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“Lines of Flight”: History and Territory in *The Rings of Saturn*

The present essay draws comparisons between the labyrinthine structure of the narrative in The Rings of Saturn and the views on Kafka's narratives presented by Deleuze and Guattari in their book Kafka: For a Minor Literature, which Sebald cites in one of his essays on Austrian literature. In particular, Sebald's attempt to balance exile and escape owes much to Kafka's stories and to what Deleuze and Guattari term “lines of flight”. The internal split between Sebald's original home in Germany and his new home in England makes his ramble through Suffolk into a palimpsest of German history. But the essay also argues that he ultimately becomes a kind of pilgrim (as suggested by the subtitle of Die Ringe des Saturn, “Eine englische Wallfahrt”, which is missing in the English translation), through his attempt to draw our attention to the history and geography of natural and man-made destruction.

Exile and escape maintain a precarious balance in Sebald's writings. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why his works appeal to readers: they remind us of the fundamental fragility of our relationship to home and to place in general. His creative writing is always, in a crucial sense, peripatetic: his narrators and most of the other characters in his books are wanderers, either forced from their original homes or in flight from them. Sometimes, it is hard to tell whether there is actually a difference between exile and escape. In *The Rings of Saturn* this problem is complicated by an additional element that also has to do with wandering: the concept of pilgrimage.

Unlike some of Sebald's creative works, the German edition of *Die Ringe des Saturn* bears a subtitle that is more than a mere genre description.¹ Oddly, this elaboration of the main title is omitted from the English translation of the book, *The Rings of Saturn*, thus depriving those who cannot consult the German original of a clue to an important dimension of the text. The subtitle reads: *Eine englische Wallfahrt* (“an English pilgrimage”). Why does Sebald append this phrase to the title of the book?

To begin, I would like to suggest that the phrase “an English pilgrimage” is not only a thematic description of the text but, in some sense, also a genre designation. Stella Augusta Singer's recent dissertation on medieval texts states that “pilgrimage is perhaps the most characteristic and compelling literary technique of the medieval period”.² Significantly, she describes

¹Cf. *Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen*. Somewhat less routine is the designation of the long poem *Nach der Natur* in its subtitle as *Ein Elementargedicht*. By contrast, *Schwindel.Gefühle* has no subtitle at all.

²Stella Augusta Singer: *Places of Pilgrimage in Premodern Texts*. Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania 2006. P. vi.

pilgrimage, not as a topic, but as a “literary technique”. We might think, in this connection, of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1387), which set the parameters for a whole series of texts at once about pilgrimage and structured by it.³ In these texts, the act of moving through geographical space gives form to considerations of history and culture in which the local comes to be connected with the spiritual. “English pilgrimage” has come to be an accepted term, in part because the practice in England differed historically from that in Europe: Henry VIII’s injunctions of 1536 and 1538 forbade pilgrimages, first to overseas destinations and then within England itself. The result has been a “uniquely interrupted and expurgated history and geography of insular pilgrimage”.⁴ Perhaps coincidentally, an English vicar published a book on English pilgrimage in the very year when Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* appeared.⁵ Norwich, where Sebald lived and taught at the University of East Anglia, was not far from one important site of English pilgrimage, Walsingham, known since medieval times as “England’s Nazareth”.

Sebald, with his passion for walking, surely visited Walsingham more than once. Indeed, when mentioning the town in the German edition of *Die Ringe des Saturn* (RS, 37), he specifically draws attention to its connection with pilgrimage, terming it a “Wallfahrtsort” (“site of pilgrimage”).⁶ It is there, he explains, that Sir Thomas Browne discovered the urns he discusses in his *Hydriotaphia: Urn Burial; or, a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns Lately Found in Norfolk* (1685).⁷ Weighing the preferences of different cultures with respect to the merits of cremation or bodily interment, Browne embarks on an eloquent meditation on questions on life and death. Monuments, which can extend individual memory, are of unpredictable duration, and ultimately the dead fall into oblivion. The theme is one familiar to readers of Sebald’s works. Walsingham is not only the location of the buried urns found in the mid-seventeenth century; it had been a site of pilgrimage since the eleventh century. There, in response to a dream, Lady Richeldis de Faverches had a replica of the Holy House at Nazareth constructed; subsequently this replica was surrounded by an Anglican priory.

³A later example is Bunyan’s allegorical *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678–1684).

⁴Singer: Places of Pilgrimage. P. vi.

