W.G. Sebald: Journeys into the Past

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This dissertation, *W.G. Sebald: Journeys into the Past*, discusses the challenges that W.G. Sebald’s four prose works, *Vertigo* (Sebald, 2002b), *The Emigrants* (Sebald, 2002a), *Rings of Saturn* (Sebald, 2002c), and *Austerlitz* (2011), pose to historiography, and the way in which they problematize representing the past. It demonstrates how Sebald’s literature augments historical accounts, with the aim of preserving and passing on the memory of those who have suffered in some of the most traumatic episodes of Twentieth Century history. It highlights how Sebald’s work can be read as suggesting that the most effective historical accounts must be, by their nature, unsettling and that any claim to have written a definitive, settled account of the past is at best suspicious and at worst dangerous. Additionally, it argues that Sebald should be viewed as a postmodernist writer of historical narratives, and puts his unique style in context by comparing him to early psychogeographers, and clearly distinguishes his multi-dimensional character-narrators named ‘W.G. Sebald’ from Sebald the writer. This dissertation also attempts to trace the importance of trauma in the writing of many of his characters and places, and gives special consideration to the importance of the many character biographies, or ‘microhistories’, that populate his work. It suggests that Sebald enables his readers to better understand how layered and complex the concept of time is, and finally, discusses his asking the question as to whether mankind is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.
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List of Abbreviations

Primary works by W.G. Sebald will be cited in this dissertation according to the following abbreviation system. This dissertation has used English translations of W.G. Sebald’s work, and the editions referred to are indicated below:

(First published in German, 2001. Published in English 2001.)

(First published in German, 1992. Published in English 1996)

(First published in German, 1999. Published in English 2003)

(First published in German, 1995. Published in English 1998)

(First published in German 1995. Published in English 1998)
Introduction

Writing in *Le Différend*, Jean-François Lyotard suggested that the Holocaust can be compared to an earthquake that has destroyed all the instruments for measuring it (Lyotard, 1983, p.56). The problem Lyotard identifies, that of recording and representing history’s most devastating chapter, forms the still point at the heart of W. G. Sebald’s four prose works.

Sebald’s work similarly addresses the question of how to represent and remember the Holocaust, and draws particular attention to the new nature of the problem presented by the fact that the time is approaching when there will be no survivors remaining. Yet to focus solely on Sebald as a Holocaust writer is to ignore that each text also documents traumatic events stretching back to the Seventeenth Century. In this dissertation I shall argue, chiefly using a postmodern theoretical approach, that Sebald’s works illustrate the hollowness of both ‘grand narratives’ and of the inherent belief, as expressed by modernists, in new beginnings and human progress. Sebald’s fiction poses a stern challenge to traditional historiography, and draws attention to the problems of how to represent the past, and of the perspective taken by those who seek to document history. His texts arguably show how literature can not only question established historical narratives, but transmit and create new knowledge by complementing existing witness testimonies and memories, both individual and collective.

Chapter One begins with discussing how Sebald highlights the impossibility of an objective position in historiography, and assesses the significance of the observations that Sebald’s narrators make in places that ‘memorialise’ the events of the past. The chapter additionally sets out the rejection of ‘grand narratives’ that is central to Lyotardian postmodernism, and suggests that, in the light of this, there is particular significance attached to the character biographies, or microhistories of witnesses and places, that can be found
throughout his texts. Chapter Two sets out to analyse Sebald’s style, with a special focus on
the multi-dimensional narrators that chronicle his stories. This chapter will consider too the
significance of the travels that the narrators in *Vertigo* (Sebald, 2002b, hereafter *V*) and *The
Rings of Saturn* (Sebald, 2002c, *ROS*), and the lead character in *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2011, *A*),
take across the urban and rural environments of Western Europe, journeying through time, to
the past, as well as through space. Chapter Three examines the limitations of attempts to
represent the past, whether in texts or historical sites, and shows how such representations
can obscure or repress the events that they are said to depict. It discusses memory in the
context of repressed memories returning to the character of Jacques Austerlitz, and introduces
postmemory, a concept vital to appreciating the importance of Sebald’s work. Finally, with a
comparison to contemporary art, the dissertation offers a new interpretation of Sebald’s
figure of the walker. In conclusion, it assesses the applicability of a postmodern framework
for understanding Sebald, and suggests that in the future his work may be regarded as
capturing the sense of feeling of the post-postmodern age.
Chapter One: The writing of history

Echoing Theodor W. Adorno’s 1949 dictum that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno, 1983, p.34), Sebald confirmed in an interview that his books approach the Holocaust tangentially, because ‘to write of concentration camps is virtually impossible’ (Interview with Rondas, 2001, cited in Wolff, 2014, p.185). While the horrors of the Holocaust lie at the heart of his body of work, Sebald uses a number of techniques to jolt the reader into questioning accepted versions of history. In each text, Sebald introduces the reader to a variety of characters, drawn from both reality and fiction, who are curiously at odds with their surroundings. To a list of people who figure in Sebald’s microhistories we must add the narrators of each of the four prose works, to whom this dissertation will demonstrate the many reasons why he should not be considered identical. The biographical microhistories of the characters that are inserted in between discourses on economic or social history, or commentaries of the narrator’s surroundings as he makes his way through urban and rural landscapes, lift the seams on the layers of history, portraying individuals who are somehow out of time but with whom the reader can establish a living empathy. For György Lukács such a connection was key to the effectiveness of a historical novel:

‘What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality’. (Lukacs, 1962, p.42)

Sebald’s work makes us aware that what constitutes ‘historical reality’ is a contested idea, which is always in flux, though at the same time the ‘poetic awakening’ of his marginal figures triggers a powerful emotional response from the reader. In attempting to better understand the contribution that Sebald makes in challenging the reliability of accounts and
representations of the past this essay will take its lead from Karl Marx’s definition of history, before developing a postmodern position on Sebald’s work. Marx was unequivocal:

‘History does nothing, it possesses no immense wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, real living man who does everything, who possesses and fights’. (Marx - Engels: Gesamtausgabe, I, iii, 625, cited in Carr, 1961, p.43)

**Perspective**

Marx’s observation forces us to separate the event itself from the historical account that is written about it. Historical accounts therefore, like all culture, are constructs and not natural. Sebald breaks the process of historiography down even further, with the problems experienced by his characters and narrators in gaining a perspective on events underlining the impossibility of a truly objective position. Though a preoccupation across Sebald’s prose works, it is in *The Rings of Saturn* that the problem of perspective is explored in greatest depth. Ostensibly an account of the narrator’s effort to counter a bout of melancholy by taking a walking tour of Suffolk, the text meanders not only through the landmarks of the county’s towns and countryside, but through many of the most traumatic episodes in the history of Western civilisation, with oblique references to the Holocaust. Recalling, while walking, a visit to The Hague to view Rembrandt’s large group portrait *The Anatomy Lesson* the narrator hopes to better understand where the surgeon and writer Sir Thomas Browne might have viewed the dissection the canvas depicts, but instead he feels so overcome by the painting that he diverts his attention to Jacob Van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem with Bleaching fields* for an hour to recover. Recuperating in front of the canvas, the narrator remarks that it would be impossible for the artist to attain the bird’s-eye view of the landscape that the painting portrays:
The truth is that Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above the earth. *(ROS, p.83)*

Later, remembering a visit to the Waterloo Panorama, a one hundred and ten yards by twelve mural by Louis Dumontin of the 1815 battle, the narrator is again troubled by the problem of the perspective taken and representation of great historical events:

>This then, I thought, as I looked round me is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. *(ROS, p.125)*

The narrator’s profound sense of unease while visiting the Panorama is understandable. For one, it was painted nearly a hundred years after the battle meaning several generations had passed before Dumontin began work on the fresco. As on a number of occasions, Sebald’s narrator remains silent on the tragic irony of a nation’s leaders commissioning a representation glorifying battle in 1912, and thus reinforcing the narrative of the Allies gloriously defeating Napoleon, when the reader knows that the bloody catastrophe of the First World War will shortly break out. Furthermore, the nature of the Panorama being housed in a huge round building makes the visiting experience an immersive, dizzying one for the visitor. As Sebald writes ‘we see everything at once’, as though being impressed and disoriented will override any doubts that the viewer might have as to the accuracy and reliability of the image. Indeed, his concern that the representation of history requires a ‘falsification of perspective’ is not only confined to artistic representations of the past, and provokes the reader to question the reliability of established historical accounts.

It is in *Austerlitz* that the conflict between an event and later testimonies and representations of it are most clearly articulated. Telling the story of a neurotic man who vainly tries to trace his true identity after realising that he was transported to the United
Kingdom and adopted by a Welsh Methodist Minister and his wife as part of the kindertransport rescue mission, *Austerlitz* is the most literal depiction of the idea that what we take for reality may instead be a construct built on uneasy foundations. Across Sebald’s work it is arguably the clearest expression of the idea of the unreliability of that which is popularly regarded as settled history. In a key passage, after uncannily describing the 1805 Battle of Austerlitz, Andre Hilary, the History Tutor at Stower Grange Boarding School outlines to his class the limits of reproducing real events as ‘history’:

> All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us ... Our concern with history, so Hilary’s thesis ran, is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered. (A, p.101)

At its most simple level we can understand Hilary’s argument as being that a real event from which a historical narrative is derived will always be different from, and in some way in conflict with, the account that is used to describe it, no matter how great an effort is made for the account to be objective. His layered argument covers the ground of multiple thinkers. He can be said to be taking a Foucauldian position in encouraging his pupils to become aware of the dynamics that hold society in thrall to a few powerful interests. Furthermore, the visual images the writer of history calls upon, the character seems to argue, appeal to the collective unconscious, much like archetypes in Jungian psychology. One of the more disturbing conclusions that Sebald seems to infer can be drawn from this observation is that owing to the need to constantly interpret the past and present via such archetypes, mankind is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past for eternity. However, as with taking care not to mistake Sebald the author with Sebald the character-narrator, it is clearly paramount not to regard
Hilary as representing Sebald’s position, which this essay will proceed to argue is governed less by adhering to any theoretical viewpoint but by a deeply fatalistic view of history.

