

On the edge of a cosmopoetic paradigm shift:

Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*

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Abstract

This article proposes an alternative to the customary readings of W.G. Sebald's work, which traditionally focus on alienation, exile and a dislocated semiotics. The suggestion here is that the very elements that generally are taken to emblemise these Modernist notions of artistic creation can be understood as indices of more positive tendencies. The article offers a new reading of Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*, that identifies elements of a positive aesthetic. According to that aesthetic, all facets of the material world are connected to each other in an undulating fabric of material, and not merely semiotic, correspondences.

Keywords: Sebald, nature, walking, cosmopoetics, creativity, environment

Introduction

In the third chapter of W.G. Sebald's fictional travelogue-meditation *Die Ringe des Saturn*, the narrator finds himself standing upon Covehithe Cliffs looking out to sea, only to realise abruptly that the ground beneath his feet is rather less solid than he imagines:

Während mir das durch den Kopf ging, sah ich draußen über dem Meer die Schwalben herum-schießen. [...] Und wenn sie, geschoßgleich, aufs Ufer zukamen, verschwanden einige von ihnen immer unmittelbar unter meinen Füßen, als hätte sie der Erdboden verschluckt. Ich trat an den Rand der Klippe und sah, daß sie ihre Nistlöcher in die oberste Lehmschicht des Abbruchs gegraben hatten, eines neben dem andern. Ich stand also sozusagen auf einem perforierten Stück Land, das jeden Moment nachgeben konnte. (Sebald 2007:86-7; subsequent references in the text with page number only)

Sebald's scenario condenses a number of typically Modernist motifs in a remarkably dense amalgam. A recognisable composite avatar of Caspar David Friedrich's tourist-figures gazing over the sea of mist ("Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer", 1818) and looking from the chalk cliffs of Rügen ("Kreidefelsen auf Rügen", 1818) has the ground pulled from under its feet. At first glance, Sebald's narrator may appear to be an isolated Romantic subject gazing out over a sublime panorama whose immensity dwarfs, but by the same token reinforces, the subject in its proud individualism. The narrator says: "Demungeachtet legte ich [...] so weit es ging den Kopf in den Nacken, richtete den Blick an den Zenit hinauf, ließ ihn herabgleiten an der Himmelskugel und zog ihn dann vom Horizont her über das Wasser herein." (87) Yet this subject is fundamentally threatened by a lacunary order typical of Modernist uncertainty. Indeed, the porosity of the cliff is an almost too-literal prompt for a reading of Sebald, that concludes that "we are defined by the terrible abundance of our lacunae." (Wood 1999:2) Lacan's void at the heart of being is transposed into the foundations upon which the upright, speaking homo erectus stands (Leroi-Gourhan 1964): "ich glaubte [...] mehrmals den Boden unter meinen Füßen

zu verlieren." (224) Not surprisingly, the narrator, faced by the void, is overcome by a "Schwindelgefühl" (88) — a motif significant enough to provide the title of a short story collection by Sebald. (1990) But the odd typology of the collection's title, "Schwindel. Gefühle", alerts us to a connection between a sense of existential, even ontological vertigo, and a destabilisation of language in its Enlightenment function of transparency and truth-transmission ("Schwindel" as deception of falsification). Most readings of Sebald connect this semiotic disruption with a spatial destabilization, in particular the notion of exilic loss: "Sebald's writing instantiates a ... restless, rootless and meandering spatiality", as one critic (Wylie 2007:176) puts it, epitomized in the narrator's associative, paratactic narration as a linguistic equivalent of walking and the displacement of the refugees he and his avatars often meet.

Critical responses over recent decades show that Sebald's work constantly mobilises a Modernist dismantlement of Romantic aesthetics and Enlightenment, humanist rationality by pitting the unruly dynamics of language as the Other *par excellence* ("L'Autre est donc le lieu où se constitue le je qui parle avec celui qui l'entend" [Lacan 1966:431]) against the self-assertions of the artistic individual. Such a project is clearly a major concern of Sebald's work, especially where it intersects with a critique of human destructiveness, whether towards fellow humans, in particular those marked by cultural, ethnic or racial difference, or towards the environment, as the basso continuo of "unsere beinahe nur aus Kalamitäten bestehende Geschichte." (350) This facet of Sebald's fiction has been convincingly documented by numerous scholars (for one instance Öhlschläger 2006) and hardly needs reiteration.