⁵Christopher Donaldson: *The Great English Pilgrimage: In the Footsteps of Saint Augustine: From Rome to Canterbury: 1400th Anniversary AD 597–1997*. Norwich 1995. The book argued for a revival of pilgrimage in the 1400th anniversary year of Augustine’s pilgrimage, at that time still two years away.

⁶The English translation does not include the information that Walsingham was a pilgrimage destination (RS, 24), thus continuing to leave the English-speaking reader in the dark.

⁷For the full text, see <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/browne/hydriotaphia.html>>.

A counterpart of sorts to the Walsingham replica of the Holy House is the model of the temple at Jerusalem that Sebald describes in *The Rings of Saturn*. On his tour of Suffolk, Sebald visits a farmer who has been at work on the model for over 25 years, taking extraordinary pains to ensure the accuracy of its construction. Sebald reaches the farm by taking the bus from Orford to Yoxford and then walking about two miles northwest along an old Roman road. However unstructured his ramble through Suffolk may have been, his visit to the Suffolk farmer scarcely seems random. In the Middle Ages Jerusalem was the quintessential destination for pilgrimage, the one for which all other destinations, notably those of “English pilgrimage”, were only a kind of substitute.⁸ To be sure, the model of the temple at Jerusalem is not the final destination on Sebald’s journey, but it is an amusing variation on the notion of alternative destinations. Like Sir Thomas Browne, the farmer meditates on the fragility of monuments, expressing the hope that, although the original temple had lasted only 100 years, the replica might perhaps last a little longer.

At the beginning of the book, Sebald – or, more correctly, a Sebald-like narrator who is writing up this account of his walking tour – explains that he undertook the trip in order to fill a sense of “Leere” (“emptiness”) [RS, 11; RS, 3] that had befallen him after he had completed a substantial piece of writing (possibly *The Emigrants*). The feeling of emptiness, he says, emerged during the dog days of August 1992, when Saturn exerts its influence and produces “bestimmte Krankheiten des Gemüts und des Körpers” (“certain ailments of the spirit and of the body”) [RS, 11; RS, 3]. Exactly one year after setting out on his tour of Suffolk, Sebald is suddenly stricken again – and this time, he is placed in a Norwich hospital, where he undergoes an operation. He does not tell us what kind of operation it was, but external sources identify it as a back operation.⁹ On returning to consciousness, he starts mentally drafting parts of his narrative. A year later – the time of the opening pages of *The Rings of Saturn* – he is writing up his account from notes. The two sicknesses, the first one of the spirit, the second one of the body, are important elements in the “pilgrimage” that is described in the book and that, on another level, constitutes the book.

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* reminds us that pilgrimages are often motivated by recovery from illness. The prologue tells us that many who travel to Canterbury do so

The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. (ll. 17–18)¹⁰

⁸Singer: Places of Pilgrimage. P. 3.

⁹Rüdiger Görner: Im Allgäu, Grafschaft Norfolk: Über W.G. Sebald in England. In: *Text + Kritik* 158 (2003). Pp. 23–29. Here: P. 27.

¹⁰*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. by F.M. Robinson. 2nd edn. Cambridge, MA 1957. P. 17.

Unlike Chaucer's pilgrims, however, Sebald does not have a precise destination in mind; and, instead of planning to give thanks for recovery, he uses the walking tour itself as a cure for his depression. In a further contrast to *The Canterbury Tales*, Sebald's journey does not begin in "Aprille with his shoures sote", but at the end of the hottest period in August. The day when he sets out is overcast with heavy, gray clouds, and the pilgrim of 1992 begins by riding, not the gaily decked-out horses of the medieval narrative, but the iron horse: a diesel train smeared with oil and soot takes him from Norwich to Lowestoft, on the eastern coast of England. There he visits the grand residence of Lord Somerleyton, whose extravagant house was financed in the mid-nineteenth century by earnings from railway speculation in far-flung parts of the earth. In addition to these thematic reversals of the Chaucerian model, we can also note structural reversals. In *The Rings of Saturn* the band of pilgrims has shrunk to a single wanderer and the tales embedded in the narrative are not recounted by a series of colourful individual narrators. Instead, Sebald blends the stories together by means of his now familiar "Sebald-Ton" ("Sebald sound"). The "literary technique of pilgrimage" takes a radically new form.