**Metanarratives**

Lyotard defined the postmodern condition as being that of ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Jenkins, 1997, p.36). Hilary’s complex analysis arguably takes Lyotard’s position a step further in suggesting that any narrative of history cannot possibly capture the dynamics of the real event, and will instead be a story drawing from the historian’s interpretation of the event packaged to appeal to the reader’s pre-conceptions. These stories, however, can at times be deeply dangerous. Sebald is keenly aware of the dangers of societies being duped, or even hypnotised, by warped narratives of history, and tangentially approaches the issue of the inter-war German population embracing Nazism, despite the apparently obviously poisonous nature of the policies and totalitarianism they planned and realised. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald makes intertextual references to the fictional world of Tlön created by intellectuals in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (Borges, 1962) a text with which the novel is in deep dialogue:

> [on Tlön ] ‘in historiography, the indisputable advantages of a fictitious past have become apparent’. (*ROS*, p.71)

In Borges’ story the culture of *Tlön*, an imaginary world created by academics pursuing speculative interests in the possibilities of languages and epistemology, is gradually adopted by the unthinking general population of the real world, invoking the disgust of the character-narrator Borges. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin, a profound influence on Sebald’s thinking, was among the first to articulate the fact that, as with historical narratives, the narratives of current affairs pursued by media interests can confuse and mislead an unthinking public:
It is precisely the purpose of the public opinion generated by the press to make the public incapable of judging, to insinuate into it the attitude of someone irresponsible, uninformed. (Benjamin, 1931, p.501)

‘Where, after the metanarratives, does legitimacy reside?’, asked Lyotard at the dawn of postmodernism (Jenkins, 1997, p.37). For Sebald, no doubt sharing Borges and Benjamin’s suspicion of narratives that discourage thinking, a sort of legitimacy, or authenticity, seems to exist in what I shall term as the ‘character microhistories’ of the eccentric or overlooked people and places that populate his texts. In such stories, which are threaded in-between representations of, and ruminations on, the grand narratives of history, literature and history can be said to converge. Baudrillard argued that in the postmodern age the telling of history ‘has become impossible because that telling (re-citatum) is, by definition, the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings’ (Jenkins, 1997, p.40). Jenkins (1997) goes further and suggests that in the postmodern age history and literature may both be seen as forms of storytelling. Sebald’s approach is not so radical, but in re animating the lives of those who have been overlooked by traditional historical accounts he uses his writing to augment established historical records such as institutional archives. Burns and van der Will see Sebald’s microhistories as evidence of his belief that ‘the task of art, particularly literature, is to engage in creative activity as a labour of mourning and a demonstration of solidarity with those who suffer’ (Burns & Will, 2011, p.341).

**Sebald’s curiosities**

Sebald’s characters are those who inhabit the voids of history, the people whose suffering and trauma goes unrecorded in major historical accounts. The most moving stories are inevitably those of the Jewish people whose lives were shattered by the Nazi rise to power and resulting Second World War and Holocaust. The actual events that occurred at the concentration camps as part of the ‘Final Solution’ are directly described only once in
Sebald’s prose work, when in *Austerlitz* the narrator describes the harsh reality of life at Theresienstadt, where the protagonist discovers that his mother was sent. Such stories arguably demonstrate how literature can compensate for the problems historians have in adequately representing the Holocaust. As the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész writes ‘we may form a realistic view of the Holocaust, this incomprehensible and confusing reality, only with the help of the aesthetic imagination’ (Kertész, 1993, p.22).

In one of the short stories that form *The Emigrants*, Sebald tells the story of Paul Bereyter, a talented primary school teacher who taught the narrator in the town of S, and was later forbidden to teach when the Nazis introduced laws which prohibited people of Jewish ancestry from taking public positions (Sebald, 2002a, hereafter *E*). The psychological toll that is taken on Bereyter owing to losing his position and seeing his father’s business in his hometown of Gunzenhausen, where Jewish families had been prominent residents for generations, subjected to violent attacks and subsequently destroyed during Kristallnacht before its forced sale to a Nazi supporter is never directly described, leaving much to the reader’s imagination as Kertész suggests. Instead, we are told that ‘the wonderful future he had dreamt of … collapsed without sound like the proverbial house of cards. All his prospects blurred’ (*E*, p.48). Beneath this, Sebald inserts a photograph of Bereyter alongside a family in Basle, Switzerland with whom he had reluctantly taken a post as a house tutor, where he is described as having ‘plunged within a month from happiness to misfortune, and was so terribly thin that he seems to have almost reached a physical vanishing point’ (*E*, p.49). We see the traces of the character of K from Kafka’s *The Castle*, as Bereyter becomes alienated from both the Country and profession he loves so ardently, by an irrational, unaccountable bureaucracy. Bereyter begins to behave, what on the surface seems increasingly oddly, leaving a post as a tutor in Paris to take on an office job at a garage in Oranienburg. Sebald’s sending his character to Oranienburg is not a chance happening; the small town was the
location for one of the first Nazi concentration camps, to which members of Berlin’s literary and arts scene were sent from as early as 1933 (Barnett, 1998, p.101). From this post he is called up to the German Army, being ‘three-quarters Aryan’, and serves for six years around war-torn Europe. Post-war the character returns to teaching in Germany, leading a solitary life immersed in literature and with an ominous fascination with the logistics of railways – ‘Railways had meant a great deal to him – perhaps he felt they were headed for death’ (E, p.61). Trains and railways figure prominently across Sebald’s output, another knowing allusion to the Holocaust, and it is perhaps little surprise to the reader when Bereyter commits suicide on the train tracks near his hometown. The tragic story of Paul Bereyter perfectly encapsulates the way in which Sebald’s intense, emotionally powerful writing of character micro-histories animates the past in a way in which historical accounts and artefacts could never achieve.

Sebald’s characters are typically people who have either retreated by choice, or been forced by circumstance, to the margins of society and history. From the margins they occupy, as it were, the nooks and crannies on the riverbank as time washes by, forgotten in the reality of their own time and neglected in the narratives that tell the story of the past. In *The Rings of Saturn*, while walking alongside a lake overlooked by Henstead Hall, the narrator recalls an article that he clipped some months previously from the Eastern Daily Press, concerning the recent death of the Hall’s owner, Major George Wyndham Le Strange. Le Strange, we are told, was an aristocrat by birth who served in a tank regiment that liberated Bergen-Belsen in April 1945. Upon being demobbed, Le Strange returns from Germany to manage his great-uncle’s estates in Suffolk and Birmingham. Then he lived a reclusive life at his family seat at Henstead, and over time discharged his household staff until he lived alone with only a tame cockerel and his young housekeeper, Florence Barnes. His housekeeper is employed ‘on the explicit condition that she takes the meals she prepared together with him, but in absolute
silence’ (ROS, p.62). Upon his death, the housekeeper is bequeathed Le Strange’s entire fortune, estimated at having been worth several million pounds. It is striking how little emotional language Sebald uses in recounting Le Strange’s life; it is left to the reader to speculate as to whether Le Strange’s behaviour can be attributed to the traumatic experience of his having witnessed the reality of a concentration camp, though the link is deliberately obvious.

Sebald is clearly deeply concerned with the interiority of the subjects of his microhistories such as Le Strange, yet they must remain alien and external for a number of reasons. Firstly, Sebald draws attention to the fact that he relies on other texts and media as his source of information and inspiration. Nothing is experienced first-hand; he relies on newspaper cuttings and local gossip for the information he gathers on Le Strange, both potentially highly unreliable sources for an author attuned to the problem of perspective. Secondly, there is a point at which language cannot be anything other than an approximation for the subject’s thoughts and feelings. In leaving the reader to speculate on the interiority of his characters, Sebald is once invoking an empathetic reaction whilst acknowledging the limits of portraying the subjective experience of trauma through universal language.

Sebald’s focus on microhistory is in keeping with the approach taken by historians such as Iggers, who view their discipline as needing to change focus in the light of the challenge that postmodern ideas pose to the relationship of historians to their subject and to the idea of objective history (Iggers, 2012). For Iggers the contemporary discipline must be a hybrid, moving away from a macrohistorical approach towards microhistory, cultural history and the history of everyday life. Eschewing the leaders that figure prominently in conventional macrohistories, and perhaps subscribing to Lukacs’ view that “The 'world-historical individual' can only figure as a minor character in the [historical] novel because of the complexity and intricacy of the whole social-historical process”, Sebald’s concern is
chiefly with people exiled from society (Lukacs, 1962). Only once is Hitler named directly in Sebald’s work, in *Austerlitz*, when the protagonist’s former nanny Vera describes to him how his father Maximilian had despaired at how the Fuhrer had received a ‘prodigious’ welcome at the Nuremberg Nazi Party Rally (*A*, p.239).

**Memory and Historiography**

Even when Sebald’s characters reflect on the plans and actions of tyrants, their concern is less with finding any rationale for their rise to power and more with familiar Sebaldian themes such as the problem of perspective and the fallibility of human memory. The opening of *Vertigo* sets the scene by describing how in May 1880 Napoleon and a force of 36,000 men crossed the St. Bernard Pass, an undertaking which had previously been regarded as impossible. Among those taking the legendary march was Marie Henri Beyle, better known by his pen name Stendhal. Delving into the notes that Stendhal made reflecting on the march some thirty-six years later, Sebald highlights how difficult he found it to accurately remember the details of one of the largest troop movements ever undertaken;

‘At times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarce credit them – such as that of General Marmont, whom he believes he saw at Martigny to the left of the track along which a column was moving, clad in the royal- and sky blue robes of a Councillor of State…’ (*V*, p.5)

Stendhal is quick to acknowledge that the image in his mind must be wrong, because while on tour Marmont must have been wearing his General’s uniform. This microhistory is, however, much more layered that simply being a reflection on the fallibility of human memory. Instead, Sebald offers a penetrating insight into the psyche. Unable to cope with being bombarded with images, the mind often settles on an image associated with an idea or person precisely because it has been repeatedly seen by the viewer rather than truthfully
recollecting real events (these repeated images will be carefully controlled and often reinforced by a variety of media channels). This is arguably seen in the unconscious effectiveness of modern political propaganda and advertising, even with the most cynical of voters and consumers. Stendhal states as much on the following page, commenting that ‘the difference between the images of the battle which he had in his head and what he now saw before him as evidence that the battle had in fact taken place occasioned in him a vertiginous sense of confusion such as he had never previously experienced’ (V, p.17). Crudely put, for Stendhal who had never been in any military engagement before, the reality of warfare did not, and could not, live up to the pre-formed images in his mind of the glory of blood shed for the national good. Sebald’s choice of Stendhal forgetting General Marmont’s position is a knowing one, especially in view of the fact that the General was a prolific biographer whose memoirs continue to be of great value to scholars of military history. To arrive at something close to a truthful version of history requires a vast number of sources, Sebald seems to infer, but even then the problem of perspective means that the real lived experience must forever be elusive. Historiography is fraught with problems for Sebald, and anyone purporting to have produced a final, definitive account of past events is at best deluded and at worst dangerous. Reflecting on the how the techniques of self-reflexive fiction writing can lend at least some legitimation to the writing of history, Burns and Van der Will suggest that:

‘For Sebald, historiography cannot be approached sine ira et studio, as Tacitus would have us believe. On the contrary: in his eyes it is legitimated as a form of writing only where the author, as an empathetic listener and communicator, applies the techniques of fiction, mixes narrated times, and unearths, layer by layer, the individual’s pathology of confusion and trauma that is configured in mournful memory’ (Burns and Van der Will, 2011, p.372)