But because a plethora of critical expositions have demonstrated the centrality of these matters for Sebald's work again and again, I wish instead to search out a different dynamic in this passage and explore its workings in Sebald's novel. In what follows I would like to turn these Modernist and Postmodernist questions inside out, to appropriate a conceptual-discursive topos used by Roberto Esposito. (2008:157) If Sebald's aesthetics is generally taken as one of exile, alienation and disjunction, I am interested in those aspects of his work that offer a counterpoise to the centrifugal dynamics of this history of calamities (350). I will seek to show that Sebald's landscape portrayals are less a manifestation of an alienated semiotic, a rift between literary signifier and spatial signified, than participants in an interfolded, undulating reality: "For Sebald, the beauty of the landscape is testament to nothing other than itself". (Bewes 2005:65)

From critique to creativity

The cliff that Sebald's narrator stands upon is porous, potentially dangerously so: "Ich stand also sozusagen auf einem perforierten Stück Land, das jeden Moment nachgeben konnte." (87) Yet that porosity should not be read merely as part of an implicit critical script, expressed in topological terms, for the undermining of a Eurocentric, white, male identity. Rather, that porosity should also be regarded in the light of what the text explicitly says. The cliff has been eaten away by the nesting activities of swallows. The passage initially appears to stress the unhoused, *unheimliche* nature of a world in which dwelling has become impossible: Lukács (1963:124) intoned just after the First World

War that the ambient “transzendente Heimatlosigkeit” had become one of the “konstitutive Prinzipien” of the novel, while Adorno (1951:55-6) just after the Second World War said: “Eigentlich kann man nicht mehr wohnen.” But Sebald’s site of the unhoused human subject is in fact very much a home, a milieu for other creatures (swallows) who are typically neighbours of humans and share their homes.

This very rudimentary observation, which hardly even begins to touch the complexity of the passage, let alone those of the many-layered text, nonetheless encapsulates the argument I wish to make. The geographies that Sebald orchestrates via his protagonists’ wanderings may indeed manifest the “selbst in dieser entlegenden Gegend bis weit in die Vergangenheit zurückgehenden Spuren der Zerstörung,” (11) Yet these geographies are also the concrete manifestation of “die grundsätzliche Unausrottbarkeit der Natur” (70), not merely as a reactive capacity, but as positive evidence of “der staunenswerte Selbstvermehrung and Vervielfältigung des organischen Lebens.” (70) of the “pulsierender” “Lebensstrom unserer Erde” (47) and its “Resilienz”. (Sebald 2003:132)

These positive attributes of nature are all used, in their context, in a highly ironic, indeed almost cynical manner. Irony, of course, often means saying something to mean its opposite, and Sebald generally speaks of this resilience of natural life in the context of its destruction. Yet this ironic, and thus displaced, indeed catachrestic use of language itself is significant. It points, litotically, towards something positive which lies outside the bounds of linguistic expression.

In what follows I will argue that hidden in the interstices of Sebald’s “Unglückschronik” (118) there is something which resonates with, but far exceeds what he terms, paraphrasing Borges, “unseren Versuche zur Erfindung von Welten zweiten oder gar dritten Grades.” (89) In fact, there is no need to invent such multiple worlds, because the world itself is already plural, multiple beyond counting, in the very generativity that characterizes the real. (Viveiros de Castro 2014:66) The self-inventivity of “alles, was der Fall ist,” (Wittgenstein 1990:9) or better, of the everything-and-more that is-becoming, what Bergson (1932) called “creative evolution”, is such that it defies the limits of language. As such, the creativity of being-becoming pre-empts any modernist or postmodernist critique of language and its traps. Rather, it lurks joyfully as an irrepressible excess in the interstices of even the bleakest histories and narratives of destruction. Within this reading of the world, the necessity of a critique of language in its self-deluding, ideological aspects goes hand in hand with the equal necessity of a more celebratory recognition. That celebratory spirit would claim that such a critique of language can also be turned inside-out, in Esposito’s (2004:157) phrase, to reveal the infinite plenitude of what Rooney (2007:1-2) calls “the feminine real”, and Morton (2017:15-19) terms “the symbiotic Real”, of all that which is imperceptible because it falls below (or rises above) the threshold of language: life, in its unfolding, is often too fast, or too slow, too minute or too immense to be captured by syntax and semantics.

