in the human stance to nature. Though Sebald is most often put rather too conveniently into the interpretive box of ‘Holocaust literature,’ I would suggest that a broader view of his writings, and in particular this early text, reveals something quite different. Sebald seems to be disturbed at least as much by crimes against nature as by crimes against humanity. In some respects, his concern over the Holocaust stems from his awareness that this singularly despicable crime is actually only in keeping with the way humans operate in the natural world, and perhaps even stems from that human tendency to destroy nature by conceiving of it as only a means to an end. His assessment resonates with Adorno and Horkheimer, who claim that estrangement from the outside world, and from inner, human nature, leads us to victimize other humans, who, are after all, also a part of nature. It is not as though Sebald is unconcerned with human victims. On the contrary, he diagnoses human suffering as symptomatic of a larger problem; it was a problem to which Kant himself alluded in his famous dictum that humans should not abuse animals, nor that which is beautiful in inanimate nature since that would be “intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering, and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other men” (*Metaphysics of Morals* 192-93). Violence against the rest of the natural order could lead to violence against humans as well. But for Kant this was merely a crime because it deadened sympathy and could lead to bad treatment of other humans. Animals were for Kant, after all, only a “means to an end, and that end is man,” and one had “duties” towards animals “because thus we cultivate the corresponding duties towards human beings […]. Man must practice
kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men” (*Lecture on Ethics* 239-40).

Sebald, however, sees the crime here before human victims enter the picture. It should be noted that the dangers of a purely rationalistic, purpose-driven philosophy were not lost on many in the Enlightenment establishment. Sebald himself acknowledged Rousseau’s desire to strike back at progress, to return to an agrarian, non-hierarchical structure for society. In *Logis in einem Landhaus*, Sebald writes that Rousseau saw in Corsica “die Möglichkeit zur Verwirklichung einer Ordnung, die die Übel der Gesellschaft, in der er sich gefangen fühlte, vermied” (the possibility of the realization of an order that avoided the evils of society in which he felt himself trapped, LiL 58-59). But for Rousseau this remained an irreconcilable, utopian dream. As Sebald’s essay goes on to point out, Rousseau indeed wrote a draft constitution for the Corsican rebels spelling out their return to agrarianism, but neither he, nor his contemporaries could reconcile utopia with progress, which they were unwilling to sacrifice. Nevertheless, as Enlightenment historian Aaron Garrett points out, though Kant’s argument for decent behavior was only in the interest of reaffirming the basic difference between humans and animals (Garrett 176), the Scottish philosopher, Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), argued that animals had “a right to happiness,” and that no misery should be inflicted upon them. “'Tis true,” he observed, “brutes have no notion of right or of moral qualities: but infants are in the same case….not to mention that frequent cruelty to brutes may produce such a bad habit of mind as may break out in like treatment of our fellows.”¹⁷⁰ Clearly the danger of cruelty bred by purely rationalistic assignment of animals to the ranks of the unfeeling (for which Descartes is habitually blamed) was apparent to Hutcheson. It is a danger of which Sebald himself seems to warn when he juxtaposes a passage describing brutal experiments on herring with a two-page photo of the

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concentration camp at Bergen Belsen (74-75 and 78-79 respectively). The kind of violence that rationalization directs toward the animal kingdom generalizes to the rest of nature including, of course, humans.

Another Scott, John Oswald (ca.1760-93), seems to eerily presage Sebald’s protest when he writes that mankind had been estranged from his original sympathy with nature (and consequent vegetarianism) by “the interrelated evils of scientism and superstition” which led humans to condone vivisection—to “interrogate trembling nature, plunge into her maternal bosom the butcher knife” This crime against nature, he surmised, resulted in “war, inequality, the destruction of nature and self-destruction”171 for humans themselves. And Oswald was not alone. Garrett informs us that the din for animal rights was so ardent as to prompt Thomas Taylor’s 1792 anonymous parody A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes (Garrett 176).

Conclusion

Reading Sebald’s work as a quasi-messianic attempt to construct redemptive literature, which consists of the unearthing and retelling of personal histories that cast light on and resist the brokenness of the world, is now gaining ascendancy. However, though scholars are beginning to take note of this strain in Sebald’s work, they have so far only located this in his prose. David Darby, for example, sees Sebald’s redemption of history in the landscapes of Rings of Saturn, concluding that the bringing to paper of history and memories can “hold only so long as one step and one written sheet of paper can be made to follow another” (Darby 277). Similarly, Helen Finch points out that Sebald’s essays on Peter Handke’s work reveal his interest in a “space of redemption,” which Finch locates in the passage from Austerlitz where Sebald invokes the trope of the Bohemian sea (Finch179). Russell Kilbourn also reads Sebald in a redemptive light and


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analyzes intertextual allusions to Kafka’s Jäger Gracchus story in Sebald’s *Vertigo* as well as to the figure of Nabokov in *The Emigrants*. Kilbourn identifies intertextuality itself as “the only place one can hope to find anything like a redemptive mechanism, or even just its promise, since it is *there* that our fate is written” (Kilbourn 63, emphasis in original). These contemplations and others will be more fully explored in the following chapter where we consider Sebald’s prose more specifically. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Sebald’s project of giving victims a voice and speaking the truth about systems of exploitation began long before he turned (almost) exclusively to prose. As early as 1969, Sebald demonstrates his unease with the kinds of self-serving histories being declaimed by surviving perpetrators. By the late 1980s he has turned his focus to reconstructing lives now beyond living memory, those of Wittgenstein and Kant, and revealing how these lives illustrate what went wrong with modernity. Thus, in his early attempts at drama and, as the previous chapter revealed, even earlier, in his poetry, the thread of redemption proves to run throughout Sebald’s oeuvre. Indeed, it is the presence of this phenomenon across genres that turns out to be perhaps the most compelling reason for regarding Sebald’s disparate compositions under the same aspect and as motivated by the same unfulfilled (and ultimately unfulfillable) desire to reclaim histories from history, victims from the systems that destroyed them, and thus enact a literature of restitution.
Chapter Five

Redemption Takes a Circular Path: Sebald’s Prose

Abstract

In the previous chapters we have investigated the quasi-messianic mission proposed in Part One of this study. In pursuing this line of inquiry, we considered the messianic characteristics of Sebald’s long-standing interest in poetry, especially After Nature (Ch. 3), as well as his forays into drama (Ch.4) This final chapter will propose that as Sebald’s interest in poetry and drama waned, his sense of the necessity for a literary restitution only deepened, reaching an apex in the most finely wrought of his works, The Rings of Saturn.

Neither drama nor poetry proved to be Sebald’s preferred genre. Though he continued to write poems, they were truly on a much smaller scale after 1988 and he appears to have given up on drama altogether after 1989. Whatever the cause of this change in focus, its effect has been that when Sebald eventually became, as Scott Denham has called him, a “phenomenon” (Denham and McCulloh 1), it was above all for his long, unclassifiable, sometimes inscrutable, but always identifiable prose. Consequently, most of the scholarly work on Sebald has examined that prose, identifying its various intertexts, motifs and strategies. In turning this present study’s attention to these by now very familiar texts, I do not intend to double the efforts of other adept scholars. Nor is there room in the scope of this project to do justice to every book. What follows, then, will be a brief overview of the larger works, in which the messianic qualities we have been tracing are evident. Closer attention will then be paid to three representative texts, two of them rarely before studied: from Sebald’s early years, middle and mature career.

In the first half of this study, we discovered that Sebald’s reception of texts from the Frankfurt School caused him to be troubled by the condition of modernity. In response to this brokenness, he developed a way of conceiving literature that was influenced by the Jewish messianic notion of making amends. This making of amends consisted of several literary strategies that promised to “bring a halt, to dissipate the mythic power that reproduces itself in an
external recurrence by forcing it to reverse its direction” (Undiscover’d 29) or at least to stir
those who had become numb to the “exile” of modernity, the alienation from nature. In a
passage Martin Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim that Sebald underlined and quoted in his essay on
Kafka (Law 53), we read that even false hope is useful, since, though the exiles have succumbed
to slumber, they can be awakened “from time to time with the hope in a false Messiah” (Buber
229). And it was in just such a forlornly hopeful way that Sebald began a quasi-messianic
literary program which we have been able to trace thus far in his poetry and drama. The practice
we have been tracing in the second half of this dissertation amounts to giving victims a voice,
confronting systems of power, and pointing to an alternate way of relating to the world by means
of demonstrating the interconnectedness of life in its unexpected coincidences. What we
discovered is that the characteristics that render Sebald’s work so difficult to categorize are
precisely those which function in tune with a messianic urge: its allusiveness, recursive qualities,
its deep sadness and fleeting moments of levitation. In Sebald’s poetry, we discovered the
development of Sebald’s discomfort with alienation from nature into a sense of the victimization
of other humans that this entailed. In his longest poem, After Nature, then, Sebald points to
moments where this condition is lifted, and, though these prove to be insufficient, they give us a
sense of what an improvement in the earthly situation would look like. His dramas proved to
develop along similar lines. The early monologue castigated self-deluded collaborators in this
system of victimization, (in the guise of Fritz von Schiegl) after which Sebald turned his
attention to the biography of Immanuel Kant, who became a symbol of the corrosiveness of
scientism and instrumental reason.

In this present chapter, a survey of Sebald’s prose will continue to demonstrate his
interest in giving victims a voice, confronting systems of power, demonstrating the unexpected
interconnectedness of all life, and pointing to moments of levitation where a glimpse of an alternate way of organizing the world can be seen.

But before we examine these characteristics, there is some circumstantial evidence to consider. Throughout Sebald’s prose, we encounter images that are drawn explicitly from the sources we considered in Chapter 2, and which Sebald considered to be emblematic of a messiah in his essays on Kafka and Döblin. Sebald often wrote about narrators who travel, and so it is perhaps unsurprising to encounter the image of a character bearing a walking stick and rucksack. However, as he explicitly indicates in his essays on Kafka’s Schloss, the walking stick and rucksack are emblematic of the wandering messiah figure, and he points to Martin Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim as his source for this (Undiscover’d 23, Law 46, Gesetz 118/ UH 92). The wanderer, he observed in these essays, (as well as in his essay on Stifter and Handke, “Helle Bilder und dunkle”), carrying his “Stock und Mantelsack” (staff and valise), a “minute knapsack and knotty stick” (Undiscover’d 23), or a “Stock und Ranzen” (staff and satchel, Gesetz 188), is an image that he associates with the figure of an itinerant Messiah, who, in Buber’s Tales, travels from place to place and “Weisheit um Weisheit” (one wise saying after another, Gesetz 118; cf. Buber 418/269). It was an image that haunted his own prose.

Thus, in Vertigo, for example, the narrator carries a rucksack down on his hike to W. in (SG193/ V 177). The hunter Hans Schlag, the doctor Piazolo and the priest Wurmser all carry rucksacks (251-52/230-31 and 259-71/237-48). Dr. Selwyn carries a shoulder-bag (AG 26/E 15) and a blind guide walks with a staff in The Emigrants (DA 210/E 142). In Rings of Saturn, it is the narrator who wears a rucksack (RS 43/31, 59/44, 208/175, and 214/180) and contemplates a bamboo “Wanderstab” (hiking staff) used to secretly transport silkworm eggs in the 6th century.

\[172\text{ It is surprising that Paul Bereyter does not seem to have either knapsack or walking stick, though he is the spitting image of a Wandervogel (AG 61/E 40).}\]
And in *Austerlitz*, the eponymous central figure also conspicuously wears a rucksack that stands out to the narrator (A 15/7, 18/31, 62-63/39-40, 167/112, 253/173; and 323/224,) and of which he provides a photographs (63/40 and 179/121). It reminds him of the fact that Wittgenstein also carried such an accoutrement (63/40-41). Later, Austerlitz sees a little boy in the Liverpool Street Station holding a *Rucksäckchen* (201/137) and remembers the inexplicable disappearance of his little green rucksack upon his arrival in Wales (203/138). His insistence on living out of his rucksack is also a sign of his remaining unapproachable and machine-like to Marie (311/216). At the end of the narrative, we find that it is the narrator himself who has donned a rucksack (418/296). These images are certainly not conclusive evidence that Sebald intended these characters to be read as ciphers for the Messiah, but they are thought provoking in light of how Sebald as a scholar of literature interpreted the figure of the knapsack-toting wanderer. They also cast into interesting relief Sebald’s own comments in a 1998 interview with Michaël Zeeman that “the pervasiveness of [the German past] and the fact that it wasn’t just something that happened in one or two places but that it happened almost throughout Europe, and the calamitous dimensions of it, are something that, even though I left Germany when I was twenty-one, *I still have in my backpack* and I just can’t put down” (Denham and McCulloh 29 emphasis mine). Furthermore, wandering and exile are tropes reaching back to antiquity, but Sebald took special note of them as symptomatic of messianic characters. He had specifically singled out Kafka’s Jäger Gracchus as a type of this deathless wanderer—similar to the Ahasver character—who is “exempt from the passage of time” (Law 49), which is one of the reasons why this character’s curious emergence in *Vertigo* is so intriguing (29-30/24-25, 140/125 and 178-83/163-67).
Sebald points to yet another characteristic of the messianic figure. In his analysis of Kafka’s *Schloss*, he remarks on the inevitable weariness, the sense of being doomed, and of being nearest redemption when farthest from it, that the hopelessness of a messianic mission brings with it. He observes that Kafka’s surveyor, K, is alternately characterized by insomnia and insurmountable exhaustion at the brink of redemption (Undiscover’d 25 and 31). In light of these observations, the weariness, exhaustion, paralysis and immobility expressed by several figures including the narrator in *Vertigo* (13/9, 41-42/35-36, 161/145, 164/149, and 200/183), *The Emigrants* (169/115, 203/137 and 346/231), *The Rings of Saturn* (11-12/3, 224/188, 264/221 and 307/259) and *Austerlitz* (70/45, 145/97, 206/140; 297/206 and 384/271) can be read not only as the symptom of overexertion, but also of the exhausting hopelessness of a messianic mission. In Sebald’s essays on Döblin and Kafka, he makes it clear that one component of the messianic complex is the sense that apocalypse and destruction function as agents of redemption (Undiscover’d 31 and MZ 61, for example). Perhaps this is one reason behind, as Peter Morgan puts it, “an ‘Endzeitstimmung’ and a pervasive imagery of apocalypse” throughout Sebald’s work (“Sign of Saturn,” 76). Perhaps this is also what Helen Finch detects when she observes that there seems to be a longed for apocalypse in Sebald’s work (Fuchs and Long 179). Finch locates redemption in Sebald’s landscape, but the presence of apocalyptic imagery that she and many others have identified may signal more than simply a melancholy death-wish or Sebald’s diagnosis of the brokenness of modernity, (which is, of course, how we have been reading it thus far in the present study.)

Also, Sebald’s seemingly offhand remark in an essay from 1972 that the dog is an “Vehikel der Erlösung des Menschen” (vehicle of human redemption, Gedanken 282) is thought-provoking considering how often the dog, also an emblem of melancholia, appears in Sebald’s
work. “Dem Hunde sich anzuverwandeln,” he continues, “erscheint seither als die Aufgabe der wahrhaft Berufenen” (to adapt into a dog seems ever since to be the task of the Called One, 282). But these fleeting images are truly only hints at what can be called the messianic mode in which Sebald writes. This is circumstantial evidence. On the other hand, what we have been pursuing thus far in the present study is not only the odd allusion to imagery derived from Sebald’s copies of Buber and Scholem. Far more it is a continuously present mode of writing that performs certain, quasi-messianic functions. And so, now, we turn to examining several of Sebald’s prose works to determine the degree to which they evince the characteristics of a restitution-oriented literature that we have seen in Sebald’s other works.