In the reader’s final encounter with Stendhal, the character is a vessel for the rejection of the ‘Great Man’ of History, stoically reflecting that, ‘it is a fundamentally insane notion … that one is able to influence the course of events by a turn of the helm, by will-power alone,
whereas in fact all is determined by the most complex of interdependencies’ (V, p.156). As such, Sebald offers another critique of history; that events are capable of being spun into a coherent narrative, but in reality are chaotic and probably beyond comprehension. While Sebald can be said to adopt a now orthodox postmodern position in rejecting the ‘Great Actors’ and ‘Subjects’ of history such as the nation state, the proletariat, and the party, the chief importance of his work in the context of history lies in remembering those whose plight is currently held in dull archives rather than mainstream historical narratives.
Chapter 2: Travelling through history in urban and rural environments

Great works of art are often lauded for their having captured the ‘Zeitgeist’, popularly translated into English as meaning the ‘spirit of the age’. Using a number of narrators and characters who spend their time investigating archives, the layout of cities, architecture, stately homes and ruins, Sebald frequently resurrects spirits from the past for examination in the present. Sebald thus takes his reader on a series of journeys to discover the past and present the ‘Geist’ (translated from German into English depending on context as ‘mind’, ‘spirit’ or ‘ghost’) of a variety of buildings and places, and the people who constructed or lived in them. ‘And so they are ever returning to us, the dead’, he writes in The Emigrants, restating his worldview that there is no barrier between the past and present (E, p.23). Just as his prose often digresses and meanders from its subject matter, so too his characters and narrators wander at times aimlessly across the urban and rural landscapes of Western Europe, decoding the built environment and discovering worlds within worlds. This chapter will discuss how Sebald’s wanderers uncover the historical significance of the people and places they encounter, with curious stories and traces of destruction being found in even the most unlikely of locations.

Flaneurie

Having his characters move about their environment on foot provides Sebald with the ideal vantage point to repeatedly ask ‘How has the history of this place, and its inhabitants, been recorded?’ They journey not just across the city or landscape, but into a selected, often traumatic, point in that place’s layers of history; sighting a particular ruin or architectural feature while walking, for example, frequently leads to a discourse on a defining period in the site’s history. In such ways, we can see the idea of the flaneur subverted. For Turner the flaneur was:
‘a creation of the new industry of luxury and consumption, at home strolling around the facades and arcades. The new capitalism promoted the hegemony of the eye over the ear, providing fresh vehicles for gazing and consuming … This new actor epitomises the detached nihilistic observer of society, a mere strolling figure, the externally observing eye, gazing at the novel luxuries and consumption items of modern capital…” (Turner, 1994, p.27)

Sebald’s characters, on the other hand, are rarely ‘at home’ in their surroundings, transmitting instead to the reader a jaded sense of nervous energy and hypersensitivity. At the beginning of Rings of Saturn ‘the unaccustomed sense of freedom’ that the narrator feels at leaving his work for the Suffolk countryside is immediately tempered by a ‘paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction (ROS, p.1). As Turner identifies, the emergence of wealth and leisure time in what he terms as the ‘new capitalism’ of the Nineteenth Century, brought new opportunities for the urban stroller to see and be seen. On one level, Sebald’s work can be read as can be read as taking the long view of history, seeing capitalism as merely another cyclical epoch in human history. Rather than seeing it as ‘new’ in the sense Turner describes, from this perspective capitalism’s different guises are the manifestation of a cyclical pattern of economic behaviour. Several times in The Rings of Saturn, the narrator directly mentions the different stages of the dominant economic system, such as when he reports how the residents of Lowestoft had their hopes for their town’s improvement after years of decline raised by the ‘hardline capitalist years of Baroness Thatcher’ only to see their aspirations collapse in a ‘fever of speculation’ (ROS, p.43).

Sebald’s narrators are, most obviously, the antithesis of the figure most readily associated with flaneurie, the dandy. There is perhaps a fleeting similarity in Baudelaire’s memorable effort to equate dandyism as perhaps coming close ‘to spirituality and to stoicism’, and the narrators, in the main, stoically endure rather than celebrate life (Baudelaire, 1863). It is in their response to people and places encountered when travelling
that we see how inconsistent and contradictory the narrators actually are. Indeed, it is tempting to see them at various points in the texts as part-angry radical academic, part-moralistic Victorian gentleman berating society’s decline and even part-bumbling heritage tourist, seeing the world through sepia-tinted spectacles, nostalgic for a time that never was. However, to settle on such a view of the narrator, especially the latter, would be a grave mistake. Occasionally a narrator’s self-contradictions and overwhelming pessimism are a source of much-needed humour. In *Vertigo*, while in Venice leafing through Franz Grillparzer’s *Italian Diary*, Sebald, the seemingly constant traveller, reflects on how he shares the dramatist’s dislike of travel. ‘Nothing pleases me, any more than it did him’, he grumbles, ‘the sights I find infinitely disappointing, one and all; and I sometimes think that I would have done far better to stay at home with my maps and timetables’ (*V*, p.54).

Sebald’s conflicted, multi-dimensional narrators are clearly an important and intentional part of his fiction writing, which is in marked contrast to the precision and clarity of expression one finds in his essays and lectures such as *On the Natural History of Destruction*. The antiquarian style in which he writes his fiction envelops the reader in the language of the past, but the themes he raises are timeless. His moving, sometimes old-fashioned seeming, prose makes an uneasy companion to the photographs that scatter his texts, and it is striking to read references to Twentieth Century art forms and technology, such as cinema and nuclear weapons, described in what seems to be the laboured prose of an indeterminate bygone age. Speaking in a radio interview, Sebald was clear that his style was a considered construction:

‘The old-fashionedness of the diction or of the narrative tone is ... nothing to do with nostalgia for a better age that’s gone past but is simply something that, as it were, heightens the awareness of that which we have managed to engineer in this century’. (Bookworm, 2001 - KCRW interview with Michael Silverblatt)
Moreover, there is perhaps a knowing reference to his own approach, when his narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* quasi-humorously writes of Sir Thomas Browne that:

> ‘In common with other English writers of the seventeenth century, Browne wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one of two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortege in their sheer ceremonial lavishness’ (ROS, p.19)

One can see clear parallels between Sebald’s recycling of writing styles of the past with his rejection of historicism. The language available to a creative writer is never settled and nor is the interpretation of history. Most obviously, elements of his choice of language and style owe much to European Nineteenth Century realist writers, some of whom such as Stendhal and Balzac populate his text. His narrators share their moral force at times, and the fact that the narrators have a conscience is made plain, but their role is principally investigative; they raise questions rather than state what is right and wrong. The fact that Sebald’s stories are told via the filter of ambiguous, self-undermining, unpredictable narrators may be seen as further evidence of the postmodern form and style in which his work is presented and delivered. As such, despite the apparent integrity and lack of artifice of the narrators, there is a pervading sense of knowing and irony throughout *Vertigo, Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. For Hutcheon this contributes to the ‘kind of wholesale “nudging” commitment to doubleness, or “duplicity” that constitutes postmodernism’s distinctive character (Hutcheon, 2001, p.1).

For Sebald, his choice of form is clearly more about the effect generated for the reader rather than any commitment to postmodernism. Textual analysis reveals there are different styles of writing within the confines of each text, in addition to his many intertextual references, and we may say there are books within books. This is most evident in his self-contained microhistories, but other notable examples exist such as the dizzying twelve pages
without a full stop or significant pause in *Austerlitz* in which the lead character describes how thousands of Jewish people were duped into parting with their possessions and heading willingly to the Theresiensadt concentration camp, having been led to believe that it was a health resort (A, p. 331-343). The matter of fact passage, written without reflection on the horrifying events it recounts, describes how Jews from all conceivable social and professional backgrounds were crammed in an area ‘little more than a square kilometre’, and may be seen as a pastiche of the bureaucratic language of the Nazi administration (A, p.331). This epic sentence is capable of dual interpretations, and is perhaps a further example of Sebald’s form having, if not a ‘commitment’, then certainly a potential for the ‘doubleness’ Hutcheon identifies. Indeed, quite the opposite to being a pastiche, the sentence may be read, much like Browne’s ‘funeral cortege’, as a sustained graceful and redemptive tour de force which argues in its form for the continuity and integrity required to tell this story wholly and truthfully (Wallace, 2015).

**Psychogeography**

Perhaps because his style and methodology resists easy categorisation, Sebald’s works are frequently grouped together under the banner of being ‘Psychogeography’. Although there are parallels with the techniques of the original psychogeographers, the Situationists, Sebald’s broader focus on uncovering hidden histories and postmodern intertextual approach means that the label hovers uneasily above his texts. At the outset the Situationists’ aims were clear, with Guy Debord proposing that ‘Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’ (Knabb, 1981, p.50). A striking parallel with Debord’s call to action may be seen in *Austerlitz* where the main character suggests that the historic buildings of the nineteenth century that he researches were once indicative of the impending annihilation facing Western civilisation: ‘… the whole
history of the architecture and civilisation of the bourgeois age … pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time’ (A, p.197). Austerlitz’s interpretation of the impressive public buildings erected in the Nineteenth Century as being portents of the war and annihilation draws together a wider theme of Sebald’s work. For Sebald, despite the veneer of control and sophistication that fine architecture and culture can give a society, chaos lurks in the shadows and destruction remains a constant over time.

Approaching Sebald’s work from the position of regarding him as a writer of history is particularly useful in analysing his preoccupation with buildings and architecture. Sebald looks beyond the present space and time, and illuminate the thoughts and experiences of individuals at a previous point in that space’s past. At times the buildings he focuses on quite literally bury history through being constructed on or above places where traumatic events have occurred. This is seen when Austerlitz learns from the librarian Henri Lemoine that the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris rests upon a site of trauma that seems to have been forgotten in collective memory (A, p.400). Wolff notes that it is particularly significant that it is not through archaeological digging that this past is revealed, but rather through individual memory (Wolff, 2014, p.177). Sebald’s focus on the siting of the Bibliotheque at the location where some one thousand five hundred Nazi collaborators stored the property looted from the forty thousand apartments once occupied by the city’s Jewish people, is one of his more overt metaphors for history being layered rather than chronological, and the burial of shameful episodes from the past by state institutions. Strikingly, Lemoine’s observations can be said to resemble Sebald’s own approach to history, articulated most clearly in *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2004), more closely than many of the narrator’s that the reader cannot help but mistake for being W.G. Sebald himself. In his commentary Sebald aligns himself most closely with the filmmaker Alexander Kluge’s take on investigating history as being
akin to ‘an archaeological excavation of the slag heap of our collective existence’ (NHOD, p.54). Just as looking down from the monumental library has a dizzying effect on Lemoine to the extent that he feels the ‘pull of the abyss below’, for the narrator the contemplation of the past induces a feeling of vertigo. Moreover, in certain places where events of great consequence have occurred time can be tangibly felt by its subject:

‘Sometimes, so Lemoine told me, said Austerlitz, he felt the current of time streaming round his temples and brow when he was up here, but perhaps, he added, that is only a reflex of the awareness formed in my mind over the years of the various layers which have been superimposed on each other to form the carapace of the city’ (A, p.401).