This essay therefore can be situated on the cusp of a significant paradigm shift in the critical humanities. This paradigm shift marks the gradual, though not complete, distancing from a politically motivated ideology-critical stance, whose inspiration lies in structuralist semiotics and poststructuralist philosophy and their dismantling of the illusions of linguistic representation and their laying bare of the nexus between power,

discourse and knowledge. In its wake comes a turn to a no-less-politically motivated, but emphatically creative rather than critical, intervention-oriented approach to literary and cultural studies. That approach rides on the wake of an upsurge of attention, from the side of the critical humanities, to various disciplines from the domain of the natural sciences: catastrophe theory, chaos theory, complexity theory, the neuro-sciences, etc.

The so-called topological turn is indicative of this trend. (Lury, Parisi & Terranova 2012) The topological turn registers a shift from what Agamben (1998:23) somewhat dismissively described as an interest in topography (i.e. the mapping of concrete spaces in their productive relations to surveillance, power relations, control, etc.) towards a more complicated set of topological relationships. These more complex figures notably confuse inclusion and exclusion, equally implicated in the biopolitical control of populations and bodies, but are also susceptible (as in the work of Roberto Esposito on "affirmative biopolitics", 2004:157, 191-194) of a "turning-inside-out", which opens up biopolitics (or necropolitics) to the productivity of life itself. The topological twist in Esposito's work connects biopolitics, which grows out of Foucault's late writings, to an emergent interest in the generative, creative processes of life itself, in all its unpredictable multiplicity, unruly plurality, and recalcitrant diversity (for just one example, cf. Coole & Frost, eds. 2010). These new developments in the critical humanities do not supersede the older work of critique. Rather, they complement them. In the light of the contemporary political impasse which appears to leave us stuck in an apparently infinitely extended neoliberal present (Scott 2014:6), the upsurge of new work in the area of complexity, chaos, vitalism and "infinite relationality," may offer us ways of moving forward towards the formulation of new political interventions as yet still to be imagined (for instance Gilbert 2014). Sebald's text, of course, precedes this moment in the critical humanities. The complexities of Sebald's work also preclude any simple or direct connection with such perspectives. But to the extent that Sebald's *Ringe des Saturn* reveals, albeit covertly, a creative perspective within the debris of modern, globalized neoliberalism and neo-imperialism, it perhaps furnishes a tentative framework for thinking in an exploratory fashion beyond the current geopolitical stranglehold from the specific perspective of the critical humanities (cf. Mbembe 2012).

The interwoven nature of these respective projects (global biopolitics/necropolitics [Mbembe 2013]) on the one hand, and a "feminine" or "symbiotic real" on the other, is already anticipated in Sebald's cliff-top vignette. The episode gestures obliquely towards the interconnectedness of ideology-critique on the one hand and a critical humanities which seeks to collaborate in its modes of intellection with forms of cosmic creativity on the other. It intimates how critical poetics and cosmopoetics must be articulated together. In the passage, Sebald offers a remarkable figure of interwovenness that by far exceeds in its complexity the topos of lacunary porosity:

Während mir das durch den Kopf ging, sah ich draußen über dem Meer die Schwalben herumschießen. In einem fort ihre winzigen Schreie ausstoßend, durchschnitten sie ihr Flugfeld, geschwinder, als ihnen mit den Augen zu folgen war. Schon früher, in der Kindheit, wenn ich den Abendstunden vom schattigen Talgrund aus diesen Seglern zuschaute, die zu jener Zeit noch in großer Zahl droben im letzten Licht kreisten, habe ich mir vorgestellt, daß die Welt nur zusammengehalten wird von ihren durch den Luftraum gezogenen Bahnen. Viele Jahre später las ich dann in der 1940 in Salto Orientale in Argentinien verfaßten Schrift *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* von der Rettung eines ganzen Amphitheaterts durch ein paar Vögel. Die Schwalben, so bemerkte ich jetzt, jagten ausschließlich in

der Ebene, die sich von der Anhöhe, auf der ich saß, ins Leere erstreckte. Nicht eine von ihnen stieg höher hinauf oder tauchte tiefer zum Wasser hinab. Und wenn sie, geschoßgleich, aufs Ufer zukamen, verschwanden einige von ihnen immer unmittelbar unter meinen Füßen, als hätte sie der Erdboden verschluckt. Ich trat an den Rand der Klippe und sah, daß sie ihre Nistlöcher in die oberste Lehmschicht des Abbruchs gegraben hatten, eines neben dem andern. Ich stand also sozusagen auf einem perforierten Stück Land, das jeden Moment nachgeben konnte. (86-7)