**Early Prose: “Wartend”**

It is interesting to note also how early Sebald ventured into prose. The earliest extant prose manuscripts in the Sebald collection at the DLA date to 1968 or 1969, about the same time he was probably composing “Bleston.” Sebald apparently never found a publisher for these pieces. The earliest prose text is an untitled typescript—the first line begins “Herr G. ist sich nicht so ganz sicher mit sich selbst” (Mr. G. is not so entirely sure of himself)—that Sebald likely composed during his brief sojourn in St. Gallen, Switzerland or shortly thereafter in

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173 His narrator is born under the influence of a planet associated with dogs, Saturn (NN 76/AN 88), as is Austerlitz, apparently (A 93/61). Sebald begins his narrative in *Rings of Saturn* in the “Hundstage” (dog days—also a reference to melancholy Saturn, which governs the autumn: RS 11/3).

174 One can only speak with certainty about the DLA holdings. At least one long manuscript, variously described as a “novel” or simply “prose,” has been indefinitely retained by Sebald’s family. How many other manuscripts remain in their possession is unclear.

175 There is some evidence that he submitted at least two manuscripts to FAZ while living in St. Gallen. These could easily have been the prose pieces he worked on while living in Manchester, though his description of them in a letter to Hanno (Kühnert?) seems closer to the monologue “Der Traum sein Leben” which he wrote in 1968. In the as-yet uncatalogued letter from 29 October 1969, he describes his submissions thus: “Das eine ist freilich ein wenig lang und das andere möglicherweise für die Spalten Eures gepflegten Feuilletons zu grob und bösertig.” Unfortunately, the original letter has been lost and now exists only as his typewriter’s impressions imbedded in the manuscript of “Ballade vom Licht der Welt” (1968).
Manchester, is a description of a self portrait of a certain “Herr G,” which hangs in an unnamed London gallery. Other than its correspondence to later examples of ekphrasis in Sebald’s work, this text is simply too unfinished to be of much interest. The piece concludes with the observation that the image of Herr G. “wird peinlich auf die Dauer” (in time, it grows awkward). The same is, unfortunately, true of this first prose undertaking.

On the other hand, a 4-page typescript entitled “Wartend,” also typed unevenly on onionskin and located in the same file of miscellaneous early prose, makes quite a different impression. Despite its never having been published, this text marks the beginning not only of Sebald’s serious prose—it is actually quite a good read—but also bears the traces of his first engagement with the themes we have been developing up to this point. It is brief, but nevertheless registers Sebald’s now familiar complaint against modernity and the urban wastelands it produces. Here, too, is the sense that escape is an illusion but nevertheless a worthwhile desire.

The text begins with its narrator sitting in a café having taken “P” (apparently his girlfriend) to a hospital in Hampstead (in the greater London area). His observations in the café consist of character sketches and reminiscences, between which he relates step by step his time of waiting.

He begins by describing the café’s owner, who, he notes, is too dignified to be a mere employee (1). When the man comes out from behind the counter, the narrator notices that he has “krumme Beine” (bandy legs). But, the odd appearance this and the man’s trousers, which are

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176 I make this tentative claim on the basis of the document’s smooth typeface and onionskin paper, which are very like those Sebald used in correspondence from this time frame, such as the latter correspondence with Adorno and with Gershom Scholem. As one can see in later typescripts, such as the unfinished dramas, Sebald’s preferred typewriter in later years produced much more uneven letters. Additionally, the typescript has been catalogued by the DLA in a file titled “2 frühe Prosastücke 1968,” though this designation was made by the archive staff and is not, in itself, conclusive.

177 To my knowledge, no critic has yet mentioned, let alone analyzed this manuscript, which is surprising given how many researchers are now making use of the Nachlass.
worn out in the seat are “nirgends lächerlich” (nowhere comical). He is earnest and dutiful but also troubled. The narrator observes that he looks as though he would like to be “vergeßlich” (oblivious). The narrator also takes note of a caged bird sitting in front of a mirror, but dismisses this: “Aber das ist ein Zufall” (but that is a coincidence, 1). However, as we have come to expect from Sebald, it is just such accidents that are likely to be the most telling. We see here, even in his earliest pieces, Sebald’s attention drawn to unexpected juxtapositions, though the conclusion he seems to be drawing here— that the disconsolate café owner is like a caged bird—is painted rather more obviously than elsewhere in his oeuvre. Here we have our first indication of what might be considered a victim of modernity to whom Sebald lends a voice. Though the narrator dismisses the too-obvious analogy of a caged bird, the fact that he mentions it at all has registered the connection and brought it to our attention. What is going on, we are then provoked to ask, with the implicit simile? The narrator does not speculate on the man’s background, which might have given us clues to his air of desolation, but tersely remarks instead, “Weiß Gott, von wo er gekommen ist” (God knows from whence he has come, 1).

The narrator then reflects on his unusual breakfast in the hotel, to which he cannot return this evening, because the single rooms have all been booked. “Es war (übrigens),” he remarks, “ein jüdisches Hotel” (it was, by the way, a Jewish hotel). He considers the characters he observed in the dining room and how he was unable to eat, because the experience of seeing unfamiliar things takes away one’s appetite (1). Nevertheless, he has anxiety about changing locations while waiting (1). The narrative then leaps back to the present, as the narrator catches sight of a mustachioed woman entering the café who reminds him of “die Irre von Chaillot” (The Madwoman of Chaillot, 1-2). This allusion to Jean Giraudoux’s 1943 play, La Folle de Chaillot, reveals another moment of Sebald’s rebellious streak. In the play, the eponymous madwoman,
Aurelia, fights back against a cabal of ravenous financiers, brokers and industrialists, who are colluding to destroy downtown Paris in order to extract oil. Aurelia lures them to her cellar where she puts them on trial in front of a ragtag group of revolutionaries. In the end, the oil men are condemned to death and tricked into descending into a bottomless pit. Sebald’s appropriation of Giraudoux’s madwoman transforms the scene, which takes on a sinister atmosphere. The next moment—to my knowledge the only clear example of prolepsis in Sebald’s prose—is disturbing and targets the rebellious strain at a system of authority. The narrator catches sight of another “seltsame Dame,” (strange woman) who enters and orders a roll. “Eines Morgens” the narrator intones, “wird die Polizei sie verhaften, weil sie sich eine Semmel kauft” (one morning the police will arrest her because she buys herself a roll, 2). Is this another of Aurelia’s gang? At any rate, the narrator’s discomfort with her fate is clear, as is the sense that he blames the police in the affair.

The narrative then leaps backward to 1962. The narrator recalls his meeting with an old acquaintance, Wilburs, in that very snowy winter and his skepticism about technology. “Die U-Bahn schien mir” he writes, “trotz ihres einfachen Systems, das sich gleichsam an die Intelligenz des Fremden anbietet, ein äußerst hinterhältiges Verkehrsmittel, von dem ich mir überlegte, ob es einen nicht aus lauter Verschlagenheit nur an den rechten Ort bringe” (The Tube, despite its simple system, which curries favor with the intelligence of the stranger, seemed to me an extremely furtive means of transportation about which I wondered whether it did not actually bring one to the right destination out of pure deviousness, 2). But, having made the journey in his recollection to Wilburs’ house, he finds that it is not only technology that is suspect, but literature too. Trying in vain to sleep on Wilburs’ sofa, he peruses his friend’s collection of books; he samples “Tennyson, Carlyle, Henry James, und andere Fragmenten einer aufgelassenen.
Bibliothek” (Tennyson, Carlyle, Henry James and other fragments of an abandoned library, 2), but finds that the bookshelf is only “a narrow graveyard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city.” There is apparently no comfort in the canon either.

Returning to the narrative present, Sebald records the banal conversations around him, one of which takes place between two women of German origin, who, though they continue to use German colloquialisms, have obviously been in England for some time. The narrator’s boredom is palpable and it leads to a curious moment of decision. He will leave the café and strike out into the city, but the action has consequences:


According to my plan, I was to remain a while yet in Tosca. But then, to my own surprise, I stood up and left. One divides the space of waiting into deadlines that one plans to stick to. Waiting becomes a sacrifice that one brings before the longed for change, and it is like a sin if one leaves the place one has consecrated for a time earlier than agreed. One always believes that one is allowed to redeem oneself a little early, and one believes oneself able to escape the recompense, only because time, with which one conspired, is blind in one eye. (2-3)

The notion that leaving one’s self-appointed waiting room constitutes a breach of promise with despotic time is an extremely odd one. But here again, we see the language of redemption, of a longed for change, and the desire to pull one over on an authority—in this case, the dictates of time. These are the embryonic stages of an alternate, more organic arrangement for human

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178 Here, Sebald is quoting the opening line of Henry James’ The Europeans (1879). The full passage reads: “A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city, seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn, is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion; and the spectacle is not at its best when the mouldy tombstones and funereal umbrage have received the ineffectual refreshment of a dull, moist snow-fall” (James 1).
existence, which would later take more elegant shape in Austerlitz’s discourse on the artificial tyranny of time (A 149-52/100-101). A clock, says Austerlitz, which he claims never to have owned, is “wie etwas von Grund auf Verlogenes” (a thoroughly mendacious object) which must somehow be resisted (152/101). We render ourselves slaves to artificial divisions of time into solar hours and minutes, rather than into, for example, “eine Kalkulation…, die ausginge vom Wachstum der Bäume oder von der Dauer, in der ein Kalkstein zerfällt” (a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, 101). A little later in “Wartend,” the narrator braces himself against the rhythm of a song, “vielleicht” (perhaps), he muses, “weil mir eine solche Einteilung der Zeit noch tyrannischer vorkommt als diese selbst” (because such a division of time seems more tyrannical than time itself, 4). It is this self-inflicted servitude to time which Sebald’s narrator bespeaks in this early text, and which he seeks now to escape.

Thus, driving around in the city, the narrator finally finds what he seems to be looking for: an overlook from which he can view the city. It is a patch of land that has somehow escaped the developers, and from here he glimpses railroad tracks and smoke that huddle toward the horizon as if there were an escape to be found there (3). But here, too, the detritus of industrialism and modernity crowd in his view. In the foreground, the crippled, urban shrubs, a bundle of horsehair, stone fragments, shreds of metal and rust illustrate “die autonome Kunst der verlassenen Dinge” (the autonomous art of cast-off things, 3). Behind it all looms the abyss of a city that functions as though unaware that it is already dead.

At the narrative’s end, the narrator prepares to sleep in his car overnight. He wants, he says, to sleep the whole winter long. “Ich höre Flugzeuge,” he writes at the close. “Aber sie bleiben unsichtbar über den Wolken. Ich stelle mir vor, sie trügen eine Bombenlast. In so einer
großen Stadt fällt einem der Gedanke, es herrschte Krieg, ganz natürlich bei” (I hear aircraft. But they remain invisible over the clouds. I imagine they are carrying bomb loads. In such a large city, it quite naturally occurs to one that there is a war on, 4).

This narrative is certainly not among Sebald’s best work, but it bears the same sense of distress about the condition of modern life, dominated as they are by our attempts to control nature, the same longing for some kind of redemption from its tyranny, and the same attention to the fates of victims. He has begun the development of a literature that makes these its central concern, which we also saw in his poetry from this time (in Chapter Three). Like his early poems, we see the beginnings of a literature that seeks to reverse the process and resist domination.

**Middle Prose: “Die Kunst des Fliegens”**

But it was some 20 years later that he made his first stab at prose that fits into the scheme of redemptive literature. Jochen Jung, Sebald’s contact at Residenz Verlag, who had invited Sebald to contribute to the *Österreichische Porträts* volume in 1984 (published in 1985) and had arranged the publication of *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* in 1985, subsequently invited Sebald to contribute a prose piece to a collection on the theme of dreams. In his letter, dated 8 January 1987, he solicited a 5-page manuscript in which Sebald is to explore one or more (day)dreams. The result was to be “Die Kunst des Fliegens,” which appeared later that year.

In this text, Sebald’s narrator begins by describing an aircraft’s descent into the area around Basel, Switzerland for an eventual landing in Zurich. The mechanical noises of its landing gear give him cause to observe that “Nichts Primitiveres gibt es als die Technik, als die Ausgeburten des Traums, die Schöpfung wiederholen zu können” (there is nothing more primitive than technology, than the figments of the dream of being able to repeat the act of
creation, Zisselsberger, *Undiscover’d*, 31; Zisselsberger’s translation modified). Technology is only an attempt to claim divine creative power, which, his text indicates next, is dangerous, because humans make for exceptionally near-sighted creators. He relates having met a youngster, Christopher Sandbach, who at 10 years of age filled his days with making dinosaurs out of paper mâché and cardboard. The creatures mounted up, the narrator tells us, despite his mother’s best efforts to dispose of them, because of the speed with which Christopher worked. Markus Zisselsberger asserts in his analysis of the scene that this represents a break from Sebald’s typically dismal view of technology, since here Christopher’s creation does not serve the purposes of dominating nature. “To the child,” he observes, “it is an end in itself and, unlike the teleology of machines, not directed at the conquering of nature” (Zisselsberger, “Fluchtträume” 2). Zisselsberger makes a valid observation about Christopher’s motivation, but misses an important point. Quite to our surprise, Christopher’s creative act creates victims. Though Christopher was industrious and creative, the narrator makes sure to note that “Christopher kümmerte sich nicht um das Schicksal seiner Kreaturen. Allzu sehr war er, wie der Glanz seiner myopischen Augen verriet, in das Geheimnis ihrer Herstellung versunken” (Christopher did not bother himself about the fates of his creatures. He was, as the glint in his myopic eyes betrayed, all too deeply absorbed in the secret of their manufacture, 31). This picture Sebald paints of a near-sighted creator, who can’t be bothered about the inevitable destruction of his creatures, represents a double-edged critique that is actually quite problematic. On the one hand, it is clear from his other work that Sebald found Christian dogma and its claim to control over human affairs inimical. We could read this, then, as a criticism of God who, having created the world, allows it to spin out of control. On the other hand, it is humans who all too often create without considering the consequences. The text has taken a by-now familiar turn
and we begin to recognize the quasi-messianic hue that we have been observing up to this point. Humans, it seems, however innocent, always go about the practice of creation with the same result: destruction. The paper dinosaurs will be disposed of, not out of Christopher’s malice, but because he, like all of us, is oblivious to the consequences of creating.

And thus it is no surprise that when the narrative returns to the landing aircraft, the effects of technology come under Sebald’s withering gaze. The airport’s overly-large halls make him feel, ominously, as though the future has already begun. And the masses of single-minded passengers remind him, he says, of figures falling to their end in the Viennese Genesis, an illustrated manuscript from the sixth century. The scene to which Sebald is referring, (though he does not provide any more detail) is likely that of Noah’s Flood, which depicts several figures, clad drably in dark blue, plunging to their deaths and struggling vainly against the surge of murky water.