Nonetheless, there are many signs that Sebald knew very well how he was altering tradition in *The Rings of Saturn*. His use of the word "extraterritorial" at several points in the book suggests a more profound knowledge of the concept of peregrination. In its original usage, *peregrinatio* is "something akin to exile" and, in the Christian context, signified a "spiritual condition of alienation".¹¹ Being on a pilgrimage meant to be in a fundamentally different and unfamiliar place. Only gradually did the term come to imply a journey to a sacred destination.

In *The Rings of Saturn* earthly life is situated, not with reference to the divine, but rather in the context of the solar system, of which our earth is but one planet among others. One source of the book's title is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin's essay "Der Saturnring oder Etwas vom Eisenbau" ("The Ring of Saturn: or Some Remarks on Iron Construction"), with its discussion of Grandville's illustration of "Le pont des planètes" (1844).¹² This engraving depicts the planets of the solar system connected by an iron bridge and the rings of Saturn as an iron balcony, from which a crowd of people gather to

¹¹ Singer: *Places of Pilgrimage*. P. 2. On the concept *peregrinatio*, she cites Manuela Brito-Martins: *The Concept of Peregrinatio in Saint Augustine and Its Influences*. In: *Exile in the Middle Ages*. Ed. by Laura Napran and Elizabeth van Houts. International Medieval Research Vol. 13. Turnhout 2004. Pp. 83–94.

¹² Walter Benjamin: *Das Passagen-Werk*. Frankfurt am Main 1983. Vol. 2. Pp. 1060–1063; illustration in Vol. 1, fig. 16. For the English translation, see Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge and London 1999. Pp. 885–887. Illustration P. 65.

look back at Earth. Sebald was a great reader of Walter Benjamin, whose work – especially the *Passagen-Werk (Arcades Project)* – he cites frequently in his literary essays. At the end of chapter 4 of *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald mentions a message sent, at the behest of the United Nations, in the space probe *Voyager II* in the hope that it might reach any “außerirdische Bewohner des Universums” (“extra-terrestrials who may share our universe”) [RS, 123; RS, 99]. Sebald comments drily that the message is probably still on its way to the outer reaches of our solar system.

There is, of course, a difference between “extraterrestrial” and “extraterritorial”: the former means “originating or existing outside the earth or its atmosphere”, whereas the latter means “situated outside the limits of a jurisdiction”.¹³ This legal sense of territory is a key term for Sebald, who slips a double-spread photograph of dead bodies at a concentration camp into the third chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*. The connection here is with a certain Major Le Strange, who had been present at the liberation of Bergen Belsen (RS, 80; RS, 59). After his return to England, Le Strange made a bargain with his housekeeper that she should eat her meals with him in total silence, a contract she kept for over 30 years. No explicit link is made between this bizarre agreement and his presence at Bergen Belsen. Yet concentration camps are clearly limit cases, territories situated outside the bounds of normal law. On his walk through Suffolk, Sebald experiences more than once the sense of being in “extraterritorial” space. Indeed, his very first stop, the Somerleyton estate, strikes him in precisely this way. He finds it hard to tell:

ob man sich auf einem Landsitz in Suffolk befindet oder an einem sehr weit abgelegenen, quasi extraterritorialen Ort, an der Küste des Nordmeers oder im Herzen des schwarzen Kontinents. (RS, 49)

whether one is on an estate in Suffolk or in a very remote, extraterritorial place, so to speak, on the coast of the North Sea or in the heart of the dark continent. (RS, 36)

The allusions to the North Sea and the dark heart of Africa convey the sinister aspect that Somerleyton has for Sebald. Remembering an earlier trip to Holland, he recalls wandering into a desolate part of the city, standing in front of a boarded-up pizza restaurant, and feeling as if he has strayed into an extraterritorial location (RS, 101; RS, 81). More in tune with the strict meaning of the word “extraterritorial” is Orfordness, the subject of rumours that secret research into biological weapons had made the nearby town of Shingle Street completely uninhabitable. In this case, the silence surrounding the research

¹³I cite the definitions given in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Ed. by Philip Babcock Grove and the Merriam-Webster editorial staff. Springfield, MA 1993.

during The Second World War and the Cold War is clearly connected to the “extraterritorial” nature of the Orfordness promontory (RS, 278; RS, 233).

In contrast to these moments when he is overcome by a sense of “extraterritoriality”, Sebald also writes of times when he feels trapped in a confined and anxiety-provoking space. The Somerleyton estate combines both kinds of experience. Whereas his impression of the place as “extraterritorial” occurs during his visit to the interior of the house, his experience of entrapment occurs when he is making his way through the famous yew maze. There, he finds himself repeatedly going off on tangents that lead nowhere. He becomes so thoroughly lost that he only finds his way out after he sets about marking all the dead-ends with the heel of his boot (RS, 51–52; RS, 38). The random trajectory of his walking tour, by which he aims to free himself from his depression, does not work to free him from the Somerleyton labyrinth. Instead, he is compelled to fall back on a more systematic technique of escape.