Sebald's narrator traveller arrives on the cliff-edge bordering the coast and watches the swallows in their perfectly horizontal flight paths. He finds himself on one half of a symmetrical structure that resembles an Escher engraving – one in which the elements of a dual structure are turned inside out in their respective spaces. On one side, the swallows' lines of flight are imagined almost as material paths through the emptiness of the air adjacent to the cliff top. On the other side, their flight paths segue into the tunnels that they bore into the cliff. On one side there is air traversed by the solidity of the birds, on the other side there is solidity traversed by tunnels of air. These chiasmic spatial structures point in turn to a deeper structure of critique and creativity.

The narrator remarks that the swallows “durchschnitten [...] ihr Flugfeld, geschwinder, als ihnen mit den Augen zu folgen war” (87); in another version of the same structure, the narrator, confined to hospital at the opening of the book, sees how “ein Kondensstreifen quer durch das von meinem Fenster umrahmte Stück Himmel zog.” (29) He claims: “Ich habe diese weiße Spur damals für ein gutes Zeichen gehalten, fürchte aber jetzt in der Rückschau, daß sie den Anfang gewesen ist eines Risses, der seither durch mein Leben geht. Die Maschine an der Spitze der Flugbahn war so unsichtbar wie die Passagiere in ihrem Innern.” (29) Yet just this invisibility marks the tipping point at which the cataclysmic “catastrophically” (Thom 1975) segues into the creative, indeed the cosmic. Recalling a childhood scene in which he watches swallows, relatives of the sand martins witnessed on this adult walking tour, the narrator remembers his belief that “die Welt nur zusammengehalten von ihren durch den Luftraum gezogenen Bahnen [wird].” (87) Just as the cliff appears to be on the verge of collapse but does not in fact give way, conversely, the flight paths of the birds are imagined to hold the world together by some sort of ongoing performativity which recreates the fabric of the universe at every instant. In cosmopoetic terms, Sebald is sketching in concrete language the outlines of a fused theory that embraces both critique and creativity, cataclysm and cosmos, at a moment when the recent turn from critical theory to paradigms of creativity appears to be taking place in the critical humanities (cf. for instance Grosz 2005:2-3; Massumi 2015).

Calamitous Histories

It would be possible to tease out these two strands of thought, as I shall now do for the purposes of heuristic clarity, before returning subsequently to the fused paradigms of critique *and* creativity. First the strand of cataclysm: One could enumerate the hints at the destruction of the environment contained in the narrator's passing comment about the swallows that “zu jener Zeit noch in großer Zahl droben im letzten Licht kreisten.” (87) This passing hint registers the ecological depredation caused to swallow populations by increasingly efficient building methods. Swallows are close neighbours of humans, favouring nesting places in eaves and fissures in rough-cast house or barn facades. The loss of such nesting places, together with scarcity of food sources (Sánchez-Bayo &

Wyckhuys 2019), has led to a reduction of swallow populations over the past century. (Schwalben 2014; Unsere Schwalben 2014) This reading would key the passage into the larger ecological concerns of the novel, which encompass a long meditation on the herring (70-6), an extended chain of motifs connected to silkworms (198, 311, 324-51), as well as repeated references to the destruction of world forests (201-3, 208, 272-3, 312-9). The latter issue, which takes on global and world-historical proportions when connected with the wholesale marketing of the South American rainforests, in turn forms an interface with Sebald's other central concern, namely the history of human atrocities towards other humans, which likewise encompasses the slave trade (230), the depredations wrought by European imperialists in China (166-85) and in Leopold's Congo (141-9), the slaughter of the First World War (116-9), the Ustasha preliminaries to the Holocaust in Bosnia (119-23), the Holocaust itself being refracted through the liberation of Belsen concentration camp (77-81) and oblique traces in Berlin (210-12), the bombing of German cities (52-4, 212), and the development of high-technology weapons from World War Two through to the Cold War (271-2, 275-8). These aspects of Sebald's work have been identified often enough for them to need only brief reiteration here.