**Beginning the Journey**

‘For geography and chronology are the two eyes of history’ wrote Seventeenth Century philosopher Giambattista Vico, one of the first scholars to set out the limits of historiography (Vico, 1999, p.12). While Sebald can access written chronological accounts from his desk, if he is to have clear sight of what history is then he needs to experience and record the land, its features and inhabitants. In *Vertigo*, Sebald’s most personal journey, or at least one that is taken without other authors acting as portals to the past, is when he revisits his hometown of Wertach in Bavaria. Unlike many of the subjects of his tableaux, Sebald does not have a strong association to any particular place, and his childhood home is no exception. In another nod to Kafka, Wertach is referred to simply as ‘W.’, leaving the reader to ponder whether the abbreviation is made out of familiarity or disgust. Sebald is additionally offering a reminder that naming is merely how we render the temporary permanent, a way of accounting for a chaotic, fluctuating world. At one point the narrator recalls a scene where schoolchildren were copying from the blackboard a chronological list of ‘terrible events [in the history of W.] which, when recorded in this way, had something reassuring and comforting about them’ (V, p.240). The dry way the dates are recorded
naturally belies the harsh reality of the lived experience. All that remains are dates, statistics, ruins and pockmarked landscapes. Sebald’s list is one of apparently relentless misery:

‘In 1511 the Black Death claimed 105 lives. In 1530, 100 houses went up in flames. 1569: the whole settlement devastated in a blaze. 1605: another fire reduced 140 houses to ashes. 1633: W. burned down by the Swedes. 1635: 700 inhabitants died of the plague. 1806-14: 19 volunteers from W. fell in the wars of liberation. 1816-17: years of famine in consequence of unprecedented rainfall. 1870-71: 5 fusiliers from W. lost their lives in battle. 1893: on the 16th April a great conflagration destroyed the entire village. 1914-18: 68 of our sons laid down their lives for the fatherland. 1939-45: 125 from our ranks did not return home from the Second World War.’ (V, p.241)

Reality is lost in chronological data and, in the narrator’s pessimistic weltanschauung, it is merely a matter of time until the next terrible event occurs. In his commentary on Paul Celan’s poetry, Jacques Derrida notes the crucial role that names and dates play in the verification of witness statements (Derrida, 1986). They alone provide context, and at least some measure of reliability and predictability, whereas a witness statement is subject to an innumerable number of variables, such as the witness’s biases and truthfulness. According to Derrida, dates and names are the most common linguistic elements imaginable, completely contingent units which are meaningless in themselves. However, as soon as they can be linked to a specific context they become utterly singular and meaningful. As Ceuppens observes, this particularly true of birth dates and so-called historical dates (Fuchs & Long, 2007, p.70). To relate this thinking back to Sebald’s scene in the schoolroom, it makes us aware of the process of repetition, usually state-sanctioned and approved, that is at the heart of why a particular date is regarded as being ‘historical’. It leads the reader to reflect on those dates, and the events that occurred on them, that have not been deigned worthy of repetition and memory. We rely on numerical data, like dates, to help makes sense of the world, but on occasions the sheer scale of a number renders it impossible for the human mind to process. In Sebald’s work, accounts of famous battles are usually accompanied by the number of soldiers killed in the conflict, yet these figures are ironised and do not, and cannot have, the emotional
impact on the reader that his character microhistories have. The limits of human perception mean that there is a disconcerting truth it seems in the infamous quip apocryphally attributed to Stalin that ‘If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics’. Problems of perception lie in our ability to process the enormity and cruelty of the Second World War and Holocaust. As Adorno has argued, the Second World War is an event without witnesses, because nothing happened that a witness would be capable of perceiving – ‘the man-made machinery of war had long outstripped the capacity of humans to register it in sensory or intellectual terms’ (Fuchs & Long, 2007, p.64). The Second World War and ‘Final Solution’, it follows, effectively mark the time at which narrative representation of history becomes impossible.

Sebald’s return to Wertach represents his first effort to tackle and illuminate the collective amnesia that beset the German people concerning the Nazi rise to power, and the atrocities of the Second World War and Holocaust, for at least a generation after the War’s end. Revisiting his childhood home, the narrator recalls the delight his parents felt at purchasing furniture for their first home:

‘For my parents, both of whom came from provincial backwaters, my mother from W. and my father from the Bavarian Forest, the acquisition of living room furniture befitting their station, which, as the unwritten rule required, had to conform in every detail with the tastes of the average couple representative of the emerging classless society, probably marked the moment when, in the wake of their in some respects rather difficult early lives, it must have seemed to them as if there were, after all, something like a higher justice’. (V, p.193)

In focussing his zoom lens on the simple hopes of his parents, Sebald captures something of the sense of freedom and aspiration that accompanied the Nazis rise to power, a contrast to the poverty and embarrassment of the Weimar era. For the first time, his father felt some sense of security, and having been recently promoted to quartermaster in the new Reich Army could ‘be said to have attained a certain position’ (V, p.193). Compared with the horror
and uncertainty of the previous two decades, the new ‘classless society’ with a rapidly-growing economy, led by a charismatic Chancellor intent on restoring Germany to its rightful position in world affairs, must have seemed too good to be true for couples such as the Sebalds. In Austerlitz, the main character’s father recounts Hitler’s entry into a rally at Nuremberg as being that of a ‘long awaited saviour marking is entry’, and that the German people were ‘now developing an image of themselves as a people chosen to evangelise the world’ (A, p.239). The clear question Sebald is asking is ‘How could one of the most advanced and cultured societies on earth fall prey to the barbarism of Nazism?’ As so often, Sebald sees both sides of the argument, but his judgment is clear. While leaving weightier analysis to professional historians, in re-animating the hopes of people such as his parents, we see how apparently reasonable people were so comprehensively duped. Sebald’s repeated focus on the unreliability of historical narratives and images is of relevance too here, and the reader is left with the imponderable question as to whether the sophisticated use of images and narratives by Goebbels’ propaganda machine marks the point at which they become so complex and malleable as to be able to hypnotise a society to an extent that the critical faculties of its people are rendered numb.

**The Architectural Historian**

Across Sebald’s tableaux no character is rendered as numb by the events of history than the tragicomic figure of Jacques Austerlitz in Austerlitz. While microhistories such as that of Paul Bereyter and Major Le Strange are short but intense exercises in pity where Sebald manipulates his reader into feeling the suffering of his subject, Austerlitz is noticeably different. Upon first reading, it is easy to mistakenly attribute this to Sebald being unable to sustain the exercise in pity across a novel stretching to over four hundred pages. Austerlitz seldom feels like a real person, more a vessel, a character with no discernible traits, likes, dislikes, wants or desires, except to discover the fate of his parents. This, however, may be
explained as Sebald’s writing of the experience of trauma into his character’s personality. The obsessive architectural historian decodes buildings for the reader as he anxiously makes his way through the cityscape, frequently seeing built structures as either remnants or foreboding signposts of destruction. Austerlitz too channels the spirit of the early psychogeographers, and offers a number of knowing references to their uncompromising, politically-charged slogans; ‘the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image’ wrote Debord in 1953 (Debord, 1970, article 30). At Antwerp Centraal Station, during their first meeting, Austerlitz draws the narrator’s attention to the stone escutcheons above the Station’s hallway that bear symbols such as sheaves of corn, crossed hammers and a heraldic motif of a beehive ‘symbolising the principle of capital accumulation’ (A, p.130). When viewed with a full knowledge of the text, this scene is particularly ironic, with Austerlitz launching, by habit, into interpreting the signs in the built environment using a semiotic framework of interpretation, however, he repeatedly misreads the signs of his early childhood that threatens to re-surface in a number of key scenes, including the trip he takes with Marie de Verneuil to Marienbad (a scene analysed in the next chapter).

**Exiting mankind**

The close focus that Sebald brings to bear in his microhistories, such as Austerlitz’s painstaking analysis of the built environment or that of his hopeful parents setting up home in Wertach in *Vertigo*, finds a counterpoint with the wide angle lens that he uses to describe cities from above or afar. In *The Rings of Saturn*, he describes the view looking down on Amsterdam while flying to Norwich. When looking from above, the history that we recognise in the form of dates and witness accounts is incidental, and the shapes, patterns and activities on the land below tell their own story. Poetic echoes of past bombing raids, too, are obvious. At times, Sebald writes as though his narrator has temporarily left not only the land but the
human race. Humans are merely another species from this detached viewpoint, history is just an agglomeration of words and narratives, and the complexities of the information age might variously legitimise or befuddle us at ground level, but from high in the air we are simply one more animal group gathering and accumulating, building and destroying:

‘No matter whether one is flying over Newfoundland or the sea of lights that stretches from Boston to Philadelphia after nightfall ... it is as though there were no people, only the things they have made and in which they are hiding. One sees the places where they live and the roads that link them, one sees the smoke rising, one sees the vehicles in which they sit, but one sees not the people themselves.’ (ROS, p.91)

Just as the omnipotent view from his aeroplane seat renders everyday human activity invisible, so too mainstream historical accounts that are used as all-encompassing national narratives inevitable miss the minutiae and complexities of human life. Viewing mankind as merely another species can be seen as moving beyond the religious narrative that places mankind at the centre of creation, and is an acknowledgement of the contribution that environmentalism and eco-criticism has made in questioning ostensibly settled historical narratives. From this perspective, our human-centric view of history has meant that the plight of the environment and animals has been shamefully neglected. Though clearly used in a metaphorical sense, most obviously when the plight of Jewish people is represented by silkworms and moths in The Rings of Saturn and Austerlitz, Sebald’s concern with how plants and animals have been dismissed as commodities in the reality of the past and the historical accounts written about them is clear.

In The Rings of Saturn Sebald introduces Edward Fitzgerald, the reclusive poet who rejected the comfort of his aristocratic birth to live in a tiny cottage on the perimeter of his family’s estate at Boulge Hall in Bredfield. As so often in Sebald’s writing, Fitzgerald’s life is portrayed in a somewhat knowing fashion, highlighting how even though Fitzgerald lived an austere life in his hermitage reading and translating a variety of texts that he never
intended to publish, with the exception of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, the knowledge that he was able to call upon the extensive resources of his family must have made his self-imposed misery more bearable. Sick of society and unable to recover from the crushing blow of losing the man he loves, Fitzgerald retreats to Suffolk seeking peace, only to be disturbed by ‘a new breed of landowners … working the soil for all it could yield’ (*ROS*, p.202).