The narrator reprises this image of the Flood later on in the text, and it represents continued play with the ambivalence regarding agency that we observed in his comments about Christopher Sandbach and his dinosaurs. Sebald’s analysis of the modern world was that humans had caused their own destruction by alienating themselves from nature. And thus we would expect the travelers to be receiving their just punishment (as did, according to the Genesis narrative, those who perished in the deluge). But Sebald displays here, as elsewhere, his utter empathy with these victims of modernity, who have brought themselves to this pass. His narrator takes note of the utterly abysmal look of the border agent which “berührt” (touches) him as do the sunken lids of the “schwergeprüften Mitreisenden” (sorely-tested fellow travelers, 32). We also see his resistance to systems of authority; he comes close to panic when “die Kontrollschleusen zwingen wieder zu einer verhalteneren Gangart” (the checkpoint sluices
compel a more muted pace, 32). But it becomes clear that he considers these people to be victims of their own system.

The narrator then experiences an epiphany of sorts. He is swept along in the crush of Autobahn traffic when he catches a glimpse of the fading sunset. “Ein tiefes Gefühl erfaßt mich,” he writes, “nicht anders als sei ich nun wieder eingekehrt in die Natur” (a deep feeling gripped me, no different than had I now returned to nature, 32). This feeling of brightness, however, is extremely short-lived. Listening to a news-broadcast at his host’s home, the narrator hears an anchorman explain that 800,000 people live in the vicinity of the Leibstadt, Beznau, Gösgen and Mühleberg nuclear power plants. This prospect is horrifying in the wake of the recent incident at Chernobyl, which had transpired the year before Sebald composed this narrative. And the news anchor’s reassurance is small comfort indeed. He continues, “dies sei jedoch […] insofern nicht weiter beunruhigend, als in der Schweiz das Schutzkellersystem in zügigem Ausbau begriffen sei” (this is nevertheless in one respect of no additional concern, since the fallout shelter system in Switzerland is presently being rapidly expanded, 32). The impending disaster has the newsman and the narrator already in a bunker mentality. Nuclear power plants had already figured in what became the third section of *After Nature*, “Die dunkle Nacht fahrt aus” (specifically, Sizewell: NN 94/AN 110), which Sebald had published in *Manuskripte* in 1987. They also reappear in Sebald’s later prose and always signify the hubris of human invention and its attending apocalypse. This sense of apocalyptic, or rather, the post-apocalyptic dread is sustained as the narrator and his host sit on the lawn and drink pear brandy. The house is surrounded by offices and an industrial park. It seems, the narrator intones, like they are the last representatives of a sunken civilization above which the house protrudes as from floodwaters (32). This disturbing imagery, echoing his earlier allusion to the Genesis flood, in
which the focus had been on those who perished, reorients the narrative to consider what it feels like to be on the ark. It is no comfort to have survived; the victims are still floating in the floodwaters. Later, the narrator lies awake and feels electricity coursing through his body. A clock-tower strikes the hour and it seems to the narrator that it is merely striking “one” four times over. He then contemplates one of his former Swiss pupils, Peter Schwalder, whose essay “An Unforgettable Dream,” which was composed in “ebenso fehlerhaftem wie wundervollem Englisch” (equally imperfect and marvelous English, 33) Sebald reproduces:

“Last night,” schrieb Schwalder, “I had a wonderful dream. I dreamt I should can fly. I climbed on to the roof of our house, swang my arms, swang my feet and rose myself highly in the sky. I flew across our house, our garden. Higher and higher. And the village was always less and less. There were stars in the black sky and the watch tower showed twelve o’clock. I knew I should go back, but I was not tired. Below me I looked a little lake. A boat sailed across the lake. Nobody was in the boat. I saw the world like a bird sees our world. A train drove through the night. I saw the lights until he dispaired behind a hull. At last I saw again my village. I sat down on the roof and said to me: ‘of this moment you will be free.’”

Schwalder’s flawed and yet wonderful story becomes then a foretaste of and the impetus for the narrator’s own dream of flight. As the dawn approaches and weariness “breitet…ihr stillendes Gift in mein Adern aus. Wie es die letzten Verästelungen erreicht,” the narrator succumbs to its persuasion and senses “eine Erleichterung des Körpers, ein Schwebezustand tritt ein, eine schmerzlose Levitation” (diffuses its quieting poison in my veins. As it reaches the last branches, I feel a lightening in my body, limbo arises, a painless levitation, 33). He thinks on the lines from Heinrich Meibom which had appeared in “Bleston” some twenty years before: “*alma quies optata veni, nam sic sine vita vivere tam suave est quam sine morte moriri*” (Come, gentle sleep! How sweet it is to live though seeming dead and, without dying, to die, Zisselsberger 33; cf. ÜLW 25 lines 16-17). And here Sebald’s narrator interjects something quite remarkable. In a moment of rare self-referentiality, he comments on why he has included these lines: “Zum
Andenken an den Autor dieser Zeilen. Der Maiboum hieß, glaub ich (in commemoration of the author of these lines. Who was called Maiboum, I believe, 33). Sebald fairly often commented on the fact that his work was sprinkled with words and images from other authors. This passage is reminiscent, for example, of his statement concerning the inclusion of another author’s words in his essay on Robert Walser from Logis in einem Landhaus:


I have always tried in my own work to show my respect to those, by whom I feel myself drawn, in a way to doff my hat to them, in as much as I borrow a beautiful image or a few special words from them. Still, it is one thing when one makes a memorial for a colleague who has gone on ahead, and another when one cannot get rid of the feeling that one is being beckoned to from the other side.

(LiL 139)

Common between these passages is the sense that an intertextual reference serves (at least) the purpose of fashioning a memorial to the one being quoted. But Russell Kilbourn points to another function that this practice serves. He sees intertextual maneuvers, specifically Sebald’s invocations of Kafka and Nabokov, as contributing to a redemptive model “predicated on a specific relation between a narrative subject and an other as embodiment of the promise—or hope—of redemption” (Denham and McCulloh 34, emphasis in original).

But it is the end of this brief narrative, in which Sebald’s narrator is on the edge of consciousness and images are flooding in as over a levee (33), which bears the clearest imprint of what we have been discussing as Sebald’s quasi-messianic mode. The entire text has been aiming at the moment of dreaming, when the narrator may (perhaps) discover his Kunst des
**Fliegen**. The passage is worth recounting in full, because it affords us a taste of a redemptive moment of levitation:

Lifted out of the world, I float in the eye of the storm high over the earth. I see the Sargasso Sea, schools of fish, rust-colored forests of algae in the current. Miles below me the white line of a beach that bends to the horizon. Banks of clouds mount up before me. A partly black, partly lime green marsh land. I see a gardener’s family that I know, who are busy reaping lettuce in the country. All around lies lettuce. I had never let myself dream that there was so much lettuce. Their left hands propped against their stiff lower backs, the gardener and his wife stand erect, their right hands laid over their eyes, and look into the sky, out of which I, paddling vigorously against the air, descend. As I light on the ground, vertigo grips me. Already the gardener’s children are running to me and I lift them up, one after the other. (33-34)

Sebald’s dream of flying into a lettuce field and picking up the gardener’s children is reminiscent of the dream he describes at the end of *After Nature*, in which his flight takes him likewise out over the ocean, but in that text he flew into the dystopic industrial landscape along the Rhine, to Munich, where he views the apocalyptic *Alexanderschlacht*, and finally, within the painting, further south toward the interior of the African continent (NN 96-99/AN 112-16). Here, in “Die Kunst des Fliegens,” he appears to be returning home to Norfolk—he recognizes the gardener’s family—and to be escaping the diluvian wasteland of the Swiss industrial park. This text
presents us with a crucial moment of lightness, allowing us to glimpse what Sebald conceived of as an escape from the implications of modernity. As Jo Catling writes in her 2003 essay “Gratwanderung bis an den Rand der Natur: W.G. Sebald’s Landscapes of Memory,” these moments—in her analysis, moments where imaginary landscapes “lead beyond the limits of perception” are important, because they offer “symbolic glimpses of a gateway to another world” (Görner, Anatomist, 48). We know, however, that this is a temporary condition, and insufficient. That is the nature of the literary mode we have been tracing, which bears the marks of the recursive, doomed-from-the-outset Jewish messianic tradition Sebald found so fascinating. But the awakening that awaits his narrator here, which will see him once more in no-man’s-land, surrounded by nuclear power plants, is held at bay for at least a fleeting moment.

**Mature Prose**

This temporary lightness, which as we will discover below, becomes explicitly tied in *The Rings of Saturn* to the practice of seeking out correspondences across time, is a particularly vertiginous experience. The feeling that one is catching sight of another world—or perhaps of a secret order behind the world—which Sebald describes in the dream of flying, is not only a quasi-messianic characteristic within Sebald’s work, but it is also attended by an unsettled feeling. Sebald mentions as much in his interview with Michaël Zeeman, where he says of seemingly far-fetched correspondences that “this is also to unsettle the reader, of course” (Denham and McCulloh 26). It is no small wonder, then, that Sebald’s next prose piece, and his first major work was entitled *Schwindel. Gefühle* (the English translation, *Vertigo*, only captures half of the meaning, of course). Along with *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* constitute the “canonical” works in his oeuvre and have correspondingly received the most scholarly attention. Consequently, we will only be
considering *The Rings of Saturn* in depth; there is simply no room in the scope of a dissertation to take all the works and their readers into account. Nevertheless, it is necessary to briefly consider the other three volumes to see if they, too, bear traces of a redemptive mode of writing.

Here, too, we discover Sebald’s practice of giving the suffering a voice, particularly those obscured by history’s tendency to anonymize its victims. I am thinking here specifically of the gypsies who once camped near the narrator’s former hometown in *Vertigo* (200-201/183-84), the schizophrenic author Ernst Herbeck, with whom Sebald’s narrator (like Sebald himself) develops a friendship and kind of patronage (44-57/38-49). We would have to mention, of course, all four of the narratives in *The Emigrants*, since it was their conspicuous victimhood that initially led to Sebald being considered a Holocaust author. To this list we should also add Jean Améry, whose torture in the Dutch fortress of Breendonk Sebald contemplates in *Austerlitz* (42/26), and, of course, the central narrative thread cannot be unmentioned. The eponymous central figure, Austerlitz, is not only a victim of anti-Semitism, but also very explicitly of modernity itself. But here, Sebald also collects the stories of less conspicuous sufferers, such as Novelli, who was tortured like Améry, but whose story remained “fragmentarisch” (fragmentary, 42/26). Even in the unfinished Corsica project, much of which was published posthumously in *Campo Santo*, we see Sebald’s persistent fixation on chronicling the victims of the rape of nature brought on by modernity. His contemplation of the brutal hunting traditions in Corsica and the felling of its forests (39-48/35-44) are compelling examples of Sebald’s need to expose the aftereffects of misguided instrumental reason.

These other major fiction narratives, which we unfortunately cannot examine in detail also reveal Sebald’s persistent confrontation with systems of power, as, for example in his speculations in *Vertigo* on the Italian composer Demenico Cimarosa, whose mysterious death
may have been due to torture (19-20/16). It is hard to miss his obsession with detecting and collecting correspondences and associations that hint at a hidden network organizing the world. Doubles do exist, Sebald claimed later in interviews, not only in Kafka’s writing, but somehow across time.\textsuperscript{179} Thus, \textit{Doppelgänger}, non-causal juxtapositions and irrational relationships are sprinkled throughout his prose and are truly too numerous to mention here. These correspondences reflect, as we read in \textit{Campo Santo}, Sebald’s view of history. Here, he writes of the flow of events as driven in some barely perceptible way by forces beyond our ken:

\begin{quote}
Aber was wissen wir schon im Voraus vom Verlauf der Geschichte, der sich entwickelt nach irgendeinem, von keiner Logik zu entschlüsselnden Gesetz, bewegt und in seiner Richtung verändert oft im entscheidenden Moment von unwägbaren Winzigkeiten, durch einen kaum spürbaren Luftzug, durch ein zur Erde sinkendes Blatt oder durch einen von einem Auge zum anderen quer durch eine Menschenversammlung gehenden Blick.
\end{quote}

But what can we know in advance of the course of history, which unfolds according to some logically indecipherable law, impelled forward, often changing direction at the crucial moment, by tine, imponderable events, by a barely perceptible current of air, a leaf falling to the ground, a glance exchanged across a great crowd of people. (CS 17/13)

This “glance exchanged across a great crowd of people” is yet another part of what we have been tracing up to this point in his poetry and dramas and, now, his fiction.

Finally, we also see hints of levitation that are brought on by glimpses of another way of interacting with nature. In \textit{The Emigrants}, for example, there are momentary glimpses, for example of harmony with nature that are paired rather with moments of lightness, vertigo and the feeling of floating such as the episode in when a quail takes refuge in Cosmo’s lap (214/144). On the facing page, Ambros Adelwarth says of memory that it is a kind of dumbness that “macht einen schweren, schwindligen Kopf, als blickte man nicht zurück durch die Fluchten der Zeit, sondern aus großer Höhe auf die Erde hinab von einem jener Türme, die sich ihm Himmel

\textsuperscript{179} In conversation with Joseph Cuomo, for example, in \textit{The Emergence of Memory}, 117.
verlieren” (it makes one’s head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds, 215/145). These few examples, selected of many, many that one might mention, serve to illustrate how pervasive these themes related to Sebald’s literary restitution are. The developments in his later prose are thus fully in keeping with the redemptive strain we have been pursuing up to this point.

The Rings of Saturn

And so we turn our attention now to The Rings of Saturn, where these characteristics we have been tracing not only are present, but seem to reach a crescendo. In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald continues to bring to light the effects of the Enlightenment on humans, animals and even the inanimate world. For example, a number of critics have pointed to his memorialization of the victims of imperialism, which Mary Cosgrove, for example, connects to his critique of capitalism in her article (Fuchs and Long 102-103). What Cosgrove does not say is that Sebald’s concern with capitalism and imperialism is actually a part of his critique of domination and exploitation—the alienation from ourselves and nature—that come from practicing a particular kind of rationality. Thus, when Sebald turns his narrator’s attention to the fate of the Congolese, who had been colonized by Belgium, he notes that King Leopold’s aim had ostensibly been to “break through the darkness” (RS 144/118). Sebald also does not leave the fate of European Jews unmentioned. He specifically invokes the sites of their persecution and extermination. However, as a number of scholars have pointed out already, the Holocaust, though it haunts Sebald’s work, represents only one of many sites of historical catastrophe. This serves not to diminish or relativize its victims’ suffering, but rather to expand Sebald’s audience’s perspective on suffering. We are able to see analogous victimization, though not of the same kind, in the
deaths by starvation of 20 million Chinese peasants, the forced labor of the Congolese, the repression of Irish republicans, and the deaths of millions during the First World War.

He also turns our attention to the fates of the inanimate natural world, such as his ruminations on the fate of the English coastline, which is continually eroding out from under the town of Dunwich (186-92/155-60), the Dutch elm disease epidemic (313-14/264) and the massive felling of trees following the freakish hurricane of 1987 (315-19/265-68). But Sebald’s contemplation of the fate of Dunwich and of the windblown trees brings us to an important consideration. Are these the victims of humans or of nature itself? Can a community or edifices be said to be victims as such? There is a sense in which Sebald’s melancholy assessment of modernity has run away with itself or perhaps we have discovered a narrow soft spot in Sebald’s *Naturgeschichte* where the categories of victimhood almost lose their meaning. The herring, after all, mount up on beaches as though nature were drowning in her own fruitfulness (72/55). Is nature to blame for its own destruction? In *Campo Santo*, Sebald hints at this problematic when his narrator observes (quoting Freud) that “für das unbewußte Denken selbst der ein Gemordeter ist, der eines natürlichen Todes starb” (to the unconscious mind, even those who die a natural death are victims of murder, 35/30). But having registered these reservations, we have to take note of the expansion of victimhood as a category that is underway here.