They are epitomized by the passage where the ironically scripted post-Romantic viewer on the cliff-tops looks down upon a mirror-image of itself on the shore below. The figure on the beach is a projection of the fate that might befall it, were indeed the "stets von Einbrüchen bedrohte[r] Rand des festen Landes" (83) to collapse as the narrator fears. Such a demise of the Romantic subject, a glimpse of what recent theory has come to term the posthuman (e.g. Braidotti 2013), is given in the uncanny description of a figure seen on the shore at the foot of the cliffs:

Es war ein Menschenpaar, das dort drunten lag, auf dem Grund der Grube, dachte ich mir, ein Mann, ausgestreckt über den Körper eines anderen Wesens, von dem nichts sichtbar war als die angewinkelten, nach außen gekehrte Beine. [...] es [kam] mir vor, als sei ein Zucken durch die Füße des Mannes gefahren wie bei einem gerade Gehenkten. [...] Ungestalt gleich einer großen, ans Land geworfenen Molluske lagen sie da, scheinbar ein Leib, ein von weit draußen hereingetriebenes, vieligliedriges, doppelköpfiges Seeungeheuer, letztes Exemplar einer monströsen Art [...]. (88)

The terminal notion of a monster at the end of its life bears out the ambient sense of practices of ecological destruction that have undermined the very ground the human race stands upon, altering the global ecosphere to such an extent that the race's own sustainability, not to mention that of neighbouring species, is severely jeopardized. (Chakrabarty 2009; Kolbert 2014)

The emergence of the new

Yet Sebald's point may have ultimately more significant ramifications than mere predictions of the end of humankind. The image of the human figure on the shore immediately recalls the famous final lines of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where the human being is identified as an ephemeral apparition which may pass away as soon as its appearance is recent: "If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared [...] then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea." (Foucault 2002:422) The monstrous character of this figure may, however, suggest a further Foucauldian allusion (cf. Schmucker 2012:96, 274-5, 280 n255, 458 n438). In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault sketched his theory

of epistemological paradigm shifts from *episteme* to *episteme*. He explained that notions clothed with respectability in one epoch of thought or *episteme* would become simply false in a later epoch. Moving backwards, however, to the era before their common acceptability, to an earlier *episteme*, the same ideas would have been quite simply unthinkable, or *monstrous*: Mendel, for instance “spoke the truth, but he was not ‘within the true’ of the biological discourse of his time: it was not according to such rules that biological objects and concepts were formed. [...] Mendel was a true monster.” (Foucault 1981:61) By figuring the human figures on the beach as a form of sea-monster, Sebald may be punning on the notion of epistemological paradigm shifts, and thereby tentatively gesturing towards the *episteme* we are currently moving into. If there is any doubt about this interplay, intentional or otherwise, of Foucauldian images and Sebald’s prose, then we need only re-read the final lines of *The Order of Discourse*:

If these arrangements [i.e. the discursive construction of the human being as the centre of the social sciences] were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault 2002:422; emphasis added)

Sebald’s narrator, standing on the crumbling cliffs of modernity, may be in a position to sense more clearly, at the particular juncture at which *Die Ringe des Saturn* appeared, what those critical events might be and what might arise in the ruins they would leave behind.

If Sebald appears to allude to the final lines of Foucault’s *The Order of Things* in the cliff episode, he also appears to refer to the inaugural sections of the same book, “The Prose of the World,” in the corresponding first chapter of *Die Ringe des Saturn*. In his first chapter, Foucault sketches a picture of early modern paradigms of knowledge in which the cosmos is linked by a network of associations and connections, structured around relations of contiguity, emulation, analogy, and sympathy (Foucault 2002:19-28).

The whole volume of the world, all the adjacencies of “convenience”, all the echoes of emulation, all the linkages of analogy, are supported, maintained, and doubled by this space governed by sympathy and antipathy, which are ceaselessly drawing things together and holding them apart. By means of this interplay, the world remains identical; resemblances continue to be what they are, and to resemble one another. The same remains the same, riveted to itself. (*ibid.*:28)

In his first chapter, Sebald draws the reader into the same early modern world of correspondences. The narrator, confined to a hospital room in Norwich after his long rambles across the Suffolk fields, meditates upon several academic colleagues before embarking upon an evocation of Thomas Browne, another Norwich scholar, whose early-modern peregrinations in erudition recall Sebald’s own. Browne, according to Sebald’s (partly verbatim) paraphrase (compare Browne 1928:I, 203) describes

die in der anscheinend unendlichen Vielfalt der Formen Mal für Mal wiederkehrenden Muster, beispielsweise in seiner Abhandlung über den Garten des Cyrus dasjenige des sogenannten Quincunx, das gebildet wird von den Eckpunkten eines regelmäßigen Vierecks und dem Punkt, an dem dessen Diagonalen sich überschneiden. Überall an der lebendigen und toten Materie entdeckt Browne diese Struktur, in gewissen kristallinen Formen, an Seesternen und Seeigeln, an der Wirbelknochen der Säugetiere, am Rückgrat der Vögel und Fische, auf der Haut mehrerer Arten von Schlangen, in den Spuren der über Kreuz sich fortführenden Vierfüßler, in den Konfigurationen der Körper der