Reminiscent of John Clare’s poetry, Fitzgerald’s response to the increased intensiveness of agriculture is one of concern at the fate of the wildlife that previously populated the area:

> ‘They are felling all the trees, he complained, and tearing up the hedgerows. Soon the birds will not know where to go. One copse after another is vanishing, the grassy wayside banks where in the spring the cowslips and violets bloomed have been ploughed up and levelled, and if one now takes the path from Bredfield to Hasketon, which was once so delightful, it is like crossing a desert.’ (*ROS*, p.202)

Fitzgerald may have underestimated the resilience of the natural world, but his microhistory is a leading example of how Sebald uses his characters’ observations to augment popular knowledge historical knowledge with personal observations, in this case on the plight of plants and animals, to create a fuller impression of the lived experience of the time.

**Escape to the Country**

In his texts Sebald not only questions historiography, but also the idea of what time itself is. As with the problem Derrida identified with dates, time, or rather the units people measure time by, is an arbitrary construct. Bringing to mind the problems that farmers and countryside dwellers had in adjusting to the introduction of universal time in the Nineteenth Century, the lead character in *Austerlitz* argues that it even in modernity that it is possible to be outside time:

> ‘Even in a metropolis ruled by time like London, said Austerlitz, it is still possible to be outside time, a state of affairs which until recently was almost as common in backward and forgotten areas of our own country as it used to be in the undiscovered continents overseas. The dead are outside
time, the dying and all the sick at home or in hospitals, and they are not the only ones, for a certain degree of personal misfortune is enough to cut us off from the past and future’ (A, p.143).

Building on Austerlitz’s reflection that ‘time was by far the most artificial of our inventions’, his observation of the different ways in which people experience temporality hints at wider philosophical difficulties in conceptualising time. Grosz suggests that ‘time is perhaps the most enigmatic, the most paradoxical, elusive and “unreal” of any form of material existence’ (Grosz, 2004, p.4). While time may be elusive, the practicalities of life mean that it can never be ignored. Drawing on the Nietzschean idea of the untimely, Grosz continues:

‘time … is a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our expectations are (positively or negatively) surprised. We can think it only when we are jarred out of our immersion in its continuity, when something untimely disrupts our expectations.’ (Grosz, 2004, p.5)

In Austerlitz, a number of the main character’s encounters with neglected or abandoned buildings lead the reader to question the linear progression of time. While studying at Oxford, Austerlitz regularly goes on excursions with Hilary to visit the surrounding area’s dilapidated country houses. On one such occasion they visit Iver Grove, a Georgian mansion in Buckinghamshire, which Austerlitz incorrectly estimates was constructed in 1780 (It was erected in 1724. This is perhaps one of a number of clues Sebald subtly inserts to draw attention to the fact that Austerlitz is an unreliable witness to history (Parks and Gardens, 2008)). Perhaps reflecting Sebald’s own interest in the feeling a building can evoke rather than its architectural significance, Austerlitz, the eminent architectural historian, makes no reference to the property being an important example of one of the first houses in Britain built in the then radical Palladian style. The pair are guided around the house by an ancestor of the original owner, James Mallord Ashman, a farmer who lives in one of the estate’s smaller properties. One room in particular, the games room, has remained intentionally undisturbed since the first owner’s death in 1813. The expectations of the pair are positively surprised by the remarkable room which has remained unaltered for over one hundred and fifty years, with
Hilary remarking on ‘the curious confusion of emotions affecting even a historian in a room like this, sealing sealed so away so long from the flow of hours and days and the succession of the generations’ (A, p.152). As if following Nietzsche’s thinking on time exactly, the untimely surprise the room provokes jars Austerlitz out of his immersion in continuous time, and mesmerised by the dusty contents of the billiards room he recalls that, ‘It was as if time, which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as if the years behind us were still to come’ (A, p.152).

Sebald’s work abounds with examples of untimely events disrupting a character’s experience of time. Unlike Austerlitz and Hilary’s amazement at the preservation of the billiards room at Iver Grove, it is more often a negative, even traumatic, experience that jars the character out of their experience of continuous time. In The Rings of Saturn the narrator recalls staying at a country house at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Ireland with a family called the Ashburys. With the typical openness with which Sebald’s characters offer their story to the narrator, Mrs. Ashbury explains that the family are all that remains of an Anglo-Irish aristocratic family. Many similar properties to their home were burned across Ireland by rebel Republicans during the 1920’s having been identified as being associated with English rule, but theirs is left untouched by quirk of fate and the family live insulated from the tumultuous social change that has occurred in Ireland in the intervening period. In the wake of the Troubles most similar families leave Ireland, but unable to sell their virtually worthless home, the Ashburys remain and endure their existences. They are jarred out of their immersion in time by the realisation that the society which they knew and to which they were raised and adapted, is now irretrievably consigned to the past. The narrator at times seems a voyeur of misery, and describes the describe the family as living ‘under their roof like refugees who have come through dreadful ordeals and do not now dare to settle in the place where they have ended up’ (ROS, p.210). Unable to relate to the society around them Mrs
Ashbury’s three grown-up children retreat, somewhat melodramatically, to fantasy worlds. The youngest son Edmund has spent nearly twenty years working on a boat despite knowing nothing of boat-building and has no intention of ever going to sea. His sisters meanwhile, plan business ideas that they know will never materialise owing to their lack of practical skills and spend their days stitching patterns which they then undo once complete. There are obvious problems with this scene, most particularly that the dates the narrator uses make the ages of the characters very different to that they are portrayed as being, and there is a great deal of wallowing in melancholia, almost uncomfortably so. However, the characters are symbolic in their lack of a will to live having been excluded from mainstream society owing to the effects of events far beyond their own control. Sebald here again highlights the experience of those who have been left behind in grand historical narratives of nation-building and economic and social progress.
Chapter Three: Memory and Historical Sites

This Chapter will explore the relationship between the places that Sebald’s characters visit, especially the ‘historical’ sites that seek to ‘memorialise’ the past, and the thoughts, emotions and memories that they describe experiencing. In The Rings of Saturn the narrator cannot help but see the traumatic events of the past in his surroundings, whether they be places that might actually provoke such thoughts like dilapidated RAF facilities, or more innocuous locations such as beaches and unspoilt countryside. Each chapter in the novel follows the same pattern, and begins with a description of an apparently banal site, such as a stately home or the East Anglian coastline, but by the end of the chapter the narrator’s thoughts have radically drifted to ruminations on such diverse horrors as the Holocaust or the Belgian exploitation of the Congo during the colonial era. While this pattern is unique to The Rings of Saturn, the story of Jacques Austerlitz also portrays the dramatic impact that seemingly harmless places can have on a character’s memory and mental wellbeing. With this point in mind, this Chapter will pay particular attention to the visits that Austerlitz makes to the Karmelitska Archive Office and the Marienbad Spa on separate journeys to the Czech Republic.

Retrieving the past or creating new memories?

While sitting on the steps of the Mauritshuis the narrator of The Rings of Saturn reflects on the scene that would have been visible from the same spot in May 1644 at the celebration to mark the house’s opening. At the event, eleven Amazonian Indians brought back to The Hague by Governor John Maurits performed a dance on the cobbled square ‘conveying to the townspeople some sense of the foreign lands to which their power of community now extended’ (ROS, p.83). Viewed from the present the scene is at once pitiable
and absurd, prompting the narrator to ponder ‘Who can say how things were in ages past?’ (ROS, p.84). Here Sebald underlines the impossibility of retrieving and authentically portraying historical experience. Instead, something new is created with his microhistories, albeit rooted in the past, which in turn draws attention to the fact that memory is an activity of the present. As Gunther writes:

‘No text, non-fictional or otherwise, can claim to be an unmediated conduit of the past event itself but is inescapably subject to the sway the ex post facto embeddedness, in the form of memory being an activity of the present, exerts over the past’ (Gunther, 2006, p.280)

The limitations of retrieving the historical experience are encapsulated in the visit to Somerleyton Hall taken by the narrator in Rings of Saturn. Having passed through the ownership of a number of families since the Middle Ages, the manor at Somerleyton is now supported by tourists, who pay to visit during the summer months. However, far from giving an insight into the estate’s past, the narrator is presented with a wholly new experience, one packaged to meet the demands of the British heritage industry, replete with false nostalgia (Hewison, 1987). The scene the narrator describes upon arriving at Somerleyton is blackly comic, the tourists on the Hall’s miniature train ‘reminded me of dressed-up circus dogs or seals’, and he continues:

‘at the front of the train, a ticket satchel slung about him, sat the engine driver, conductor and controller of all the animals, the present Lord Somerleyton, Her Majesty the Queen’s Master of the Horse’ (ROS, p.32)

For Long this simile of the passengers resembling trained dogs and seals ‘explicitly articulates the transformation of nature into culture’ (Fuchs & Long, 2007, p.119). Moreover, echoing Hilary’s lesson in Austerlitz that images can be used to hide or distort actual events, the scene is emblematic of a wider theme in Sebald’s work; namely that what is presented as ‘history’ is often little more than a distraction that can serve to obscure or repress real lived
history. Of far more interest to the narrator is his chance meeting with William Hazell, the gardener at Somerleyton, who tells him of the airfields established in East Anglia in 1940. Though little known today the 67 airfields in the region were pivotal to the war effort, the few remaining dilapidated control towers and grassed over runways betraying no sign of the vast scale of the RAF operation:

‘In the course of one thousand and nine days, the eighth airfleet alone used a billion gallons of fuel, dropped seven hundred and thirty-two thousand tons of bombs, and lost almost nine thousand aircraft and fifty thousand men’ (ROS, p.38).

As with the dates listed on the schoolboard in W. in Vertigo, the statistics reeled off by the gardener underline how reducing events to numerical data obscures real lived history. More particularly, the statement has ironic undertones, and Sebald draws attention to the way in which when events are recorded in figures they can be consigned to the cold storage of history, when in reality nothing should be settled in historiography and events often merit further investigation several generations after they happened. Indeed, one senses that if Sebald hoped to achieve anything tangible and specific from his literary project it was a re-examination of these bombing raids, much like his encounter with Henri Lemoine at the Bibliotheque Nationale, when the narrator talks to Hazell it is as though he is interviewing W.G. Sebald himself. Reflecting on his search for what the German people had said about the destruction of their cities in the raids, predominantly launched from South-East England, he comments:

‘To my astonishment, however, I soon found the search for such accounts fruitless. No one at the time seemed to have written about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly, it was as if everything had been erased from their minds (ROS, p.39)

Here Sebald uses his fiction to illuminate the gaps that exist in recorded history. He draws attention to the vacuum in knowledge that inevitably occurs if the people who witnessed a catastrophe do not record their experiences, either by choice or because of suppression from
authorities, for posterity. In many ways the vacuum which Sebald exposes is straightforward to explain. The writers, journalists and archivists who were best equipped to document the effects of the raids had likely long fled the country if they were lucky, or already fallen foul of a Nazi leadership intent on eliminating freedom of speech. Additionally, one feels readers could scarce be expected to palate traumatic accounts of the raids their leadership had provoked, so soon after the cessation of hostilities. What is less understandable, Sebald seems to suggest, is why the bombing of the German cities remains taboo and why, with the passage of time, historians in the late Twentieth Century have apparently neglected to re-examine the issue.