*The Rings of Saturn* goes farther in expanding the categories of victimhood than the other texts in which we had noticed this characteristic even from Sebald’s earliest days. Here again, we see that rather than being solely concerned with crimes against humans, Sebald is deeply interested in giving voice to the victims of instrumental reason in the natural world. What we had observed in *After Nature*, for example, and *Jetzund kömmt die Nacht herbei*, expands even more in *The Rings of Saturn*. As Sara Friedrichsmeyer has pointed out, one of the “dominant

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180 Here, Sebald is quoting directly from *Totem and Taboo* (104).
motifs” in *The Rings of Saturn* is Sebald’s concern about the fate of animals, and indeed, of the many animals that appear in his works, she continues, almost all meet with grisly fates (Martin and Wintermeyer 11). In Friedrichsmeyer’s analysis, Sebald’s depiction of animal suffering touches on the central concerns of animal ethicists and constitutes part of his ongoing critique of instrumental reason, expanding the category of ethical treatment to animals as well as humans (20). This critique, as we have seen, is central to his notion of confronting systems of dominating and alienating power. Thus, what Friedrichsmeyer points out about Sebald’s concern for animal suffering confirms what I have been describing as the “messianic” character of Sebald’s work.¹⁸¹ In his effort to show the world as in need of mending and to make a step toward restitution, Sebald turns our attention to the suffering of a quail, herring, silkworms, and even (briefly) to the dubious Gadarene pigs from the New Testament (RS 86/67; cf. Matthew 8:28-32, Mark 5:1-13, Luke 8:26-33).

In the third chapter, Sebald turns our attention to the suffering of herring (68-77). The topic occurs to his narrator after he stumbles across a number of beach fishermen in the vicinity of Lowestoft. These fishermen however, rarely catch anything anymore. The fishermen cannot make a living conducting their business as fishermen have for centuries, in small launches and from the beach. They themselves are dying out, and, the narrator notes, “Niemand hat ein Interesse an ihrer Hinterlassenschaft” (no one is interested in their legacy, 69/53). Here is yet another number of those negatively affected by more modern ways, but Sebald’s attention is directed not to them as much as to the fish that have disappeared. Even out at sea, where the fishing is on an industrial scale, “die Ausbeute [wird] immer geringer” (the catches are growing

¹⁸¹ Friedrichsmeyer’s essay thoroughly elucidates the prevalence and significance of the herring and silk motifs and makes the connection between Sebald’s invocation of animal suffering and his critique of instrumental reason unmistakable. What I wish to add to her analysis here is the manner in which these motifs contributes to the understanding of Sebald’s work as a quasi-messianic, restitutionary literature, which Friedrichsmeyer does not address.
smaller, 69/53). The connotation of this phrase is clear; the orthographical relationship of *Ausbeute* (here: catch) to *Ausbeutung*, (exploitation) has unavoidable implications. The fishermen’s abusive domination of nature is affecting not only the herring, but themselves as well. However, the fish are dying, as it turns out, not only because of overfishing, but because of the confluence of a host of aftereffects of industrialization. They are being poisoned by fertilizers, pesticides, mercury and cadmium, which causes congenital defects, according to the narrator, in a third of the fish (69-70/53). The herring, he continues, had been a favorite example of the bounty of nature, and their capture a scene in the perennial battle for supremacy between humans and nature (70/54). And in a stunning turn of phrase, Sebald observes that, after their capture, landing, gutting, sorting and packing, “nehmen die Güterwagen der Eisenbahn…den ruhelosen Wanderer des Meeres auf, um ihn an die Stätten zu bringen, wo sich sein Schicksal auf dieser Erde endgültig erfüllen wird” (the railway goods wagons take in this restless wanderer of the seas and transport it to those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled, 71/54). These words, taken, as Sebald notes, from the booklet accompanying a 1936 film about the industry, reverberate with broader connotations. Friedrichsmeyer points out that the suggestion of a link between the North Sea herring and the victims of the Holocaust is “möglicherweise zu undifferenziert” (possibly too undifferentiated, 18), but it bears contemplation that Sebald, who was ever careful about his wording, could not possibly have been unaware of the connection readers would make when he speaks of restless wanderers who were transported in “Güterwagen” to a ghastly fate. It is a connection that he even draws visually. Immediately following his contemplation of the herring, he interrupts his text with a two-page photo taken near the Bergen Belsen extermination camp (77-78/60-61). The similarity to a previously appearing image of herring piled up in a warehouse in Lowestoft (71/54), heightened by the
proximity of the two, is striking and provocative. Perhaps it is for that reason that Sebald, in considering the complex physiology of herring, also muses on the grisly, pseudo-scientific experiments that were conducted on the fish in the (74-77/56-59). Here, the connection between the interests of “science” and the destruction of its object of investigation becomes explicit. Speaking of the vivisections conducted by a certain Noel de Marinière in Rouen, Sebald’s narrator exclaims that “Eine solche, von unserem Wissensdrang inspirierte Prozedur ist sozusagen die äußerste Zuspitzung der Leidensgeschichte einer ständig von Katastrophen bedrohten Art” (this process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster, 74/57).

These extreme sufferings only increase, he seems to assert, as the process of technological development accelerates. Whereas the fishermen on the beach near Lowestoft might have once caught herring with individual lines or small nets, industrial fishing utilizes gillnets “aus grober persischer Seide” (of coarse Persian silk, 73/56).

It is no accident that the fate of herring and silk are connected in this way. As it turns out, perhaps the most thoroughly woven of the topical threads in The Rings of Saturn is the theme of silk, silkworms and the silk industry. These terms appear in every chapter of the book and, as Friedrichsmeyer observes, lends an aesthetic unity to the text (Martin and Wintermeyer 20), though, as Sebald himself avers, its meaning requires some thought. At the end of the first chapter, commenting on Thomas Browne’s search for the kind of immortality he observed in (silk)worm metamorphosis, he asks “Das purpursfarbene Fetzchen Seide aus der Urne des Petrokolus, von dem er berichtet, was also bedeutet es wohl?” (that purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus – what does it mean? 39/26). Judith Ryan has recently

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182 Daniel Lash’s diagram of the thematic structure in Rings of Saturn provides an excellent visual reference for the thoroughness with which all things silken are woven throughout the text (Patt and Dillbohner 445, fig. 98).
interpreted silk as “a metaphor for the travelling structure” of the book, and points to the similarity between its seemingly disorganized collection of elective affinities and the initial stages of a silkworm’s cocoon (Fischer, “Schreiben” 56). Though Ryan’s interpretation is nuanced, I rather tend to agree with Friedrichsmeyer’s reading, which pairs the theme with the herring episode as an extended contemplation of the aftereffects of instrumental reason on animals and humans. This central thread begins in Sebald’s discussion of Thomas Browne, whose father was a silk dealer (21/11) and crescendos in the final chapter, where he explicates the development of the silk industry in Europe, especially in Germany, where it is rationalized to a destructive, “despotischen” degree during the Enlightenment (340/287), eventually capturing the imagination of the Nazi agricultural bureaucracy (344-45/291) in the last chapter. Between these stages Sebald traces the development of sericulture from its humble beginnings in agrarian China through the stages of technological advancement until it, as an industrialized process reveals itself as a “Tötungsgeschäft” (killing business, 348/294). Friedrichsmeyer also observes that his vocabulary “macht es unmöglich, diese Tierausbeutung nicht in Bezug auf den Barbarismus der Nazizeit zu sehen” (23), by which she implies that here, as with the herring, Sebald intentionally draws a connection between the utmost human suffering and that of the animals.

Throughout the book, however, silk gains additional layers of significance. Throughout history, silk, especially dark silk, has been a symbol of mourning. In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald makes it clear that this mourning is over our shared calamitous history, as he notes in the closing words of the book, where he also reports Thomas Browne’s supposed remarks that in Holland superstition dictates that silk be draped over mirrors and inviting images in home where
someone had died so that the departing soul not be interrupted in its flight.\textsuperscript{183} And this symbolism runs parallel to the theme of exploitation mentioned above. Earlier in the book, for example, Major George Wyndham Le Strange wears a faded taffeta mourning robe (82/64) and young Joseph Conrad’s family wears black silk as he and his mother join his father in Siberian exile (129/106). The Ashbury sisters weave shreds of silk into beautiful dresses which they then destroy in an act expressing the futility and sadness of their lonely existence (253/212). Silk also becomes thematically bound to the death of other creatures. As mentioned above, the herring strangle slowly in gillnets of Persian silk. Later in the text, a quasi-messianic Chinese rebel, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan, lies rotting in silken robes (170/141). His remaining Chinese conspirators are hanged with silken nooses as a form of “merciful” execution (178/148), as is one of the ancestors of Lord Ferrers in eighteenth-century England (311/262). Silk also gradually becomes a cipher for imperialism. Not only is it among the prizes sought by looters in the Old Summer Palace after the fall of Peking to the British in the Second Opium War (174/145), but colorful silken bows adorn a gaudy Belgian hotel (150/123), in which Sebald stays while visiting Brussels, from whence the vast expanse of the Congo was ruled.

The silken adornments of imperial Belgian bad taste and its implications about the systematic abuse of animals and humans lead us to consider the ways in which \textit{The Rings of Saturn} seeks to confront and reverse dominating power structures, since, as we have seen elsewhere in this study, imperialism represented for Sebald one of the systems of power against which he wished to aim his literary work. Another target of his ire is the apparently seamless reintegration of former Nazis into society, a subject he touches on when contemplating the career of former United Nations Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim (122-23/98-99). As Richard

\hfill \textsuperscript{183} RS 350/296. As Judith Ryan has recently reminded, the volume from which Sebald claims to have taken these remarks, Thomas Browne’s \textit{Pseudodoxia Epidemica}, is a “collection of common errors and mistaken beliefs,” a fact which too many scholars ignore in interpreting the passage (58).
Sheppard has pointed out, Sebald was deeply affected during his university days by the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (Woods, Trees 87). That trial’s significance to Sebald’s generation is hard to overstate, particularly in bringing about awareness of the ways in which former perpetrators and their Mitläufer had reentered society. Sebald’s sidelong excoriation of the heights to which Waldheim was able to climb after the war, especially given the latter’s experiences in Croatia, which Sebald ironically terms “verdienstvoll[e] Schreibarbeiten” (commendable paperwork, 122/99) also brings us in touch with his perennial complaint against the Catholic church, which here, as elsewhere, represents a system of power interested in the expansion of its own domination. He remarks, for example, that the Croatian Ustasha committed their unspeakable crimes in the various World War Two Yugoslavian prison camps “im Rücken gestärkt von der Wehrmacht und in der Seele von der katholischen Kirche” (its hand strengthened by the Wehrmacht and its spirit by the Catholic church, 121/97).

Given the persistence of certain themes throughout the work, such as the theme of silk, for example, which indicate how highly systematic The Rings of Saturn is, it is astonishing that the work retains a compellingly aleatory feeling. Part of what gives it this flavor is the consistent motif of unexpected interconnectedness that emerges in the narrative. Sebald’s narrative moves seem to flow from their own unique logic, which is substantiated from time to time with a surprising coincidence that turns out to have been the point of the excursion all along. A good example that springs to mind is that of Thomas Browne’s assumed presence at Dr. Nicolaas Tulp’s 1632 dissection of a recently executed criminal, Aris Kindt, in Amsterdam (22-27/12-17). Browne studied medicine in Leiden at the time and was fascinated by the body, and so, Sebald supposes, he would have attended this public dissection. Sebald admits freely that his evidence

184 This is a frequently observed tactic in Rings of Saturn. See, for example, the previously mentioned essay by Sara Friedrichsmeyer (2006) as well as Peter Pfeiffer (2003).
for this idea is thin, but “obzwar nirgends eindeutig belegt, ist es mehr als wahrscheinlich, daß Browne die Ankündigung dieser Prosektur nicht entgangen war und daß er dem spektakulären, von Rembrandt in seiner Porträtierung der Chirurgengilde festgehaltenen Ereignis beigewohnt hat...” (Although we have no definite evidence for this, it is probable that Browne would have heard of the dissection and was present at the extraordinary event, which Rembrandt depicted in his painting of the Guild of Surgeons [...] 22/12). Whether or not Browne was there, Sebald treats him as though he were, even speculating on what he might have experienced there. He even gives the source from which he extrapolates Browne’s presence—the Englishman had compared a fog over England and Holland to the vapor rising from a freshly opened corpse (27-28/17). These are not unwarranted speculations, but Sebald is importantly *not* making a connection that explains anything causally. He is merely running with an assumption based on coincidence and proximity. This is anathema to the kind of scientism that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* diagnoses, because there is nothing provable (nor deniable, for that matter) about Sebald’s construction, and so, like all other subjective constructions, it is of little value to the scientific mind.

Another example presents itself as Sebald unfolds the (again, non-causally paired) stories of Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement in chapter 5. He mentions, ‘in passing’ one might say, that Kafka’s uncle, Joseph Loewy, had earlier boarded a Belgian ship bound for Africa (147/121). Sebald seems to throw this character into the narrative. It feels exceedingly arbitrary. Now, one could puzzle endlessly over (or conduct exhaustive research seeking) what would motivate Sebald to note Joseph Loewy’s presence on a ship headed for the Congo. At any rate, this seems like an odd move, since he mentions above on the same page Korzeniowski’s (Conrad’s) feeling that he had burdened himself with guilt through his mere presence in the
Congo; Kafka is one of Sebald’s favorite characters in German literature. This is one of the appealing interpretive challenges in Sebald’s writing. He invites questions. But I believe he is up to something more fundamental here. It does not matter in the end why Sebald has placed these only tangentially related details in juxtaposition. What matters is that Sebald himself does not tell us why. He is not in the business of constructing a new totality to replace the broken systems of idealism. He is not proposing a thesis, but rather revealing a personal, ultimately indefinable, but for him as the author somehow comforting process of weaving together narrative threads (perhaps powered by association) in search of meaning.

Of course, some of these correspondences are invented from whole cloth. To name just one example, the lives of the Chinese Empress Tz’u-hsi and Charles Algernon Swinburne, which Sebald considers in Chapter 6, were not, actually, have “coterminous to the year” as he claims (194/161). Swinburne was born two years after and died one year after the Empress. Also, some of the coincidences Sebald catalogues are inconsequential even within the narrative. The idea that Kafka’s uncle, Joseph Loewy, was heading to the Congo just as Conrad was departing in 1891 (147/121), does not seem to lead anywhere except perhaps as an excuse for making an intertextual connection to Kafka, whose In the Penal Colony seems to have been influenced by Loewy’s experiences (Robertson 88). But the very insubstantiability of these manufactured correspondences is part of the point.

The clearest expression of what Sebald is up to comes in chapter 7 of Rings of Saturn where the narrator contemplates his own process of writing which threatens to spin out of his control as it grows ever more complex. He poses a question on the consequence of coincidence (which strict rationality would deny; coincidence is inconsequential since, by definition, it
merely happens alongside another happening and does not involve causality). Nevertheless, a specific coincidence seems particularly meaningful to Sebald’s narrator:

    Begleitet einen der Schatten Hölderlins ein Leben lang, weil man zwei Tage nach ihm Geburtstag hat? Ist man deshalb immer wieder versucht, die Vernunft abzulegen wie einen alten Mantel, Briefe und Gedichte unterthänigst zu zeichnen als Scardanelli und die unliebsamen Gäste, die einen anschauen kommen, sich mit Anreden wie Euer Hoheit und Majestät vom Leib zu halten?