Raupen, Schmetterlinge, Seidenspinner und Nachfalter, in der Wurzel des Wasserfarns, der Samenhülsen der Sonnenblumen und Schirmpinien, im Inneren der jungen Triebe der Eichen oder der Stengel des Schachtelhalms und in den Kunstwerken der Menschen, in den ägyptischen Pyramiden und im Mausoleum des Augustus ebenso wie im dem mit Granatapfelbäumen und weißen Lilien nach der Richtschnur bestückten Garten des Königs Salomon. Endlos viel ließe sich hier zusammentragen, sagt Browne, und endlos ließe sich zeigen, mit welcher eleganter Hand die Natur geometrisiert... (30-2)

In a similar manner, almost as if obeying Browne's dictums, the lozenge-like quincunx also proliferates through Sebald's text and its visual components: in a grid-like pattern taken facsimile from Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus* (31), (Browne 1928:I, 178) in the print of a herring (75), in the half-lozenge form of the Waterloo monument (150).

At first glance, these lozenge-like forms may seem to be mere variations upon the ubiquitous grid-like images adorning Sebald's text. The grid is to be found in the image of black net over the hospital window on the second page of the novel (12), the imprisoned quail at Somerleyton (50), the windows of Michael Hamburger's study in the old house at Middleton (218, 219), the grid-lines of the Ordnance Survey map of Orfordness (277), the cage-like weavers' looms (334), and finally, the woven samples of silk from a Norwich silk merchant's catalogue (336-7). Perhaps less obviously, but most disturbingly, the pine trees at Belsen concentration camp are superimposed upon rows of corpses lying among the trees (78-9), creating a hidden grid pattern which is emblematic of a modernity reposing upon the camp, with its gridded geography, its barb-wire grids, and its necropolitical regimes of management-towards-death. The cage-like weaving loom in which the weaver appears to be suspended (334) refers back, in a gruesome manner, to the grainy image of the Serbs, Bosnians and Jews hung by the Croatian Ustasha militia and "reihenweise wie Krähen und Elstern aufgehängt" from a cross-bar gallows (120), which in turn replicates in part the structure of the Belsen image (though reversing the vertical/horizontal opposition of wood/bodies). The grid was the underlying topographical form of the "instrumental rationality" criticized by Horkheimer and Adorno (1971). It was the salient spatial pattern that has become iconic of Auschwitz (Giacarra & Minca 2011) but also underpinned colonial urban planning. (Carter 1987:205-20)

Sebald appears thus to set up a fundamental structural opposition between, on the one hand, a diagonal structure of interlocking diamond- or rhomboid-shaped lozenges (these terms feature explicitly in *The Garden of Cyrus* [Browne 1928:I, 173, 190, 214]) that epitomize an early-modern epistemology in which humankind and the natural world have not yet been fully separated out from one another (Latour 1993); and, on the other hand, right-angled grids which are emblematic of the industrial, carceral, necropolitical and epistemological machinery of modernity. But two caveats are called for here.

First, if this opposition is indeed at work, then it is significantly different to that binary identified by extant scholarship on grids in Sebald. (Gray 2009; Lethen 2006) Gray (2009:519) sets up an opposition between "the chaos of the non-distinct and the hyper-rationality of the well-ordered grid," between "between blind immersion in a landscape of subject matter and a clear-sighted, encompassing overview." Similarly, Lethen (2006: 16) operates with an opposition between grid and mist ("Dunst") that resonates with Gray's (2009:516) interest in the "fuzzy [...] lack of distinction" at the vanishing point of

the perspectival representations founded upon the grid method, and epitomized by Dürer's *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman* (ca. 1600).