**Entering the Archives**

An interesting contrast with the paucity of recorded knowledge about the bombing of German cities can be found in how Jacques Austerlitz has used the accumulation of architectural information to effectively repress his knowledge of his past:

‘…I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory’. (A, p.198)

The collective trauma induced by the bombing of the German cities and the personal trauma of Austerlitz being separated from his parents as a child to be shipped to Britain, have resulted in different kinds of self-induced amnesia. Austerlitz has lived a very contained life, the effect of his traumatic early experiences perhaps being sublimated onto his intellectual life, with the result being an interiority that is ‘composed of nothing but book learning, acquired knowledge that he has accumulated in archival fashion’ (Long, 2007, p. 153). Only when Austerlitz, the living archive, enters the Czech state archive at Karmelitska can he begin to come to terms with his past that first re-surfaced in the images he imagined in the ladies waiting room at Liverpool Street Station. It is a particularly tender scene where he
holds the glass of water given to him by the archivist Tereza Ambrosova as a small child
would, in both hands, struggling to maintain his composure as long repressed memories
return (A, p.209) The character’s emptiness becomes a strength in representative terms as he
temporarily becomes a relatable universal figure whose plight draws attention to the complex
interplay between events, knowledge and memory that underpins all human psychology. As
with the problem of what is documented and recorded as ‘history’, and then variously
forgotten, ignored, supressed or retained and used to justify actions in the present, the
reader’s attention is directed to filters. Light is shone implicitly upon the mental filters that
occur at the point information or an experience is processed by an individual before
becoming a memory, and the later, separate filtering process that occurs before the said
information or experience is remembered. It follows that Sebald could be said to use the
character of Austerlitz to portray the problem of representing and remembering the
Holocaust, not only in a literary sense but for many witnesses too. In his study of the
testimonials of Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub showed that inconsistencies and errors in
memories can in fact be the details that have the potential to bear witness to trauma (Wolff,

‘Knowledge in testimony is not simply a given factual that is reproduced
and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own
right’.

Therefore one could argue that in many ways it is not his reaction, such as his aphasic
blanking, to discovering his past but rather his prior inability to remember and failure to
engage in life that bears witness to the trauma of his early life. This goes some way to way to
explaining why Sebald opted to create an autistic-like character, unable to reflect on his own
life or engage with the people around him.
Jacques Austerlitz’s inability to connect with people around him has its most tragic consequences in the encounters he describes having as a young man with his only romantic interest, Marie de Verneuil. The trip he and Marie take to the health resort at Marienbad, in then Communist Czechoslovakia, must be regarded as one of the most important passages in the text. Austerlitz tells the narrator how in August 1972 he accompanied Marie on a short visit to Marienbad, but during the trip he becomes ever more withdrawn and anxious. Many years afterwards he realises that his distress and emotional impotence at Marienbad may be attributed to the fact that he visited the resort as a small child in the summer of 1938 with his parents and nanny, Vera, a trip Vera describes as ‘three wonderful, almost blissful weeks’ (A, p.289). During the later visit with Marie, Austerlitz cannot relax, in spite of his pleasant surroundings and company:

‘I woke before dawn with such an abysmal sense of distress that without being able to look at Marie I sat up and, like a man seasick, had to perch on the edge of the bed’. (A, p.297)

This scene captures the tragedy at the heart of the character; he is unable to escape the persistence of the past and live in the present. His suffering is metaphorical also; the trauma of his early childhood casts a spectre over the present and future in the same way that the violent episodes of the past loom oppressively over the present in Sebald’s world view. For Austerlitz the repressed trauma of his departure from his parents has laid dormant and hidden, but for the reader it is evident throughout in the character’s echoing emptiness. Marie, one of the few well-developed female characters across Sebald’s output, is understandably exasperated at her companion’s reticence, and while in the spa’s pump room exclaims:

‘Can’t you tell me the reason, she asked, why you remain so unapproachable? Why, she said, have you been like a pool of frozen water ever since we came here? Why do I see your lips opening as if you were about to say something, maybe even cry out loud, and then I hear not the slightest sound?’ (A, p.303)
The hollow Austerlitz cannot answer Marie, and his frozen emotions will only begin to thaw years after with his visions at Liverpool Street Station. The visit to Marienbad is pregnant with references to dark episodes in history, and connections that are, on first reading, difficult to understand. Most obvious are the walks that Austerlitz and Marie take, ‘as if to say goodbye’ to one another, to the ‘Auschowitz Springs’, the mineral springs bathed in by the spa’s health tourists, which bear an unmistakeable similarity to the name Auschwitz (A, p.302) (Sebald would appear to have modified the name ‘Auschowitz Springs’, belonging to the Tepl Abbey, to make this similarity as blatant as possible.). Less evidently, a character named Marie de Verneuil appears in Balzac’s *Les Chouans* (Balzac, 1829). The character of Balzac’s creation is a beautiful daughter of an aristocrat, who spies on the leader of a group of anti-Republican rebels on behalf of the Republican Chief of Police. This knowledge alerts us to the irony that although the Marie of *Austerlitz* is also from an aristocratic family, she is far from being a spy. On the contrary, she is the only person who builds something approximating to a trusting relationship with Austerlitz in adult life, and who recognises that there is an unseen force holding him back from engaging in the present. Finally, there is the significance of Sebald’s choice of setting, the resort at Marienbad. Something of the suspicion and paranoia that were the hallmarks of the Eastern European Communist states of the era is portrayed in the form of the two uniformed motorcyclists oddly following the limousine that takes the pair from Prague airport to Marienbad. What goes unremarked upon are the shocking events that occurred in Marienbad, and throughout the towns and villages of the Sudetenland, when two and a half million ethnic Germans were expelled from the region to appointed zones in West and East Germany as part of the 1945 Potsdam Agreement (BBC News, 2002). Additionally, between 10,000 and 100,000 Sudeten Germans suffered violent deaths at the hands of Czechs eager for revenge on those perceived to have collaborated in Nazi crimes, such as the murder of 300,000 Czech Jews in concentration camps (The
Economist, 2013). Sebald’s characters are inexorably drawn to, and explore, sites of collective, as well as individual, trauma. Inevitably, Auschwitz’s relationship with Marie goes nowhere, and he describes their parting in muted terms, regretfully reflecting ‘I lost [her] entirely soon afterwards’ (A, p.305). Tragically, it is only years later, during his final meeting with the narrator that Austerlitz understands her importance to him and resolves to find her once again (A, p.408). The fact that many witnesses have been traumatised into repressing or inaccurately remembering the past highlights the human mind’s way of coping with trauma. Silence too it seems can be a witness to history, the trauma experienced by certain individuals means their testimony can never be recorded, leaving a cavernous gap in our knowledge of the past.

**Memory and Postmemory**

In an essay on Walter Benjamin’s work, Susan Sontag observes how Benjamin illustrates the way in which memory ‘turns the flow of events into tableaux’ (Sontag, 1980, p.107). Sebald’s non-linear narratives, punctuated by character microhistories that are arrived at geographically rather than chronologically, clearly build on such a reading of Benjamin. Across his oeuvre, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the unreliability of memory and gaps in recorded history, whether personal, collective or cultural, are dominant and interlinked themes. Confronted with these themes the reader is led to question ‘Why does this matter so much?’, especially in view of the fact that memory is not perfectible, and to forget is natural and useful. As Nietzsche wrote in *The Untimely Meditations*:

`a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being […]. Forgetting is essential to action of any kind.’ (Nietzsche, 1876)

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in Sebald’s theory of time that allows for the simultaneity of past, present and future. Returning to the idea of the untimely, Grosz writes
that the past produces the resources for multiple futures, including the norms that currently prevail. Furthermore, the present has ‘actualised elements, fragments of the past, while rendering the rest dormant, inactive, virtual’ (Grosz, 2004, p.253). One conclusion from this thinking on time is that the more informed we are of the past, in the present, the more potential futures remain open to us. The more potential futures remain open, the fewer chances there are of repeating the mistakes of the past. The second problem Sebald postulates concerns the significance of the impending time when there will be no first-hand witnesses of the Holocaust remaining.

Just as the miniature railway at Somerleyton distracts visitors from the significance of the bombing raids launched from the area, Alvin Rosenfeld argues that one of the greatest risks surrounding the Holocaust is the ‘smothering sentimentalization of the memory of the Shoah’ (Rosenfeld, 2013). For Rosenfeld, the end of the Holocaust is the transformation of it into a lesson about the “triumph of the human spirit” or some such affirmation. This is a criticism that Sebald’s work is largely immune to; none of his characters affected by the Holocaust find their grief transformed into affirmation, though their suffering as individuals illustrates how fiction can actively complement the many millions of dollars spent on projects such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yale University’s Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies (Fishbane, 2014). With there soon to be no remaining Holocaust survivors, Sebald’s work plays an important role in the wider effort to transmit the memories of those who did suffer directly to a new generation born long after their death. His focus on memory, and his ability to connect the reader to a past they have not experienced first-hand is a leading example in fiction writing of what Marianne Hirsch terms ‘postmemory’:

‘In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation’. (Hirsch, 1997, p.22)
As this dissertation has sought to show, in re-activating characters from the past, portrayed in captivating, emotionally powerful stories, Sebald fulfils the goal of postmemory, so that such stories and causes are not consigned to institutional archives or left unread. Sebald’s challenge to institutional archives is evident also in his use of photographs. In her work Hirsch argues for a reconsideration of the archive, suggesting that using personal photographs and albums as archival material ‘challenges the notion of the archive as an institutional body that aids in the documentation of official forms of history’ (Woolf, 2014, p.188). Here it seems as though we might regard the use of personal photographs, as opposed to images typically contained in archives, as being parallel to Sebald’s concentrating on little rather than grand narratives. However, there is a problem with this, since Sebald’s photographs have been tampered with and rarely match the narrative of the text they accompany. Barthes (1980) observed photographs shock us because they so finally represent what has been; Sebald, on the other hand, plays with this idea. His photographs have the capacity to shock us precisely because they do not represent what has been and can instead be an impediment to memory.