    Does one follow in Hölderlin’s footsteps, simply because one’s birthday happened to fall two days after his? Is that why one is tempted time and again to cast reason aside like an old coat, to sign one’s poems and letters “your humble servant Scardanelli”, and to keep unwelcome guests who come to stare at one at arm’s length by addressing them as Your Excellency or Majesty? (217/182)

He continues to muse on the coincidence of Hölderlin’s and his birthdays asking, “Über was für Zeiträume hinweg verlaufen die Wahlverwandtschaften und Korrespondenzen?” (Across what distances in time to the elective affinities and correspondences connect? 217/182). Sebald is contemplating the possibility that the coincidence of his birth, which we all take for granted, may not be separate from all the other births around that date. There might just be another way of looking at the world that takes into account threads of interconnectedness, which bind us to other creatures across time and space and render them fellow creatures rather than Others.

    And Sebald makes it clear that the search for correspondences that explain a basic structure of our world can lead to moments of levitation. In the opening chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald contemplates Thomas Browne’s “Quincunx,” which represents an imperfect attempt to detect the basic structures that unify life despite its seeming disconnectedness. Fascinatingly, this attempt at structure appears in work that itself seems to levitate. Browne’s work, Sebald writes, is often gravitationally overburdened, but “wenn er, mitsamt seiner Fracht, auf den Kreisen seiner Prosa höher und höher getragen wird wie ein Segler auf den warmen Strömungen der Luft, dann ergreift selbst den heutigen Leser noch ein Gefühl der Levitation”
(when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiraling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation, 30/19). This points clearly to the link between the process of collecting correspondences and catching glimpses of the ephemeral better world which retreats before the messianic figure. It is the queasy, vertiginous sensation he describes after realizing that both he and Michael Hamburger had met the same individual, Stanley Kerry, twenty years apart when they were both 22 years old:

Das Körpergefühl, das ich am ehesten mit dem manchmal sehr lange anhaltenden, äußerst befremdlichen Zustand vergleichen läßt, ist das einer durch einen schweren Blutverlust hervorgerufenen Benommenheit, die sich ausweiten kann zu einer momentanen Lähmung des Denkvermögens, der Sprechorgane und der Glieder, wie sie einer empfinden mag, der, ohne es zu wissen, gerade von einem Schlag gestreift worden ist.

The physical sensation closest to this feeling of repetition, which sometimes last for several minutes and can be quite disconcerting, is that of the peculiar numbness brought on by a heavy loss of blood, often resulting in a temporary inability to think, to speak, or to move one’s limbs, as though, without being aware of it, one had suffered a stroke. (224/187)

Levitation, and the vertigo it causes, are symptoms of having made an unexpected connection, of having discovered by chance a part of the fabric of the universe that eludes our rational sense. Thus, at the close of chapter 7, shortly after the above remarks, the narrator relates the dream of floating through the forest Anne has had (226-28/189-90). The sense of “Schweben…als ich ein paar Zoll über der Erde mich fortbewegen konnte” (floating…when I was able to hover a few inches above the ground, 227/190) that Anne reports

Perhaps the most interesting example of this levitation in Sebald’s oeuvre did not, unfortunately, actually appear in print. In the Reinschrift of The Rings of Saturn, there is a fascinating episode that would have otherwise appeared in Chapter 7, but for an unexplained
reason was elided from the book’s final version. In this almost final manuscript, which represents the only extant intermediary version between the printed book and its genesis, Sebald related an encounter with a character that quite literally seems to float about the ground. In Chapter 7, as it appeared in the final version, the narrator loses his way in the warren-like heath and is surrounded by flies. The print version resolves this situation so:


I cannot say how long I walked about in that state of mind, or how I found a way out. But I do remember that suddenly I stood on a country lane, beneath a mighty oak […]. (205/172)

In the Reinschrift, on the other hand, the passage reads thus:

Ich weiß nicht, wie lange ich auf der Heide von Dunwich herumgeirrt bin; es mögen zwei Stunden gewesen sein, aber mir war es wie eine Ewigkeit. Gerettet wurde ich schließlich von einem Geländeläufer oder Jogger, der mich zu meiner großen Erleichterung in einer langen Kurve einholte. Do you have any idea how to get out of here, rief ich ihm so unbekümmert wie möglich zu, worauf er sehr elegant seine Schritte verlangsamt & erwiderte: Sure, the heath ends just over there, round three or four more corners. I’ll walk the rest of the way with you, if you don’t mind. Erst jetzt musterte ich den Jogger, den ersten Menschen, dem ich auf dieser Heide bisher begegnet war, etwas genauer. Er mochte um die vierzigern, hatte lockiges, brandrotes Haar &, vielleicht vom vielen Laufen, eine auffallend fliehende Stirn. Außer einem weißen T-Shirt mit der kategorischen Aufschrift GET AIRBORNE trug er eine weitgeschnittene, gleichfalls weiße Hose aus einem seidigen Stoff, die ihm bis knapp unter die Knie reichten. These are running pantaloons. They keep the flies off, war seine Antwort auf den Ausdruck der Verwunderung, den seine Erscheinung offenbar auf meinem Gesicht hervorgerufen hatte. And these are my state of the art self-propelled running shoes, setzte er noch hinzu, indem kurz stehenblieb & auf seine Fußspitzen hinunterblickte. Schon aber schaute er mir wieder in die Augen & sagte: Dorfman, Ariel Dorfman, Columbus, Ohio. Dann erzählte er mir, daß er derzeit als Chief Steward arbeite für Virgin Atlantic. I have always worked for airlines, sagte er, because running is my sole passion in life. Even in second grade in High School I was obsessed with running & since then I have left my tracks almost everywhere. On the Pacific shore & the high roads of Mexico, in the Australian bush & in the parles of Buenos Aires, in Kenya & in the English

185 There is no indication from an editor that this passage should be changed or removed, so presumably the elision was Sebald’s choice.
countryside, in Helsinki & in the Himalayas. Nothing matters to me except leaving tracks that no one can see. I just close my eyes & imagine a place somewhere on the map of the world. And then I fly and drive to whereever [sic] it is, usually more or less for free as an airline employee, & start running. I have no idea how many hundreds of thousands of miles I have already clocked up. Anyway, we are here now. This is the exit from the maze. Over there is the road you were looking for. I think I will run round the heath one more time. Nice meeting you. Und damit lief er auch schon davon, mit einer Leichtigkeit, als berührte er [elision] kaum den Boden.

The version that eventually made it into print is significantly gloomier and in this regard, Alan Bennett’s comments about Sebald seeming to “stage manage both the landscape and weather to suit his (seldom cheerful) mood” seems right on the money (Bennett 308-09). The characteristics of this jogger, who saves the narrator from his lostness, are almost too obviously light and other-worldly: he wears winged shoes; his T-shirt loudly adjures “Get Airborne;” his name is either a reference to the so-named angelic beings Milton’s Paradise Lost, or Shakespeare’s Tempest, (or both); he flies for a living; he leaves “tracks that no one can see;” he seems to the narrator to barely touch the ground. Ben Hutchinson speculates in the final chapter of his study of Sebald’s dialektische Imagination that such episodes of levitation may represent “idyllische Momente, Schlupflöcher, in die der Melancholiker sich retten kann” (146). But we can go one further. Hutchinson’s “idyllic moments and loopholes” are part not only of Sebald’s attempt to rescue his melancholic narrator, but to point to another possible way of organizing our existence in the universe. They are an essential part of the messianic practice of mending the world, if but for a moment.

Reflections

Thus far, we have been tracing four motifs that make up the core of Sebald’s messianism, however, in closing it seems appropriate to address the presence of specific figures throughout Sebald’s work that seem particularly messianic in themselves. Not only do they often bear those
characteristics of the Messiah according to the Jewish tradition, to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, (namely, inevitable failure, wandering, weariness, death, and so on,) but they also embody the sense of sent-ness, of calling, that describes the basic meaning of the word Messiah: the “anointed one” who is set apart for a mission. Most importantly, these individuals to whom Sebald gives special attention fight back against the injustice and brokenness of the world. I am thinking here, for example, of Paul Bereyter, for example, whose eventual conviction that he belonged to the exiles and not to the people of S. echoes Sebald’s description of the Messiah as archetypal exile (UH 92/Law 47) who identifies with the oppressed (Gedanken 282), who is a martyr of the state (Thema 426), and for whom the only resolution lay through death (Undiscover’d 31). In the same way that there was precious little to recommend Kafka’s land surveyor, K, as the Messiah—little more than a single Hebrew vowel that got Sebald to thinking (UH 93)—so there is little about Paul that seems outwardly messianic. And yet this character exudes the same ecstasy and melancholia, alternately breaking into song and becoming “die Untröstlichkeit selber” (desolation itself, AG 62/E 42), and the same fate as the figure Sebald had discovered in the Jewish messianic tradition. And his impact on the narrator is revolutionary and lasting. Similarly unlikely candidates who nevertheless seem to take the mending of the world seriously are Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad, who take the part of the Congolese and the Irish, Stanley Kerry, who seems to come “gliding down from on high” (RS 223/187), and even Algernon Charles Swinburne had access to power as the scion of a wealthy family, but who, in Sebald’s version of events, dedicated himself to literary “self-destruction” (RS 196/163). To this list, one might add the reverse image, which is to say, figures who in attempting to dispel darkness, only made it deeper. The Belgian King Leopold strikes me as a

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186 Hutchinson reads these figures not only as Sebald’s critique of colonialism and progress, but also as part of his “lebenslange Analyse der Bedingungen des Schreibens” (life-long analysis of the conditions of writing, Die dialectische Imagination, 144).
particularly misbegotten messianic figure, in that he claimed to be intent on piercing the darkness of the Congo (RS 144/118), only to conspicuously bring about the victimization of its population. Thomas Browne might also fit into this category of reverse-images of the Messiah, since he, as a representative of the Enlightenment drive to catalogue and dissect the world, plays for the other team, so to speak. Like the figure of Steller from *After Nature*, Browne contributes to the entropic spread of instrumental reason rather than resisting it.

And to this list of figures who bear the marks of being sent, of having a particular mission to fight back against the structures of dominating power, of being forlornly hopeful we might at this point also add Sebald the writer, who, as this study has argued, took it upon himself to compose a literature of restitution. Aware of the hopelessness of this mission, Sebald had no illusions that his work could craft a better world that would hold. But in his writing he hoped, I believe this dissertation has shown, to be able to point to the ongoing annihilation of ourselves and nature and, perhaps, “den allgemeinen Prozeß der Dissoziation zeit- und stellenweise aufhalten zu können” (to halt, temporarily and in places, the general process of dissociation, Tiere 198).
Conclusion

It has proven quite difficult for scholars to pin down what exactly W.G. Sebald’s work is “about,” which is not to say that no one has tried just that. Generalizations and hasty summaries are at least as common as truly insightful overviews. In an excellent example of the latter, Jonathan Long has recently claimed that, though there are general categories into which the ever-multiplying articles and monographs can be organized, these sites of investigation are really circling around the problem of modernity itself (Image, 1-2). And I am inclined to agree with him for the reasons I have been pursuing in this study. As Chapter 1 of this dissertation sought to demonstrate, Sebald adopted the critique of modernity proposed by leading lights of the Frankfurt School, (Long makes a compelling case for Foucault, too, 13-18), and determined that something had gone terribly wrong in the modern condition. Long, and a number of others, have argued that the characteristics of Sebald’s literary work are strategies to analyze, comment on, or perhaps deal with this condition. Thus, the argument often goes, Sebald mobilizes certain tropes; invokes particular figures from history; alludes to or even appropriates works of art, literature and historiography; and interrupts his text with images.

But, why is this so? What is usually missing in many scholarly approaches to Sebald is an explanation of what is at work, which is to say, what all these mobilizations, invocations, allusions, appropriations and interpolations actually do. What is their function? Long’s monograph, for one, pursues an answer of sorts. After devoting the first half of his book to registering the theme of the archive in all its variations throughout Sebald’s work, he turns in the second half to parsing the narratological function of this theme, which he believes “offer[s] possibilities for resisting modernity’s disciplinary imperatives” (19). And it is this aspect of resistance—of conducting a guerilla war for a hopeless cause against modernity—that I have
been tracing in this dissertation. What is interesting about our collective disagreement, (or diversity of opinion,) as readers of Sebald’s work is that Sebald himself was in no confusion about the potential—one might even say: the duty—of literature. In my second chapter, I made the case that Sebald had adopted the thesis that aesthetic concerns and ethical concerns were bound together. Thus, aesthetic choices had ethical ramifications. It was the measure by which he judged other authors and, judging by his comments in interviews, his Zurich lectures, and his speech at the Literaturhaus in Stuttgart, it was the standard to which he understood his own work would be held. Thus, my argument has sought to derive from the function of Sebald’s literary maneuvers—the ways in which they arouse irritation at the condition of modernity—a corresponding intention that I believe lay behind them. That intention, I maintain, is to craft a kind of literature that leaves its reader more aware of the state of affairs and the need for a mending than was possible in other forms of literature.

So, is Sebald’s work in any useful way related to Jewish messianic traditions? Does this intentionality I derive from how his works function, as I have repeatedly asserted, represent a quasi-messianic mission? Andreas Huyssen, in his 2003 monograph, Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, disputes Sebald’s notion of a “natural history of destruction,” finding that, whereas Benjamin’s vision of the angel of history was ostensibly offset by an inherent “messianic dimension,” such a dimension is lacking in Sebald (155). Huyssen’s comments, though they appear to disrupt my assertion about the messianic character of Sebald’s work, actually hit on something that is quite important to it. What is messianic about Sebald’s work has very little to do with the real traditions of Judaism—even less to do with orthodox views of Christ—but rather with Sebald’s perception of these. Thus, it does not readily appear messianic unless we take into account the way in which Sebald understood (or perhaps
misunderstood) the messianic traditions, which I explicited at the outset of this study. It is true, as Huyssen points out, that in Sebald’s stubbornly dark work “not only is there no new beginning, but there does not seem to be a future” (156). This is due, in my estimation, to an impossibility that Sebald confronted. Having diagnosed the cause of modernity’s ills to be the fusion of truth claims and power, he could not avow a new totality. And his understanding of the Jewish tradition afforded him a model of messianic longing which did not necessarily have to end well in order to be useful—the Jewish Messiah could fail and remain a Messiah.

Sebald’s works, then, prove to be not only an archive of seemingly disparate histories strung together by Sebald’s elective affinities, but also a representation of his attempt—impeded by his own distaste for totality—to mend the world by retrieving the spectral voices of victims (and their advocates) from the dust of history and allowing them to speak through his narrator’s experiences (both real and imagined). What readers perceive as melancholia is thus the result of forlorn hopefulness in this impossible yet necessary utopia.