Second, this opposition is less an opposition than a difference of degree. Lozenge and grid share a fundamental structure that is mediated by a turning of the verticals/horizontals to make them diagonals, with a concomitant alteration of the angles between the perpendicular lines. Browne himself operates such a turning in his discussion of chess boards. (Browne 1928:I, 188) The lozenge is not opposed to the grid, but implicit within it, just as the radiating diagonals arise in the conversion of the grid technique into perspective representation. The diagonals figure a present but ignored alternative to the grid-immersion or grid-mist opposition that is not a binary, because it is contained in the productive process itself. The intertwining of the two goes however largely unnoticed in the extant scholarly work. Lethen (2006:16) remarks in passing on the "leicht diagonal versetzt" angle of the hospital-window grid that provides the opening image of the book, but this turning remains implicit in his reflections. Gray (2009:514, 515, 517) shows such diagonals in his reproductions of Sebald's images, but does not comment on them. The task of this essay is to render the implicit explicit, to turn the inside out, to pick up the topological topos used above.

I claim that the elision of the diagonals is merely the persistent symptom of an historical amnesia with regard to earlier modes of knowing the world. Perhaps the description of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* (22-7), which may allude to the grid lines underpinning emergent modern modes of perspective representation imposed upon a human body once thought to be the interface for all the correspondences of the cosmos (Foucault 2002:24-5), an imposition epitomized in Dürer's grid illustration, marks the tipping point between these regimes. To that extent, the separation between the two paradigms is not one of a fundamental discontinuity or rupture, *pace* Foucault. (2007:183-95) Rather, it is a matter of shifting but interconnected or interfolded systems, where older *epistemes* may continue to reside in the interstices, the folds, or the margins of more modern ones. Logically, then, these partly obscured, "residual" structures may shift back into the range of perception at specific junctures in history such as our own early twenty-first century one.

Differences may nonetheless be made out between these two paradigms. The Ordnance Survey 1:50 000 map reproduced to show the Orford Ness weapons-testing range (277) is exemplary here. The natural environment that forms the foundation for the narrator's peregrinations, and which the text never attempts to represent in anything but a gestural, indexical manner, is reduced to a schematic symbolic system inserted within a grid of northings and eastings. The shift from the "quincinciall" paradigm to that of the grid involves two aspects.

First, the grid is part of a modern military-industrial apparatus whose quintessential function is to destroy and desiccate, severing entities from each other and from life. Ordnance survey was the British military mapping agency in its early nineteenth century avatar, and has since metamorphosed into a metonymy of the British outdoors leisure pursuits. (cf. Hewitt 2010) This transformation should not, however, obscure its genealogy as a forerunner of the aerial surveys implemented by the colonial armies (Young 2003:34-44) and the contemporary digital mapping and GPS technology driven by the 1980s development of cruise missiles and drones. (Benjamin 2013; Chamayou 2015;

Gregory 2011) Consequently, the grid separates in a way the quincunx does not. Second, then, the grid represents a mode of separation, exemplified in the “mit einem schwarzen Netz verhängten Krankenhausfenster” (13), which reduces the narrator’s world to “das farblose Stück Himmel im Rahmen des Fensters.” (12) From the grid of representation, which drives a wedge between the words and things of Foucault’s French title, via the classical tabular order, we can go back to the early modern fabric of the world.

Yet all these aspects of gridding are matched, turned-inside-out (not opposed) by the porosity of the cliff-face. To return to the various avatars of the quincunx: perhaps the most intriguing metastasis of this image is the porous cliff upon which the narrator stands. Perforated like the cliff, the quincunx expresses both the fullness of creation and its elusive infiniteness. The quincunx structure can be taken to schematize both the cliff and the sand martins’ flight paths through the air, both porous solidity and solid porosity. The same chiasmic contrast between solidity and ephemerality can in turn be taken as a concrete device for thinking about the way human agency can be seen as a power in the world, one that has wreaked extraordinary damage, but also as an overrated hubris: “Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength”, comments Thoreau (1908: 8): “We are made to exaggerate the importance of the work we do; and yet how much is not done by us! Or, what if we had been taken sick?” (cf. also more recently Morton 2017:18-19) Turning inside-out hubristic and powerless human agency, the quincunx/cliff complex simultaneously refers us back to a natural agency that sustains the world. In a further mutation of the same interfolded duality, the world-constructing flight-paths of the sand martins/swallows (“Schon früher in der Kindheit, wenn ich den Abendstunden vom schattigen Talgrund aus diesen Seglern zuschaute, [...] habe ich mir vorgestellt, daß die Welt nur zusammengehalten wird von ihren durch den Luftraum gezogenen Bahnen” [87]) are both spatial and temporal: trackings of a timespace agency in which space is made by its non-human inhabitants. Time, in this parable, is stitched out of the same fabric as space, being made constantly by its natural actants, with the human spectator precariously perched on its cusp. There is no time except one that is immanent to the materiality of things in the world, and its movement is not one that is abstract and measurable, but rather, is that of the mobility inherent to things as they live in a process of dynamic transformation. (West-Pavlov 2013) Conversely, there is no materiality that does not participate in the temporality of constant transformation as renewal, at a multiplicity of tempos, many of them so slow or so rapid as to exceed human perception (Canales 2011), beyond and above any paltry notion of entropy. The honeycomb cliff does not collapse, and the chiasmically structured air-space and earth-space are not images of being and nothingness, stability and entropy, but rather, of the multiplicity of becoming and unbecoming, territorialization and deterritorialization. (cf. for instance Bohm & Peat 2011:132-7, 146)