Drawing on Hirsch’s ideas, Woolf sees parallels between postmemorial archive practices and Sebald’s form of literary historiography as an attempt at restitution (Woolf, 2014, p.188). This is too is problematic; Sebald’s body of work is much more obviously concerned with unsettling rather than resolving the past. He has much in common in this respect with the accounts of Holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi, Imre Kertesz and Jean Amery. Accounts and fictional works by survivors have a unique power and integrity, and add a special gravity to the campaign to ensure that the Holocaust is never normalised or just explained away as another tragic episode in history. Sebald’s literature shows how contemporary culture can create postmemories through ‘imaginative investment’ and complement existing knowledge and accounts of the Shoah, but what makes it unusual is that
all the while it draws attention to the problems inherent in relying on mediated texts for accounts of the past. These postmemories have two qualities that circumvent the fact that Sebald’s work is, of course, capable of being dismissed as mere text or an abstraction, and will probably at some point fall out of fashion. First, they may be said to contribute to the cultural memory of the Holocaust, which in turn influences and stirs up the collective memory, which is liable to forget things. Secondly, they represent a passing of the baton to new artists and writers, whose task must be to find ways of creating postmemories to represent past events, and the problems of individual and collective memory, for their own generation.

**Doomed to repetition**

One remarkable feature of Sebald’s fiction across all four texts is the narrators’ observation of a variety of highly unlikely coincidences and recurring numbers, and reporting an inescapable feeling that certain events or experiences have happened before. Similarly, in *Austerlitz*, the main character is told of his true identity shortly after a history lesson on the 1805 Battle of Austerlitz, and later he tells the narrator that when he changed trains at the Gare d’Austerlitz he ‘had felt a premonition that he was coming closer to his father’, with the inference that his father tried to escape from Paris via the station as the Nazis overtook the city in 1940 (*A*, p.405). Everything echoes in Sebald’s universe, and Austerlitz’s fleeting thought that ‘Maximilian would surely have left Paris in time, had gone south on foot across the Pyrenees, and perished somewhere along the way’, is a clear reference to Walter Benjamin’s tragic fate (*A*, p.359). In September 1940, having escaped Paris via rail to Port-Vendres in the French Pyrenees, Benjamin, though chronically ill at age forty-eight with heart disease, attempted to cross into Spain on foot via a little-used path. Upon arrival in Portbou in the Spanish Pyrenees, Spanish police informed his group that they would be returned to the French authorities the next day, which meant surrender to the occupying Nazi
forces. Benjamin committed suicide that evening through a morphine overdose (BenjaminPortbau, 2015). The fact that Sebald choses to ally Benjamin, whom might reasonably be regarded as his mentor, so closely with Maximilian Austerlitz is perhaps indicative of his own agreement with the character’s frank assessment that the German people were absolutely responsible for the Nazi rise to power and, at least to some extent, complicit in the crimes they committed. In contrast to this the ‘W.G. Sebald’ narrators take a different approach, one that involves a detached, long view of history, with the result being that they attribute blame for conflict, violence and waste less on individuals or groups, and more on overarching economic and social systems. The counterbalance that Maximiliam Austerlitz provides to the general approach is crucial; the narrator’s blurred, generalised approach to the crimes of the past risks letting the perpetrators of such crimes evade responsibility for their involvement.

The happening of improbable coincidences is to be seen in all four works, and in The Rings of Saturn upon finding out that both he and his friend, the poet Michael Hamburger, should have had significant chance meetings with Stanley Kerry, an eccentric Lecturer in German at Manchester University, when both were aged twenty-two, in 1944 and 1966 respectively, the narrator asserts:

‘No matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind happen far more often than we should suspect, since we all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency’ (ROS, p.187)

The influence of the Freudian idea of the uncanny is clear in these coincidences, yet they open up a number of intriguing avenues of inquiry when considering Sebald as a writer who questions history. Are these chance meetings the reader asks, or is mankind limited to a particular pattern of behaviour, including repeating the mistakes of the past? One of Sebald’s chief criticisms of historiography is how its foundations, in taking a chronological approach,
and emphasising the great actors of history, have impeded human understanding of the patterns of political, social and economic behaviours that have all too frequently culminated in disaster:

‘We know now that history does not function as the historians of the nineteenth century told us, that is, not according to a logic dictated by great individuals, not according to any kind of logic at all. History has more to do with completely different phenomena, with something like drifting, with natural historical patterns, with chaotic things that for a certain time coincide and then later go their separate ways. And I believe that it would be important, for literature as well as for historiography, to work out these complicated chaotic patterns. That is not possible in systematic ways.’ (Interview with literary critic Volker Hage in 2000, cited in Woolf, 2014, p.53)

As Chapter One sought to highlight, Sebald’s narrators are fixated with the problems inherent in accurately perceiving, remembering and reporting events, and can be said to underline the impossibility of an objective account of history. His work clearly rejects any notion that scholars could represent the past in the way that the founder of modern source-based history Leopold van Ranke suggested, that is to say ‘"wie es eigentlich gewesen" (as it actually happened) . The series of uncanny coincidences and repetition of events that Sebald engineers in his work may perhaps be seen as part of his ambitious aim to work out history’s ‘complicated chaotic patterns’. Indeed, the narrator’s speculation on the unreliability of the human mind after his astonishment at his series of coincidences with Michael Hamburger, could be interpreted more broadly as a rumination on whether there is something in human nature that means we are inevitably doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past:

‘Perhaps there is in this as yet unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication some kind of anticipation of the end, a venture into the void, a sort of disengagement, which, like a gramophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes, has less to do with damage to the machine itself than with an irreparable defect in its programme.’ (ROS, p.187)
This thought of the wreckage caused by the ‘defect in the programme’ that might somehow conveniently explain mankind’s propensity to violence evokes the haunting image of Walter Benjamin’s *Angel of History*:

‘… whose face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make the whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.’ (Benjamin, 1970, p.273).

Like Benjamin, Sebald’s work leads the reader to question the idea of progress. Technological progress has undoubtedly occurred, but any claim to moral progress is made to seem dubious as the narrator traces the signs of destruction through history even in remote parts of East Anglia. Yet the narrative of seemingly unceasing violence and destruction must be subjected to critical thinking. Pinker suggests that the era from World War Two to the present might be termed the ‘Long Peace’ on account of it being the least violent era in human history, and points out that homicide rates in Western Europe have steadily declined since 1300 (Pinker, 2011, p.77). The introduction of factual data refuting an increase in violence offers a reminder that Seballd’s narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* is recounting a journey that he took in a state of mind that saw him hospitalised for chronic depression brought on, one suspects, by a sustained contemplation of the Holocaust.

**Everything is going to be alright**

In the figure of the walking narrator in *Vertigo* and especially *The Rings of Saturn*, we see a character representative of the necessity to witness and bear life’s ills and misfortunes, and move forward nonetheless. It is because the character sees the persistence of the past in the present in the sites and objects that he encounters, that the narrator’s meanderings are
transformed from being what one suspects the majority of people would find to be a series of pleasant walks across the undemanding terrain of the attractive countryside and villages of East Anglia, into a meditation on human existence. This point is perhaps better illustrated when one compares Sebald’s walker with artist Guido Van der Werve’s short film *Nummer acht: Everything is going to be alright* (Van der Werve, 2007) (Appendix 1). Sebald’s novels have inspired a series of art exhibitions such as ‘*Sebald Variations*’ held at the Barcelona Contemporary Culture Centre between March and July 2015, including a contribution from Van der Werve, although it should be stated that *Nummer acht* is not a specific response to Sebald’s work (CCCB, 2015). In the film Van der Werve trudges slowly 32 feet ahead of a 3,500 tonne ice breaker in the Gulf of Bothnia. What makes the work particularly moving is the combination of the fact that Van der Werve is walking with no destination, and the viewer’s knowledge that the thin ice below him could crack at any moment. Most obviously a depiction of anxieties surrounding the effects of climate change, Van der Werve is dwarfed by the giant icebreaker, which ‘references the unyielding path of progress, the capitalist networks of global trade, and a landscape on the verge of disappearing’ (Cultural Cartographies Series at UMOCA, 2014). Vermeulen & Van den Akker (2010) see works like *Nummer acht* as a leading examples of contemporary art capturing the structure of feeling of the post-postmodern age that they term ‘metamodernism’. Whereas in a postmodern work subtitled ‘*Everything will be alright*’ one might expect the reassuring title to be immediately undermined, and for the ice to break and the walker to be harmed or worse, in this work he continues on walking accepting his precarious position. However, it is not a return to the modernist way of thinking, because there is no utopian horizon or any sign of a chance to start afresh (Frieze, 2014). Sebald’s books, especially *The Rings of Saturn*, capture something of the sense that Vermeulen & Van Den Akker (Frieze, 2014) identify, a kind of neoromanticism characterised by ‘post-irony’ and a ‘new sincerity’.
The parallels between *Nummer acht* and *Rings of Saturn* are more than their demonstrating how contemporary art is concerned with the entanglement of history and geography. Sebald’s narrator trudges onward, with his equivalent of the icebreaker looming over him being his inability to escape the shadow that the past casts over the present and future. The icebreaker might be said to take the place of the *Angel of History* in this analogy, irresistibly ploughing forwards, leaving a pathway of destruction cut through the thin ice. The image, too, evokes the technological sublime, the walker unable to reflect on the giant ship dominating the seascape behind him for fear of falling through cracked ice, a pertinent comparison in view of Adorno’s view that in World War Two the ‘man-made machinery of war had long outstripped the capacity of humans to register it in sensory or intellectual terms’ (Fuchs & Long, 2007, p.64). Moreover, the encounters that the narrator has, whether with the people of the present such as the gardener at Somerleyton Hall, or the past, such as Nineteenth Century poet Edward Fitzgerald and his concern at the destruction of the environment, offer little consolation that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated in the future. All the walker can do is stoically endure, keep questioning, move forwards and hope that everything will be alright. Solace and diversion is found only in the contemplation of eternity, which in classical philosophy is held to be that which exists outside of time. The walker is only jolted into this space beyond time by his encountering spectacles of nature, striking buildings and his meetings with apparently conservatively-minded rural people, with whom he, as a metropolitan intellectual, would on the surface appear to have little in common. When departing from his highly enjoyable meeting with Thomas Abrams, an eccentric farmer who has spent over twenty years building a model of the Temple of Jerusalem, the narrator wistfully recalls:

‘So we spent the quarter of an hour to Harleston sitting side by side in the cab of his truck, and I wished that the short drive through the country would
never end, that we could go on and on, all the way to Jerusalem.’ (ROS, p.249)