This quality of melancholia aimed at restitution has interesting consequences for Sebald’s readers. A good friend of mine recently confided in me that she could not stand reading Sebald, “even though” she continued, “I know it’s supposed to be good for me.” The narratives seemed contrived in their interrelatedness, the implications too dark. “I just don’t go in for that,” was her final, damning assessment. And yet this friend of mine turns out to be in the minority. As I mentioned at the outset of this study, Sebald’s reputation is only continuing to grow, which leads to an important question posed by Markus Zisselsberger in a recent review essay. “Why,” he asks, “are we so fascinated with Sebald’s writing” and:

with his pursuit of the traces of individual life-stories and his melancholy meanderings into the landscapes of twentieth-century European cultural history? Why are we so attracted to the work of a particular literary imagination at a time when the relevance of literature continues to be contested? To what particular
sensibility of the twenty-first-century reader does the work of this storyteller appeal? (Persistent Fascination 89-90)

Sebald, he notes, was certainly neither the first, nor the only German writer to address the themes he does in a form that pushed the boundaries of genre (89). Determining a complete answer to this question is surely beyond the scope of the work I set out for myself in this dissertation and perhaps even that of several books—Zisselsberger reviews three that make an attempt—since it would involve an almost infinitely layered and erudite explication of the many different forces at work in Sebald’s many-layered and multi-valent texts, some of which have yet to appear in print. And yet I believe that in the preceding pages a kind of half-way sufficient answer has emerged. Sebald remains compelling, at least in part, for two reasons.

First, the central issue that spurred him to write can only remain relevant in a world that continues to experience the ripples of enlightenment thinking. If we accept the thesis proposed in this study’s first chapter, namely, that Sebald was moved to write by his sense that the world had been broken by instrumental reason, his resulting literary engagement cannot lose its significance until the process reverses itself. That was a prospect Sebald considered hopeless, thus his work promises to continue to speak to us.

Second, Sebald’s literary response—his manner of dealing with this state of affairs—was by nature recursive and open-ended. If we further accept the thesis that his writing constituted an attempt at restitution (which was Sebald’s assertion), and that this grew out of his intense study of Jewish messianic traditions, which pointed him toward both the insufficiency and necessity of making amends for history’s crimes, then his work could never close off in fulfillment. Sebald’s work was, in this sense, anything but Christological; nevertheless, it was intensely messianic. Appropriately then, our response to the open-endedness of his work only increases. We find new ways to appreciate its complexities. We find new ways to be
productively troubled by its implications. The growth of the “Sebald-industrial-complex,” as Neil Christian Pages puts it, (especially as it continues to expand into ecocritical analysis) is a forlornly-hopeful sign and—if one may be permitted an egregious generalization—exactly the point of Sebald’s literary project.
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Appendix


The markings in this volume are predominantly in red marker or pencil, though there are two markings in black ink (on the inside cover and on p.172). There is no date of acquisition indicated in the volume, but Sheppard believes that Sebald acquired it shortly after its publication in 1969 between leaving his lecturing duties in Manchester and taking up his post at UEA (Sheppard, “Dexter—Sinister,” 422, footnote 6). The markings follow Sebald’s typical annotation scheme and are recorded as follows: passages are bracketed [b], underscored [u], set off with vertical strokes in the margin [s] or virgules [virgule], and include left-margin [lm] or right-margin [rm] notes in red marker or pencil.

There is only one dog-eared page (p.205) in the volume.

On the front inside cover in black ink an inscription: “Sebald”

*Vorrede*

1. p.1-2—[b, u] in red marker and [s,s] in pencil (here bold) around, next to, and in the passage: “*[Wenn die Öffentlichkeit einen Zustand erreicht hat, in dem unentrinnbar der Gedanke zu Ware und die Sprache zu deren Anpreisung wird, so muß der Versuch, solcher Depravation auf die Spur zu kommen, den geltenden sprachlichen und gedanklichen Anforderungen Gefolgschaft versagen, ehe deren welthistorische Konsequenzen ihn vollends vereiteln.]*” Below initial sentence [note] in pencil: “oder die Natur”

2. p.2—[b, u] in red marker around sentence: “*[Die Metamorphosen von Kritik in Affirmation lassen auch den theoretischen Gehalt nicht unberührt, seine Wahrheit verflüchtigt sich.]*”

3. p.3—[b, u] in red marker around the sentence: “*[Wie Prohibition seit je dem giftigeren Produkt Eingang verschaffte, arbeitete die Absperrung der theoretischen Einbildungskraft dem politischen Wahne vor.]*”

4. p.4—[b, u] in red marker around the passage: “*[Es gehört zum heillosen Zustand, daß auch der ehrlichste Reformer, der in abgegriffener Sprache die Neuerung empfiehlt, durch Übernahme des eingeschliffenen Kategorienapparats und der dahinter stehenden schlechten Philosophie die Macht des Bestehenden verstärkt, die er brechen möchte.]*”

5. p.5—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “*[Nicht um die Konservierung der Vergangenheit, sondern um die Einlösung der vergangenen Hoffnung ist es zu tun.]*”

6. p.7—[u] in pencil of the date of Vorrede: “Mai 1944” (underlined two or three times.)

*Begriff der Aufklärung*
7. p.12—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Aufklärung ist totalitär.]”

8. p.15—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Das Erwachen des Subjekts wird erkauft durch die Anerkennung der Macht als des Prinzips aller Beziehung.]”

9. p.16—[b] in red marker around the phrase: “Was dem Speer des Feindes, seinem Haar, seinem Namen geschieht, werde zugleich der Person angetan, [anstelle des Gottes wird das Opftertier massakriert. Die Substitution beim Opfer bezeichnet einen Schritt zur diskursiven Logik hin.]”

10. p.17-18—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Das Prinzip der schicksalhaften Notwendigkeit, an der die Helden des Mythos zugrunde gehen, und die sich als logische Konsequenz aus dem Orakelspruch herausspinnt, herrscht nicht bloß, zur Stringenz formaler Logik geläutert, in jedem rationalistischen System der abendländischen / Philosophie, sondern waltet selbst über der Folge der Systeme, die mit der Göttcherarchie beginnt und in permanenter Götzendämmerung den Zorn gegen mangelnde Rechtschaffenheit als den identischen Inhalt tradiert. wie die Mythen schon Aufklärung vollziehen, so verstrickt Aufklärung mit jedem ihrer Schritte tiefer sich in Mythologie.]”

11. p.18—[b, u] in red marker around and in the phrase: “Die trockene Weisheit, die nichts Neues unter der Sonne gelten läßt, weil die Steine des sinnlosen Spiels ausgespielt, die großen Gedanken alle schon gedacht, die möglichen Entdeckungen vorweg konstruierbar, die Menschen auf Selbsterhaltung durch Anpassung festgelegt seien-diese trockene Weisheit reproduziert bloß die phantastische, die sie verwirft; [die Sanktion des Schicksals, das durch Vergeltung unablängig wieder herstellt, was je schon was.]” Also [lm note] in red marker: “vgl Grosse Society Resolutio[n]”

12. p.19—[b] in red marker and [s] in pencil (here bold) around and next to the passage: “[Jeder Versuch, den Naturzwang zu brechen, indem Natur gebrochen wird, gerät nur um so tiefer in den Naturzwang hinein. So ist die Bahn der europäischen Zivilisation verlaufen.]”


14. p.23—[b, u] in red marker and [s] in pencil (here bold) around and in the passage: “[Der Schritt vom Chaos zur Zivilisation, in der die natürlichen Verhältnisse nicht mehr unmittelbar sondern durch das Bewußtsein der Menschen hindurch ihre Macht ausüben, hat
im Prinzip der Gleichheit nichts geändert. **Ja die Menschen büßten gerade diesen Schritt mit der Anbetung dessen, dem sie vorher bloß wie alle anderen Kreaturen unterworfen waren.**

15. p.24—[b, u] in red marker around and in sentence: “[Mit fortschreitender Aufklärung haben es nur die authentischen Kunstwerke vermocht, der bloßen Imitation dessen, was ohnehin schon ist, sich zu entziehen.]”

16. p.24—[u] in red marker, then [b] in red marker in the passage: “Die Kunst der integralen Abbildlichkeit aber verschrieb sich bis in ihre Techniken der positivistischen Wissenschaft. [Sie wird in der Tat zur Welt noch einmal, zur ideologischen Verdoppelung, zur fügsamen Reproduktion.]”

17. p.26-[u, b] in red marker in the passage: “Indem der Glaube unweigerlich als Feind oder Freund ans Wissen gefesselt bleibt, perpetuiert er die Trennung im Kampf, sie zu überwinden: [sein Fanatismus ist das Mal seiner Unwahrheit, das objektive Zugeständnis, daß, wer nur glaubt, eben damit nicht mehr glaubt. Das schlechte Gewissen ist seine zweite Natur.]”


19. p.30—[s] in red marker in left margin next to the phrase (here bold): “Die Selbstzufriedenheit des Vorwegbescheidwissens und die Verklärung der Negativität zur Erlösung sind unwahre Formen des Widerstands gegen den Betrug.”

20. p.38-41—[b] around the extended passage introducing the illustration from Homer’s Odyssey: “[In einer homerischen Erzählung ist die Verschlingung von Mythos, Herrschaft und Arbeit aufbewahrt […] Maßnahmen, wie sie auf dem Schiff des Odysseus im Angesicht der Sirenen durchgeführt werden, sind die ahnungsvolle Allegorie der Dialektik der Aufklärung.]”

21. p.40—[lm] in red marker note in top left margin: “Regressio[n]”

22. p.41—[u] in red marker in the sentence: “[Wie Vertretbarkeit das Maß von Herrschaft ist und jener der Mächtigste, der sich in den meisten Verrichtungen vertreten lassen kann, so ist Vertretbarkeit das Vehikel des Fortschritts und zugleich der Regression.]”

23. p.42—[opening b, b, u] in red marker in center of page before the sentence: “[Demgegenüber involviert Anpassung an die Macht des Fortschritts den Fortschritt der Macht, jedes Mal aufs neue jene Rückbildungen, die nicht den mißlungenen sondern gerade den gelungenen
Fortschritt seines eigenen Gegenteils überführen. [Der Fluch des unaufhaltsamen Fortschritts ist die unaufhaltsame Regression.]”


**Exkurs I: Odysseus oder Mythos und Aufklärung**

26. p.52—[b, u] in red marker around and in passage: “[Im Dienste der repressiven Ideologie hält etwa Rudolf Borchardt, der bedeutendste und darum ohnmächtigste unter den Esoterikern der deutschen Schwerindustrie, mit der Analyse allzu früh inne. Er sieht nicht, daß die gepriesenen Ursprungs- mächte selbst bereits eine Stufe von Aufklärung darstellen. Indem er allzu umstandslos das Epos als Roman denunziert, entgeht ihm, was Epos und Mythos in der Tat gemein haben: Herrschaft und Ausbeutung. Das Unedle, daß er am Epos verdammt, Vermittlung und Zirkulation, ist nur die Entfaltung jenes fragwürdig Edlen, das er am Mythos vergöttert, der nackten Gewalt. Der vorgeblichen Echtheit, dem archaischen Prinzip von Blut und Opfer, haftet schon etwas vom schlechten Gewissen und der Schläuheit der Herrschaft an, die der nationalen Erneuerung eigen sind, welche heute der Urzeit als Reklame sich bedient. Schon der originale Mythos enthält das Moment der Lüge, das im Schwindelhaftem des Faschismus triumphiert, und das dieser der Aufklärung aufbürdet.]”


28. p.58—[b] in red marker around passage: “[Der ehrwürdige Glaube ans Opfer aber ist wahrscheinlich bereits ein eingedrilltes Schema, nach welchem die Unterworfenen das ihnen angetane Unrecht sich selber nochmals antun, um es ertragen zu können.] Es rettet nicht durch stellvertretende Rückgabe die unmittelbare, nur eben unterbrochene Kommunikation, welche die heutigen Mythologen ihm zuschreiben, sondern [die Institution des Opfers selber
ist das Mal einer historischen Katastrophe, ein Akt von Gewalt, der Menschen und Natur gleichermaßen widerfährt."


30. p.62-63—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Auch Odysseus ist eines, das Selbst, das immerzu sich bezwingt (footnote 12, also marked) und darüber das Leben versäumt, das es rettet und bloß noch als Irrfahrt erinnert.]”

31. p.62-63 footnote 12—[b,u] in red marker around and in the passage: “So etwa, wenn er davon absteht, den Polyphem sogleich zu töten (ix, 302); wenn er die Mißhandlung des Antinoos über sich ergehen läßt, um sich nicht zu verraten (xvii, 460ff.). Vergleiche weiter die Episode mit den Winden (x, 50ff.) und die Prophezeiung des Teiresias in der ersten Nekyia (xi, 205ff.), die die Heimkehr von der Bändigung des Herzens abhängig macht. [Freilich hat der Verzicht des Odysseus noch nicht den Charakter des Definitiven, sondern lediglich den des Aufschubs: die Rachetaten, die er sich verwehrt, verübt er meist später um so gründlicher: der Dulder ist der Geduldige. In seinem Verhalten liegt noch einigermassen offen, als naturwüchsiger Zwecke, zutage, was später in der totalen, imperativischen Entsagung sich versteckt, um damit erst unwiderstehlich Gewalt anzunehmen, die der Unterjochung alles Natürlichen.]”


33. p.66—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Fesselung gehört erst einer Stufe an, wo man den Gefangenen nicht sogleich mehr totschlägt.]”

beiden bloß in entfremdeter Gestalt, als Feinde oder als Stützpunkte, stets als Instrumente, Dinge.]"


38. p.77—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Die Gewalt seiner Auflösung ist abermals eine des Vergessens. Sie ergreift mit der festen Ordnung der Zeit den festen Willen des Subjekts, der an jener Ordnung sich ausrichtet.]”

39. p.77—[lm] in red marker note: “Regression”

41. p.80—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage, [s,s] in pencil next to center passage (here bold): “[Beim Übergang von der Sage zur Geschichte leistet sie einen entscheidenden Beitrag zur bürgerlichen Kälte. Ihr Verhalten praktiziert das Liebesverbot, das späterhin um so mächtiger sich durchgesetzt hat, je mehr Liebe als Ideologie über den Haß der Konkurrenten betrügen mußte. In der Welt des Tausches hat der Unrecht, der mehr gibt; der Liebende aber ist allemal der mehr Liebende. Während das Opfer, das er bringt, glorifiziert wird, wacht man eifersüchtig darüber, daß dem Liebenden das Opfer nicht erspart bleibe. Gerade in der Liebe selber wird der Liebende ins Unrecht gesetzt und bestraft. Die Unfähigkeit zur Herrschaft über sich und andere, die seine Liebe bezeugt, ist Grund genug, ihm die Erfüllung zu verweigern. Mit der Gesellschaft reproduziert sich erweitert die Einsamkeit. Noch in den zartesten Verzweigungen des Gefühls setzt der Mechanismus sich durch, bis Liebe selber, um überhaupt noch zum anderen finden zu können, so sehr zur Kälte getrieben wird, daß sie über der eigenen Verwirklichung zerfällt.]”


43. p.86—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Es ist die Selbstbestimmung, welche Gewalt innehalten läßt im Augenblick der Erzählung. Rede selber, die Sprache in ihrem Gegensatz zum mythischen Gesang, die Möglichkeit, das geschehene Unheil erinnernd festzuhalten, ist das Gesetz des homerischen Entrinnens. Nicht umsonst wird der entrinnende Held als Erzählender immer wieder eingeführt.]”