In the last scene of the book, the same paradigm seems to be at work, when the narrator cites Browne’s mention of an early-modern Dutch “Sitte [...] im Hause eines Verstorbenen alle Spiegel und alle Bilder, auf denen Landschaften, Menschen oder die Früchte der Felder zu sehen waren, mit seidnem Trauerflor zu verhängen.” (350) But here it is representation that is covered in a grid of natural fibres closely linked to silk. This pattern recalls “die wunderbaren Farbstreifen in den [...] Musterbüchern” compiled by the Norwich silk merchants (335). Sebald does not, here, enact an obliteration of representation.

To read the text in this way would be merely to automatically rehearse a typical post-structuralist stance of representational critique: “it is not a matter of presencing an essence” but rather, “a question of suspending (not abolishing) the ghostliness of all our preconceptions and conceptions for the sake of noticing, a receptivity towards what might then be.” (Rooney 2007:200) To that extent, what is enacted here is a more affirmative operation, one that supplements representation and its aporia by pointing out their participation in networks of being. Sebald goes about overlaying one materiality in the text, namely, landscape and its textuality, by another, silk and its “textility.” Rather than the digital system of presence/absence that underpins the critique of representation and (paradoxically) the contemporary technological system, including the immense realm of base-2-dominated systems of computing, we are in the realm here of chaotic, multiplied, non-linear relationships, which might better be compared to quantum computing, which eschews such binaries, producing results that are more powerful, but in the domain of complementarity. (Rieffel & Polack 2014) Whereas the issue of absence presence/would concern the inaccessibility of the linguistic referent, this passage appears to foreground the interwoven, interfolded juxtaposition or sympathy or interaction of various materialities; their value as signifiers would be at the level of signalling, i.e. the causing of material effects, as part of the productive “clamour of being.” (Bonta & Protevi 2004:4; Deleuze 2007:44) Such a form of material meaning-making would be “non-representational” (Thrift 2008) because it would participate in a domain of meaning-effects which would be far greater in the scope of its network of interconnections, in the infinite potentiality of its non-linear causalities, and in the range of speeds of causality, above and below human perception: “the world is finally composed of systems so extensive, so dense, and so complex that it is no longer a question of representing them in their totality/globality.” (Kwinter 2003:12)

Just before he launches into the presentation of Sir Thomas Browne, Sebald evokes his deceased colleague Janine Dakyns, who resembles, he remarks, “[dem] unter den Werkzeugen der Zerstörung verharrenden Engel der Dürerschen Melancholie”; his colleague replies “daß die scheinbare Unordnung in ihren Dingen in Wahrheit so etwas wie eine vollendete oder doch der Vollendung zustrebende Ordnung darstelle.” (19) This small vignette perhaps encompasses the way out of a merely critical paradigm, refracted through landscape and its literary inscription, towards which Sebald’s novel gestures. Among the plethora of signs and writing, a “Papierlandschaft” or “Papieruniversium,” (17, 18) a “Speaking land” (Berndt & Berndt 1989), there is no dislocation within the order of semiosis; rather, the percept, not the referent, is *there*, part of a generative force whose nature is chaotic in the sense that it follows the non-linear paths of the cosmos in its multiple, overlapping trajectories of creativity. Paper and the business of writing are far from being a mode of separation from the world, notwithstanding all the manifestations of catastrophes environmental, geopolitical or semiotic to which they may bear witness in their lacunary manner. On the contrary, they can be construed as a material mode of participation in a universe of becoming which far exceeds their limited means of articulation, but nonetheless hospitably harbours them as part of its being.

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