The Jerusalem the narrator wishes to arrive at, one suspects, is not the deeply divided city of the Middle East, but the Jerusalem of Abrams’ model that exists outside the demands of linear time.
Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that W.G. Sebald should be considered a postmodernist writer of historical narratives, but that at same time, he raises questions about historiography and human nature that defy the limitations of postmodernist theory. In demonstrating the former point, this essay has drawn attention to the self-undermining, multi-dimensional narrators that are, at times at odds with themselves, and at other times seem to merge with the characters they describe. This is most obvious in the texts where the narrator describes his thoughts and feelings on his journeys in The Rings of Saturn and Vertigo, but Sebald’s lack of punctuation throughout his work makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish characters as individuals. As Long writes:

‘Sebald’s texts are characterised by a remarkable stylistic homogeneity, and there is little attempt made to differentiate between speakers.’ (Fuchs & Long, 2007, p.19)

As part of this argument, this work has drawn attention to the deep sense of fatalism, knowing and irony, which should not be confused with humour, that permeates through Sebald’s prose. Furthermore, his style is characterised by the many texts and sources that inform and populate his work, and his calculatedly-named characters that reference other works and events, but this is to a more significant end than being an assertion of postmodern credentials. Instead, it reflects his problematizing of the issue of how to represent the past, specifically the Holocaust, at a time when there will soon be no survivors of the Shoah remaining. As such his fiction can be seen as an effort to ensure that the memories of the Holocaust, and other traumatic episodes of history, do not pass into the cold storage of institutional archives, which risks making them capable of being dismissed as the events of the past.
This essay has concentrated on the challenges that Sebald’s writing poses to
historiography. Other than his obvious condemnation of early historians’ naïve view that
history could and should be objectively written, again, it is impossible to claim Sebald as
having a particular theoretical viewpoint or to classify his work within a particular genre. It
has taken the approach that examining character microhistories is an illuminating method for
understanding the way in which Sebald excavates and exposes layers of history. It has been
suggested that this deluge of ‘little narratives’ has symbolically filled the void left by the
‘grand narratives’ that postmodern thinking proposes to have lost their legitimacy. In Vertigo,
while in the company of a family who run a hotel in Milan, the narrator comments on how
‘time passed lightly in the company of these people’ (V, p.113), but the majority of
microhistories capture an individual’s traumatic experience, which often seems to jar them
out of their own time and society. That such people have been overlooked by historians is a
further critique of historiography, and Sebald uses their biographies to highlight that there
will inevitably be gaps in mediated memory, and the vertiginous unreliability of memory
itself. Furthermore, certain events of the Twentieth Century are of such a magnitude that a
satisfactory historical account will forever be elusive. This dissertation has highlighted how
Sebald’ literature can be seen as an attempt to know and understand the past, in the wake of
Adorno’s argument that the Second World War is an event without witnesses and Lyotard’s
claim that the Holocaust can be compared to an earthquake that has destroyed all the
instruments used for measuring it. Sebald’s fiction augments that which was capable of being
measured and recorded, and transfers the experiences of those who suffered to readers in a
way in which historical archives could never achieve. At the same time, Sebald warns of the
dangers of those who seek to dismiss or suppress accounts of the past and claim a new
beginning. The ‘new beginning’ that Sebald’s work circles is the doomed establishment of
the German ‘Thousand Year Reich’. The Nazi propaganda machine created astonishing
historical narratives, messages of great hope and hatred. That the consequences of this hatred, concentration camps, could be filmed and packaged in such a way as to meet the approval of international observers, in the form of the propaganda film made at the Theresienstadt ghetto, ‘Der Fuhrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt’, is a truth stranger than any fiction.

Time is a key theme in Sebald’s work, and he shows how it can be seen to exist on many levels. There is the geographical level where time can be said to move imperceptibly, especially in the natural environment. At this detached level, mankind is simply another species; one that has been growing in size and exerting considerable demands on the environment, and will one day ‘fade away’:

Like our bodies and our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. (ROS, p.170)

Second, there are the long term trends his narrators identify, such as the rise and fall of political movements, the passage through time of family dynasties and the different manifestations of capitalist economic systems. Finally, there is life as experienced on a day to day level by individuals such as Austerlitz where unpredictable events happen. The experiences of the subjects of his microhistories, and his narrators’ responses to ‘historical’ places, show the tension that can exist between these different understandings of time.

Many of the questions that Sebald’s fiction raises are potentially confrontational, ranging from the extent to which blame should be attributed to the German people for the Nazi rise to power, to whether the Allied bombing of German cities was a disproportionate response, especially in the latter stages of the Second World War. While Sebald’s style, particularly his insertion of blurred photographs that do not appear to fit his narrative, have been celebrated and might be regarded as being transgressive, this should not distract from
the unsettling nature of much of his content. None is more troubling than the propensity he hints at for history to repeat itself. Whether this can be attributed to human nature, or other factors such as the suggestion that the past has been poorly recorded owing to the legacy of the unrealisable aims of early historians, is something Sebald leaves to his readers. Somewhat bleakly, his fiction underlines that while narratives of technological progress are easily evidenced, the matter of moral progress is more uncertain.

This dissertation has sought to argue that while Sebald’s books deal with the past, it is a body of work that harbours the anxieties of our own age, and may well be regarded in the years to come as capturing the sense of feeling that typifies what is presently uncomfortably termed as the ‘post-postmodern’. Yet more important than this are the postmemories that Sebald passes on to his readers, and the many artists who have found inspiration in his work to find new ways to deal with the problem of representing the past. On the morning I write this, the founder of the French National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen has attracted headlines for repeatedly claiming that the Nazi gas chambers were a ‘detail of history’ (BBC News, 2015), while Pope Francis has sparked a diplomatic incident by re-stating that mass killings of Armenians a hundred years ago by Turkish troops should be considered ‘the first genocide of the 20th Century’ (Scammel, 2015). The need for postmemories of the Holocaust, especially when they are handled and transferred as delicately as by Sebald, will never go away.
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Appendix 1:
Guido Van der Werve (2007), *Nummer acht*

Appendix 2:
Cardiff School of Education Ethics checklist
Appendix 1

Appendix 2

Cardiff School of Education Ethics Checklist

The University is committed to ensuring that all research undertaken by its staff and students is conducted to the highest standards of integrity. Central to this is the consideration of ethical issues arising from research involving human participants, human material and data. The University's policy is that all such research should undergo appropriate ethical scrutiny, to ensure that the rights, dignity, safety and well-being of all those involved are protected.

This research ethics checklist should be completed for every research project. It is used to determine the potential risk of harm to the researcher as well as potential participants - entailed in a proposed study and to identify whether a full application for ethics approval needs to be submitted.

The form has two sections:

Section 1: must be completed, signed and dated by the researcher in consultation with his/her supervisor.

Section 2: must be completed, signed and dated by both the researcher and his/her supervisor.

Ethical approval must be obtained before potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

These forms cannot be signed retrospectively. Your dissertation cannot be marked without a signed and dated copy of these forms in your appendix.


Cardiff School of Education Research Guidelines are available at:
Form One (to be signed by student only)

Preliminary question: Does your study involve human participants? □
NO □

Could the study be potentially harmful to you as the researcher in any way? □
No □

If you have answered no to these questions you do not need to answer any of the subsequent questions on this form. You simply need to sign both this form and along with your supervisor complete form two. These need to be included as an appendix in your dissertation.

If you have answered yes to question two your project must be submitted to the School’s Ethics Committee for review. The procedures for this are outlined in pp.15-16 of the Cardiff School of Education’s Research Ethics guidelines

If you have answered yes to question one and no to question two please complete the following questions:

1. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent - other than children. (eg. people with learning disabilities)? □

2. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places) □

3. Will the study involve discussion of participants partaking in activities that are deemed sensitive (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)? □

4. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life? □

5. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? □
If you have answered yes to any of these questions your project must be submitted to the School’s Ethics Committee for review. The procedures for this are outlined in pp.15-16 of the Cardiff School of Education’s Research Ethics guidelines.

6. Does your study involve participants under the age of 18 years? □ Yes □ No

If you have answered no to question 6 and no to questions 1-5, you do not need to answer any of the subsequent questions on this form. You simply need to sign both this form and along with your supervisor complete form two.

If you have answered yes to this question you need to answer the following supplementary questions:

6 (a) Will your research take place in a public place (schools, youth clubs or other statutory setting)? □ Yes □ No

If you have answered yes to this question you need to complete the following:

I am aware that I must gain the following before I begin my research:

a. Gate-keeper permission (e.g., Headteacher, Youth leader, Sports coach);
   b. Consent from parent(s) or guardian(s);
   c. Consent from the children or young people.

While conducting my research I commit to:

a. respecting and protecting the confidentiality of the school, all participants and groups;

b. minimizing any possible risk or disruption to the ongoing life of the school, participants or groups.

6(c)Does your study involve participants under the age of 18 years outside of a public place (schools, youth clubs or other statutory setting)? □ Yes □ No
If you have answered yes to this question you must complete the following:

I am aware that I must include the following:

a. Consent from parent(s) or guardian(s);

b. Consent from the children or young people.

Signature of Student_________________________James Graham

Date____________________29/4/15
Cardiff School of Education Ethics Checklist

Form 2 (to be signed by researcher and supervisor)

Name: James Graham 
Degree of study: MA English

It is the duty of all supervisors to familiarize themselves with this protocol and ensure that all research carried out by their supervisee follows the ethical codes. If the supervisor has any concerns in relation to the ethics of a research project s/he should follow the procedures outlined in the School of Education Research Ethics Handbook.

It is the duty of both the researcher to familiarize him/herself with this code and with the guidance and support of her/his dissertation supervisor to ensure that all research carried out conforms to the guidelines set out in this code of ethical conduct.

It is the duty of both the researcher and supervisor to ensure that all aspects of this code are adhered to.

The following checklist must be completed, signed (by all parties) prior to research being undertaken and enclosed as an appendix in your dissertation when submitted:

Give a brief outline of your project and the methods you intend to use:
I will be writing a dissertation investigating how the German writer W.G. Sebald problematizes the representation of the past. Research for this project will involve reading a wide number of primary and secondary sources. I will be using a wide range of material ranging from critical analysis to radio programmes on the writer. The project will involve considerable focused research, followed by drafting and re-drafting material for the dissertation which I will send to my supervisor at agreed dates to receive his suggestions and general feedback.
I have familiarized myself with the Cardiff School of Education Ethical Guidelines and completed and dated form one (student):

Y □ (please tick)

The proposed methodology within this research project does not violate any of the ethical codes outlined within the Cardiff School of Education Research Ethics protocol (supervisor):

Y □ (please tick)

I have discussed the ethical implications of the research with my dissertation supervisor/mentor.

Y □ (please tick)

Signed: ________James Graham________ (student)
Date: ___29.04.2015___________

Approved by: ________________ (Supervisor)
Date: _27.04.2015____________

(Please place this signed form in the Appendix of your dissertation)