44. p.86-87—[b,u,] in red marker and [s,s] in pencil (here bold) around, in, and next to passage: “[Mit ungerührter Gelassenheit, unmenschlich wie nur die impassibilité der größten Erzähler des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, wird das Los der Gehenkten dargestellt und ausdruckslos dem Tod von Vögeln in der Schlinge verglichen, mit jenem Schweigen, dessen Erstarrung der wahre Rest aller Rede ist. Daran schließt sich der Vers, der berichtet, die aneinander Greihten ‘zappelten dann mit den Füßen ein wenig aber nicht lange’. Die Genauigkeit des Beschreibers, die schon die Kälte von Anatomie und Vivisektion ausstrahlt, führt romanmäßig Protokoll über die Zuckung der Unterworfenen, die im Zeichen von Recht und

Exkurs II: Juliette oder Aufklärung und Moral

45. p.90—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Die Schwierigkeiten im Begriff der Vernunft, die daraus hervorgehen, daß ihre Subjekte, die Träger ein und derselben Vernunft, in realen Gegensätzen stehen, sind in der westlichen Aufklärung hinter der scheinbaren Klarheit ihrer Urteile versteckt.] in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft dagegen kommen sie im unklaren Verhältnis des transzendentalen zum empirischen Ich und den anderen unversöhnten Widersprüchen zum Ausdruck. Kants Begriffe sind doppelsinnig. [Vernunft als das transzendale überindividuelle Ich enthält die Idee eines freien Zusammenlebens der Menschen, in dem sie zum allgemeinen Subjekt sich organisieren und den Widerstreit zwischen der reinen und empirischen Vernunft in der bewußten Solidarität des Ganzen aufheben. Es stellte die Idee der wahren Allgemeinheit dar, die Utopie.]”

46. p.93—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Das Werk des Marquis de Sade zeigt den ‚Verstand ohne Leitung‘ eines anderen‘, das heißt, das von Bevormundung befreite bürgerliche Subjekt.]”

47. p.94—[b, u] in red marker around and in the sentence: “[Für die Herrschenden aber werden die Menschen zum Material wie die gesamte Natur für die Gesellschaft.]”

48. p.95—[opeing b] in red marker before the passage: “[Die modernen Sportsriegen, deren Zusammenspiel genau geregelt ist, so daß kein Mitglied über seine Rolle einen Zweifel hegt und für jeden der Ersatzmann bereit steht, finden in der sexuellen teams der Juliette, bei denen kein Augenblick ungenützt, keine Körperöffnung vernachlässigt, keine Funktion untätig bleibt, ihr genaues Modell.”

49. p.97—[b] in red marker around passage and two [s] in pencil next to (here bold) passage: “[Die romantischen Reaktionäre sprachen nur aus, was die Bürger selbst erfuhren: daß die Freiheit in ihrer Welt zur organisierten Anarchie hintrieb. Die Kritik der katholischen Konterrevolution behielt gegen die Aufklärung recht, wie diese gegen den Katholizismus.


51. p.102—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Juliette, nicht unähnlich der Merteuil aus den ‘Liaisons Dangereuses’, verkörpert, psychologisch ausgedrückt, weder unsublimierte noch regredierte libido, sondern intellektuelle Freude an der Regression amor intellectualis diaboli, die Lust, Zivilisation mit ihren eigenen Waffen zu schlagen.]”

52. p.103—[b, u] in red marker around and in sentence: “[Apathie tritt an jenen Wendestellen der bürgerlichen Geschichte, auch der antiken auf, wo angesichts der übermächtigen historischen Tendenz die pauci beati der eigenen Ohnmacht gewahr werden.]”


55. p.110—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Wie die stoische Apathie, an der die bürgerliche Kälte, das Widerspiel des Mitleids, sich schult, dem Allgemeinen, von dem sie sich zurückzog, nooch eher die armselige Treue hielt, als die teilnehmende Gemeinheit, die dem All sich adaptiert, so bekannten, die das Mitleid bloßstellen, negativ sich zur Revolution.]”

57. p.118—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Es hat die geistige Freiheit unmittelbar mit der Bejahung der realen Unterdrückung gleichgesetzt.]”

58. p.119—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Es hat für den Madonnenkult durch den Hexenwahn gebüßt, der Rache am Erinnerungsbild jener vorchristlichen Prophetin, die die geheiligte patriarchale Herrschaftsordnung insgeheim in Frage stellte.]”

59. p.120—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage, with pencil note in [lm]: “Panik—[illegible]”: “[Ich bin so weit‘ sagt Juliette zum Papst, ‘wie Tiberius zu wünschen, oh hätte die ganze Menschheit nur einen einzigen Kopf, daß ich die Lust hätte, ihn mit einem Hiebe abzuschlagen!’ Die Zeichen der Ohnmacht, die hastigen unkoordinierten Bewegungen, Angst der Kreatur, Gewimmel, fordern die Mordgier heraus.]”

60. p.120-21—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Die Angst, die einem selbst nucht mehr droht, explodiert im herzhaften Lachen, dem Ausdruck der Verhärtung des Individuums in sich selbst, das richtig erst im Kollektiv auslebt. Das schallende Gelächter hat zu jeder Zeit die Zivilisation denunziert. ‘Von aller Lava, die der menschliche Mund, dieser Krater, auswirft, ist die verzehrendste die Fröhlichkeit’ sagt Victor Hugo in dem Kapitel mit der Überschrift “Menschenstürme schlimmer als die des Ozeans.]”

61. p.121—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Der Wahn erkennt in der Verklärung der Opfer ihre Erniedrigung. Er macht sich dem Ungeheuer der Herrschaft gleich, das er leibhaft nicht überwinden kann. Als Grauen sucht Imagination dem Grauen standzuhalten.]”


63. p.126—[u] in red marker in the sentence: “Die dunklen Schriftsteller des Bürgertums haben nicht wie seine Apologeten die Konsequenzen der Aufklärung durch harmonistische Doktrinen abzubiegen getrachtet.”
64. p.127—[b] in red marker and [s] in pencil (rm, here bold) around and next to passage: “[Die privaten Laster sind bei Sade wie schon bei Mandeville die vorwegnehmende Geschichtsschreibung der öffentlichen Tugend der totalitären Ära.] Die Unmöglichkeit aus der Vernunft ein grundsätzliches Argument gegen den Mord vorzubringen, nicht vertuscht, sondern in alle Welt geschrien zu haben, hat den Haß entzündet, mit dem gerade die Progressiven Sade und Nietzsche heute noch verfolgen. Anders als der logische Positivismus nahmen beide die Wissenschaft beim Wort. [Daß sie entschiedener noch als jener auf der Ration beharren, hat den geheimen Sinn, die Utopie aus ihrer Hülle zu befreien, die wie im kantischen Vernunftbegriff in jeder großen Philosophie enthalten ist: die einer Menschheit, die selbst nicht mehr entstellt, der Entstellung nicht länger bedarf.]”

**Kulturindustrie**


66. p.130—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Die Verfassung des Publikums, die vorgeschoben und tatsächlich das System der Kulturindustrie begünstigt, ist ein Teil des Systems, nicht dessen Entschuldigung.]”

67. p.134—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Ihre vorweg garantierte Harmonie verhöhnt die errungene des großen bürgerlichen Kunstwerks. In Deutschland lab über den heitersten Filmen der Demokratie schon die Kirchhofsruhe der Diktatur.]”

68. p.134—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Das Leben soll der Tendenz nach vom Tonfilm nicht mehr sich unterscheiden lassen. Indem er, das Illusionstheater weit überbietend, der Phantasie und dem Gedanken der Zuschauer keine Dimension mehr übrigläßt, in der sie im Rahmen des Filmwerks und doch unkontrolliert von dessen exakten Gegebenheiten sich ergeben und abschweifen könnten, ohne den Faden zu verlieren, schult er den ihm Ausgelieferten, ihn unmittelbar mit der Wirklichkeit zu identifizieren.]”


71. p.138—[b] in red marker around passage: “[In der Einheit des Stils nicht nur des christlichen Mittelalters sondern auch der Renaissance drückt die je verschiedene Struktur der sozialen Gewalt sich aus, nicht die dunkle Erfahrung der Beherrschten, in der das Allgemeine verschlossen war. Die großen Künstler waren niemals jene, die Stil am bruchlosesten und vollkommensten verkörperten, sondern jene, die den Stil als Härte gegen den chaotischen Ausdruck der Leiden, als negative Wahrheit, in ihr Werk aufnahmen.]”

72. p.139—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Das Moment am Kunstwerk, durch das es über die Wirklichkeit hinausgeht, ist in der Tat vom Stil nicht abzulösen; doch es besteht nicht in der geleisteten Harmonie, der fragwürdigen Einheit von Form und Inhalt, Innen und Außen, Individuum und Gesellschaft, sondern in jenen Zügen, in denen die Diskrepanz erscheint, im notwendigen Scheitern der leidenschaftlichen Anstrengung zur Identität. Anstatt diesem Scheitern sich auszusetzen, in dem der Stil des großen Kunstwerks seit je sich negierte, hat das schwache immer an die Ähnlichkeit mit anderen sich gehalten, an das Surrogat der Identität. Kulturindustrie endlich setzt die Imitation absolut.”

73. p.142—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Wie freilich die Beherrschten die Moral, die ihnen von den Herrschenden kam, stets ernster nahmen als diese selbst, verfallen heute die betroffenen Massen mehr noch als die Erfolgreichen dem Mythos des Erfolgs.”

74. p.143—[b, u] in red marker around and in the sentence: “[‘Leichte’ Kunst als solche, Zerstreuung, ist keine Verfallsform.]”

75. p.143-44—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Leichte Kunst hat die autonome als Schatten begleitet. Sie ist das gesellschaftlich schlechte Gewissen der ernsten. Was diese auf Grund ihrer gesellschaftlichen Voraussetzungen an Wahrheit verfehlen mußte, gibt jener den Schein sächlichen Rechts. Die Spaltung selbst ist die Wahrheit: sie spricht zumindest die Negativität der Kultur aus, zu der die Sphären sich addieren. Der Gegensatz läßt am wenigsten sich versöhnen, indem man die leichte in die ernste aufnimmt oder umgekehrt. Das aber versuchte die Kulturindustrie.]”

76. p.145—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Amusement ist die Verlängerung der Arbeit unterm Spätkapitalismus.]”


78. p.146—[b] in red marker around the passag: “[Gerade noch in den ersten Sequenzen des Trickfilms wird ein Handlungsmotiv angegeben, damit an ihm während des Verlaufs die Zerstörung sich betätigen kann: unter Hallo des Publikums wird die Hauptgestalt wie ein Lumpen herumgeschleudert. So schlägt die Quantität des organisierten Amüsements in die Qualität der organisierten Grausamkeit um.]”

79. p.147—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Donald Duck in den Cartoons wie die Unglücklichen in der Realität erhalten ihre Prügel, damit die Zuschauer sich an die eigenen gewöhnen. / Der Spaß an der Gewalt, die dem Dargestellten widerfährt, geht über in Gewalt gegen den Zuschauer, Zerstreuung in Anstrengung. Dem müden Auge darf nichts entgehen, was die Sachverständigen als Stimulans sich ausgedacht haben, man darf sich vor der Durchtriebenheit der Darbietung in keinem Augenblick als dumm erweisen, muß überall mitkommen und selber jene Fixigkeit aufbringen, welche die Darbietung zur Schau stellt und propagiert. Damit ist fraglich geworden, ob die Kulturindustrie selbst die Funktion der Ablenkung nicht erfüllt, deren sie laut sich rühmt.]”

80. p.148—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Kunstwerke sind asketisch und schamlos, Kulturindustrie ist pornographisch und prüde.]”


82. p.150—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “Escape wie elopement sind von vornherein dazu bestimmt, zum Ausgangspunkt zurückzuführen. Das Vergnügen befördert die Resignation, die sich in ihm vergessen will.”

und andere Fabeln flicken die Fetzen des Unsinns zur schwachsinnigen Handlung zusammen. Es klirrt nicht die Schellenkappe des Narren, sondern der Schlüsselbund der kapitalistischen Vernunft, die selbst im Bild noch die Lust an die Zwecke des Fortkommens schließt. Jeder Kuß im Revuefilm muß zur Laufbahn des Boxers oder sonstigen Schlagerexperten beitragen, dessen Karriere gerade verherrlicht wird. Nicht also daß die Kulturindustrie Amüsement aufwartet, macht den Betrug aus, sondern das sie durch geschäftstächtige Befangenheit in den ideologischen Cliches der sich selbst liquidierenden Kultur den Spaß verdirbt."

84. p.154—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Jeder ist nur noch, wodurch er jeden anderen ersetzen kann: fungibel, ein Exemplar.]”

85. p.156—[b] in red marker around the passage: “Die Ideologie wird gespalten in die Photographie des sturen Daseins und die nackte Lüge von [seinem Sinn, die nicht ausgesprochen, sondern suggeriert und eingeämmert wird.] Zur Demonstration seiner Göttlichkeit wird das Wirkliche immer bloß zynisch wiederholt. Solcher photologische Beweis ist zwar nicht stringent, aber überwältigend. Wer angesichts der Macht der Monotonie noch zweifelt, ist ein Narr. [Kulturindustrie schlägt den Einwand gegen sich so gut nieder wie den gegen die Welt, die sie tendenzlos verdoppelt.]”

86. p.157—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Natur wird dadurch, daß der gesellschaftliche Herrschaftsmechanismus sie als heilsamen Gegensatz zur Gesellschaft erfaßt, in die unheilbare gerade hineingedrückt und verschachtelt. Die bildliche Beteuierung, daß die Bäume grün sind, der Himmel blau und die Wolken ziehen, macht sie schon zu Kryptogrammen für Fabrikschornsteine und Gasolinestationen.]”

87. p.160-61—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Allen gewährt sie den Trost, daß auch das starke, echte Menschenschicksal noch möglich und dessen rückhaltlose Darstellung unumgänglich sei. Das lückenlos geschlossene Dasein, in dessen Verdoppelung die Ideologie heute aufgeht, wirkt um so großartiger, herrlicher und mächtiger, je gründlicher es mit notwendigem Leiden versetzt wird. Es nimmt den Aspekt von Schicksal an. Tragik wird auf die Drohung nivelliert, den zu vernichten, der nicht mitmacht, während ihr paradoxer Sinn einmal im hoffnungslosen Widerstand gegen die mythische Drohung bestand. Das tragische Schicksal geht in die gerechte Strafe über, in die es zu transformieren seit je die Sehnsucht der bürgerlichen Ästhetik war.]”

88. p.162—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Man braucht nur der eigenen Nichtigkeit innezuwerden, nur die Niederlage zu unterschreiben, und schon gehört man dazu. Die Gesellschaft ist eine von Desperaten und daher die Beute von Rackets. an einigen der bedeutendsten deutschen Romane des Vorfaschismus wie ‘Berlin Alexanderplatz’ und ‘Kleiner Mann, was nun’ kam die Tendenz so drastisch zutage wie am durchschnittlichen Film und an der Verfahrungsweise des Jazz.]”
Das Existieren im Spätkapitalismus ist ein dauernder Initiationsritus.

In seiner Schwäche erkennt die Gesellschaft ihre Stärke wieder und gibt ihm davon ab. Seine Widerstandslosigkeit qualifiziert ihn als zuverlässigen Kantonisten. So wird die Tragik abgeschafft. Er wetterleuchtet in der Humanität, mit der Döblin seinen Biberkopf unterschlupfen läßt, ebenso gut wie in sozial getönten Filmen.

Das Wunder der Integration aber, der permanente Gnadenakt des Verfügenden, den Widerstandslosen aufzunehmen, der seine Renitenz hinunterwürgt, meint den Faschismus. Er wetterleuchtet in der Humanität, mit der Döblin seinen Biberkopf unterschlupfen läßt, ebenso gut wie in sozial getönten Filmen.

Es erinnert an die traurige Geschmeidigkeit des heimkehrenden Soldaten, den der Krieg nichts anging, des Gelegenheitsarbeiters, der schließlich in die Bünde und paramilitärischen Organisationen eintritt. Die Liquidation der Tragik bestätigt die Abschaffung des Individuums.

zugänglich wie Parks. Aber die Auflösung ihres genuinen Warencharakters bedeutet nicht, daß sie im Leben einer freien Gesellschaft aufgehoben wären, sondern daß nun auch der letzte Schutz gegen ihre Erniedrigung zu Kulturgütern gefallen ist. 

Die Abschaffung des Bildungsprivilegs durch Ausverkauf leitet die Massen nicht in die Bereiche, die man ihnen ehemals vorenthielt, sondern dient, unter den bestehenden gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen, gerade dem Zerfall der Bildung, dem Fortschritt der barbarischen Beziehungslosigkeit.”


Elemente des Antisemitismus

101. p.179—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Wenn einem der Zivilisation so tief innenwohnenden Leiden sein Recht in der Erkenntnis nicht wird, vermag es auch der Einzelne in der Erkenntnis nicht zu beschwichtigen, wäre er auch so gutwillig wie nur das Opfer selbst.]”

102. p.180—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Der Antisemitismus ist ein eingeschliffenes Schema, ja ein Ritual der Zivilisation, und die Pogrome sind die wahren Ritualmorde.]”

103. p.181—[b, u] in red marker around and in the sentence: “[Was zum Anlaß solcher Wiederholung wird, wie unglücklich selbst es auch sein mag, Ahasver und Mignon, Fremdes, das ans verheißene Land, Schönheit, die ans Geschlecht erinnert, das als widerwärtig verfemte Tier, das an Promiskuität gemahnt, zieht die Zerstörungslust der Zivilisierten auf sich, die den schmerzlichen Prozeß der Zivilisation nie ganz vollziehen konnten.]”

104. p.182—[b, u]in red marker and [note] following paragraph in red marker: “[Die heutige Gesellschaft, in der religiöse Urgefühle und Renaissancen ebenso wie die Erbmasse von Revolutionen am Markte feilstehen, in der die faschistischen Führer hinter verschlossenen Türen Land und Leben der Nationen aushandeln, während das gewiegte Publikum am Radioempfänger den Preis nachrechnet, die Gesellschaft, in der noch das Wort, das sie entlarvt, sich eben damit als Empfehlung zur Aufnahme in ein politisches Racket legitimiert: diese Gesellschaft, in der nicht bloß mehr die Politik ein Geschäft ist, sondern das Geschäft
die ganze Politik—sie entrüstet sich über das zurückgebliebene Händlergebaren des Juden und bestimmt ihn als den Materialisten, den Schacherer, der dem Feuergeist derer weichen soll, die das Geschäft zum Absoluten erhoben haben.]”

105. p.182—[rm] note in red marker following first paragraph: “Fast wäre es Karl Kraus”

106. p.186—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Um soviel wie das Absolute dem Endlichen genährt wird, wird das Endliche verabsolutiert.]”


108. p.188—[b, closing b] in red marker around the passage “[Das italienische Mütterchen, das dem heiligen Gennaro für den Enkel im Krieg in gläubiger Einfalt eine Kerze weiht, mag der Wahrheit näher sein als die Popen und Oberpfarrer, die frei vom Gottesdienst die Waffen segnen, gegen die der heilige Gennaro machtlos ist.] Der Einfall aber wird die Religion selbst zu Religionsersatz.]”

109. p.188—[virgule] in red marker after the sentence: “Das ist die religiöse Ursprung des Antisemitismus.”

110. p.188—[closing b] in red marker after the sentence: “Es ist die Feindschaft des sich als Heil verhärtenden Geistes gegen den Geist.”


112. p.192—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Am Zeichen, das Gewalt an ihnen hinterlassen hat, entzündet endlos sich Gewalt. Getilgt soll werden, was bloß vegetieren will. In den chaotisch-regelhaften Fluchtreaktionen der niederer Tiere, in den Figuren des Gewimmels, in den konvulsivischen Gesten von Gemarterten stellt sich dar, was am armen
Leben trotz allem sich nicht ganz beherrschen läßt: der mimetische Impuls. Im Todeskampf der Kreatur, am äußersten Gegenpol der Freiheit, scheint die Freiheit unwiderstehlich als die durchkreuzte Bestimmung der Materie durch.

113. p.194—[b, u, opening b] in red marker around and in the passage: “[Der Faschismus ist totalitäär auch darin, daß er die Rebellion der unterdrückten Natur gegen die Herrschaft unmittelbar der Herrschaft nutzbar zu machen strebt.]”


116. p.199—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Die Idee, die keinen festen Halt an der Realität findet, insistiert und wird zur fixen.]”


118. p.202—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Die pathische Projektion ist eine verzweifelte Veranstaltung des Ichs, dessen Reizschutz Freud zufolge nach innen viel schwächer als nach außen ist: unter dem Druck der gestauten homosexuellen Aggression vergißt der seelische Mechanismus seine phylogenetisch späteste Errungenschaft, die Selbstwahrnehmung, und erfährt jene Aggression als den Feind in der Welt, um ihr besser gewachsen zu sein.]”

119. p.205—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Die Paranoia ist der Schatten der Erkenntnis.]”
120. p.205—[b, u] in red marker around and in the sentence “[Paranoia ist das Symptom des Halbgebildeten].”

121. p.205—[b] in red marker around the passage: “Ihm werden alle Worte zum Wahnsystem, zum Versuch, durch Geist zu besetzen, woran seine Erfahrung nicht heranreicht [gewalttätig der Welt Sinn zu geben, die ihn selber sinnlos macht, zugleich aber den Geist und die Erfahrung zu diffamieren, von denen er ausgeschlossen ist, und ihnen die Schuld aufzubürden, welche die Gesellschaft trägt, die ihn davon ausschließt.]”

122. p.206—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Sie waren, im Angesicht der Bildung, apokryph und unrespektabel. Heute aber, wo Bildung überhaupt aus ökonomischen Gründen abstirbt, sind in ungeahntem Maßstab neue Bedingungen für die Paranoia der Massen gegeben.]”

123. p.206—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Jene, die ohne eigenen Willen von der Menschheit ausgeschlossen waren, wüßten es, wie jene, die aus Sehnsucht nach der Menschheit von ihr selbst ausgeschlossen:] an ihrer Verfolgung stärkte sich der krankhafte Zusammenhalt.”


125. p.208—[b, ss] around and next to the passage: “[Gleichgültig wie die Juden an sich selber beschaffen sein mögen, ihr Bild, als das des Überwundenen, trägt die Züge, denen die totalität gewordene Herrschaft todfeind sein muß: des Glückes ohne Macht, des Lohnes ohne Arbeit, der Heimat ohne Grenzstein, der Religion ohne Mythos.]”

126. p.209—[b, closing b] in red marker around the passage: “Das gelingt ihnen mittels der pathischen Projektion, [denn auch der Haß führt zur Vereinigung mit dem Objekt, in der
Zerstörung.] Er ist das Negativ der Versöhnung. Versöhnung ist der höchste Begriff des Judentums und dessen ganzer Sinn die Erwartung."

127. p.213-14—[b] in red marker around the passage: "[Im Fortschritt der Industriegesellschaft, die doch das von ihr selbst gezeigte Gesetz der Verelendung hinweggezaubert haben soll, wird nun der Begriff zuschanden, durch den das Ganze sich recht fertigte: der Mensch als Person, als Träger der Vernunft. Die Dialektik der Aufklärung schlägt objektiv in den Wahnsinn um."

128. p.214—[b] in red marker around the sentence: "[Der Schein hat sich so konzentriert, daß zu durchschauen objektiv den Charakter der Halluzination gewinnt."

129. p.217—[b, u] in red marker around and in the passage: "[Sein Grauen ist das der offenkundigen und doch fortbestehenden Lüge. Während es keine Wahrheit zuläßt, an der es gemessen werden könnte, tritt im Unmaß seines Widersinns die Wahrheit negativ zum Greifen nahe, von der die Urteilslosen einzig durch die volle Einbuße des Denkens getrennt zu halten sind. die ihrer selbst mächtige, zur Gewalt werdende Aufklärung selbst vermochte die Grenzen der Aufklärung zu durchbrechen."

Aufzeichnungen und Entwürfe

130. p.219—[b] in red marker around the sentence: "[Wie im Tausch jeder das Seine bekommt und doch das soziale Unrecht sich dabei ergibt, so ist auch die Reflexionsform der Tauschwirtschaft, die herrschende Vernunft, gerecht, allgemein und doch partikularistisch, das Instrument des Privilegs in der Gleichheit."

131. p.224—[b] in red marker around the passage: "Die Geschichte jener alten Religionen und Schulen, wie die der modernen Parteien und Revolutionen hingegen vermag zu lehren, daß der Preis fürs Überleben das praktische Mitmachen, [die Verwandlung der Idee in Herrschaft ist."

132. p.225 red "X" next to the title of the fragment: "Zur Theorie der Gespenster"

133. p.226—[b] in red marker around the passage: "[Was allen Gefühlen widerfährt, die Ächtung dessen, was keinen Marktwert hat, widerfährt am schroffsten dem, woraus nicht einmal die psychologische Wiederherstellung der Arbeitskraft zu ziehen ist, der Trauer. Sie wird zum Wundmal der Zivilisation, zur asozialen Sentimentalität, die verrät, daß es immer noch nicht ganz gelungen ist, die Menschen aufs Reich der Zwecke zu vereidigen."

134. p.229—[b] in red marker around the passage: "[Nicht das Gute sondern das Schlechte ist der Gegenstand der Theorie. Sie setzt die Reproduktion des Lebens in den je bestimmten Formen schon voraus. Ihr Element ist die Freiheit, ihr Thema die Unterdrückung."

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135. p.229—[closing b] in red marker after the sentence: “Es gibt nur einen Ausdruck für die Wahrheit: den Gedanken, der das Unrecht verneint.”

136. p.233—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Durch den eigenen Wagen werden Reisebekanntchaften auf halb-bedingte hitchhikers reduziert.]”

137. p.233—[b] in red marker around the passage: “Wenn sie an Sonntagen oder auf Reisen in den Gasthöfen zusammentreffen, deren Menus und Räume auf entsprechenden Preisniveaus miteinander identisch sind, so finden die Besucher, daß sie mit zunehmender Isolierung einander immer ähnlich geworden sind. Die Kommunikation besorgt die Angleichung der Menschen durch ihre Vereinzelung.”

138. p.235—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Denn soviel ist in der Tat am Anthropomorphismus richtig, daß die Naturgeschichte gleichsam mit dem glücklichen Wurf, der ihr im Menschen gelungen ist, nicht gerechnet hat.]”

139. p.239—[u] in red marker in the sentence: “… [sic] Wie der Verbrecher, so war die Freiheitsstrafes bürgerlich.”


141. p.240-41—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[Die Kraft, von der Umwelt sich als Individuum abzuheben und zugleich durch die konzessionierten Formen des Verkehrs mit ihr in Verbindung zu treten, um in ihr sich zu behaupten, war im Verbrecher angefressen. Er repräsentierte die dem Lebendigen tief einwohnende Tendenz, deren Überwindung das Kennzeichen aller Entwicklung ist: sich an die Umgebung zu verlieren anstatt sich tätig in ihr durchzusetzen, den Hang, sich gehen zu lassen, zurückzusinken in Natur. Freud hat sie den Todestrieb genannt, Caillois le mimétisme.”]”

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Wie nach Tocqueville die bürgerlichen Republiken im Gegensatz zu den Monarchien nicht den Körper vergewaltigen, sondern direkt auf die Seele losgehen, so greifen die Strafen dieser Ordnung die Seele an. Ihre Gemarterten sterben nicht mehr aufs Rad geflochten die langen Tage und Nächte hindurch, sondern verenden geistig, als unsichtbares Beispiel still in den großen Gefängnisbauten, die von den Irrenhäusern fast nur der Name trennt.


Die faschistischen Herren von heute sind nicht sowohl Übermenschen als Funktionen ihres eigenen Reklameapparats, Schnittpunkte der identischen Reaktionsweisen Ungezählter.
149. p.255—[s] in red marker next to the sentence: “Meine Existenz, wie ich sie mir vorstelle, mein Horror und mein Wille zur Erkenntnis scheinen mir so berechtigt zu sein wie selbst der Beruf des Arztes, auch wenn ich unmittelbar niemand helfen kann.”

150. p.255—[s] in red marker next to the sentence: “Doch sind, im Zeitalter radikal realitätsgerechter Erziehung, Gespräche seltener geworden, und der neurotische Partner B. Bedarf übermenschlicher Kraft, um nicht gesund zu werden.”

151. p.256 single red marker “X” next to title of essay “Gezeichnet”

152. p.256 large descending arrow from title in pencil


155. p.268—[b] in red marker around the passage: “[In dieser Gesellschaft gibt es keinen Bereich mehr, in dem Herrschaft als Widerspruch sich deklarierte wie in der Kunst, keine Verdoppellung drückt mehr die Entstellung aus. Solcher Ausdruck aber hieß ehemals nicht bloß Schönheit, sondern Denken, Geist und Sprache selbst. Sprache heute berechnet, bezeichnet, verrät, gibt den Mord ein, sie drückt nicht aus. Kulturindustrie hat ihren exakten Maßstab außerhalb ihrer selbst, an den sie sich halten kann, wie die Wissenschaft: die Tatsache.]”

156. p.269—[b] in red marker around the phrase “[Mit der Spiegelung der Herrschaft durch die Natur ist das Tragische entschwunden, wie das Komische,] die Herren bringen soviel Ernst auf, wie Widerstand zu überwinden ist, und soviel Humor, sie sie Verzweiflung sehen. [Der geistige Genuß war ans stellvertretende Leiden geknüpft, sie aber spielen mit dem Grauen selbst. Die sublime Liebe hing an der Erscheinung der Kraft durch die Schwäche, an der Schönheit der Frau, sie aber hängen sich an die Kraft unmittelbar: das Idol der Gesellschaft heute ist das schnittig-edle Männergesicht.]”
157. p.270—[opening b] in red marker before the sentence: “[Wer die Welt verändern will, soll um keinen Preis in jenem Sumpf der kleinen Rackets landen, wo mit den Wahrsagern auch politische Sektierer, Utopisten und Anarchisten verkommen.”

158. p.273—[s,s] in red marker next to the sentence: “Wenn die Rede heute an einen sich wenden kann, so sind es weder die sogenannten Massen, noch der Einzelne, der ohnmächtig ist, sondern eher ein eingebildeter Zeuge, dem wir es hinterlassen, damit es doch nicht ganz mit uns untergeht.”

159. p.274—[b] in red marker around the sentence: “[Den Körper lähmt die physische Verletzung, den Geist der Schrecken. Beides ist im Ursprung gar nicht zu trennen.]”