Labyrinths have a long history that has been connected since medieval times with pilgrimage. Pavement mazes were inlaid on the floor of numerous Gothic cathedrals (the thirteenth century labyrinth set in the floor of the nave at Chartres is the most famous example) to remind the faithful that the spiritual journey through life is long and laborious, and that the approach to God is not rapid. Unlike garden mazes, however, the floor labyrinth at Chartres consists of a single convoluted path: there are no dead-ends to negotiate. The journey to the centre of the maze and out again took particularly long for penitents who traversed the course on their knees in the hope of obtaining indulgences.¹⁴ A pavement maze of this type was known, among other things, as a “chemin de Jérusalem”, since it substituted for the traditional pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹⁵ The labyrinth at Chartres, with a diameter of 13 metres, spans the entire breadth of the nave; it was designed to impress the faithful with the significance of this trajectory. Walking the entire 260-metre path was an act of spiritual commitment. As David Brown puts it, the labyrinth was chosen as an image of the journey towards God “because not only does it make the journey inevitably a voyage of dislocation but also [...] one in which God could be trusted to appear, in part precisely because of that dislocation”.¹⁶ In this way, the exercise of walking the labyrinth in the cathedral floor is an equivalent in miniature to the geographic displacement that is so important in the spatially more expansive practice of pilgrimage to a sacred site.

¹⁴ Etienne Huvet: *An Illustrated Monograph of Chartres Cathedral*. Chartres 1930. P. 6.

¹⁵ W.H. Matthews: *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development*. London – New York, NY 1922. P. 40.

¹⁶ David Brown: *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*. Oxford 2004. P. 234.

On the one hand, Sebald's sense of freedom during his unstructured ramble through Suffolk is opposed to his experience of entrapment in the yew maze at Somerleyton. On the other hand, the maze at Somerleyton creates feelings of frustration that are not present in the Christian conception of the labyrinth as a spiritual compass.¹⁷

Related paradoxes surrounding entrapment and escape are familiar from the work of Franz Kafka. We know from Sebald's essays and from references and allusions in his creative texts that he was a close reader of the Czech writer.¹⁸ In *The Rings of Saturn* there is a clear allusion to Kafka's story "The Hunter Gracchus" at the point where Sebald leaves a town named Benacre Broad and walks down to the sea. Looking out over the water, he observes a sailing boat that seems to be floating motionless upon the sea, while he himself, though walking towards the boat, has the strange sense that he is not moving either. The English translation does not fully render the reference to Kafka's Gracchus, the hunter who remains perennially trapped between life and death, unable to leave the small boat that carries him hither and yon like a miniature flying Dutchman. In Sebald's German original, however, the allusion is evident in the words: "der unsichtbare Geisterfahrer mit seiner bewegungslosen Barke" ("that ghost traveller aboard his unmoving barque") [RS, 84; RS, 66; trans. modified]. For the hunter Gracchus there is no possibility of escape, despite his perpetual movement from place to place.¹⁹ In Kafka's story "The Burrow", the narrating animal is also in continuous motion, constantly hurrying between the inside and the outside of his earthen fortress to check on its safety. The burrow is at once his refuge from a threatening world and a prison that locks him in a state of permanent anxiety.

Deleuze and Guattari begin *Kafka: For a Minor Literature*, their book on Kafka, by alluding to this story: "How can we enter into Kafka's world?" they ask. "This world is a rhizome, a burrow".²⁰ Sebald may not have known their

¹⁷I am grateful to Mary Chrichton for pointing out the importance of the labyrinth in Christian tradition.

¹⁸See Sebald: *Das unentdeckte Land. Zur Motivstruktur in Kafkas Schloß* (BU, 78–92); *Das Gesetz der Schande – Macht, Messianismus und Exil in Kafkas Schloß* (UH, 87–103).

¹⁹Kafka's Hunter Gracchus is more prominent in Sebald's *Vertigo*. On the function of Gracchus in that book, see Eric Santner: *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago, IL 2006. Pp. 115–121.

²⁰I quote the English translation in order not to introduce too many different languages. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis, MN – London 1986. P. 3. For the original French edition, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris 1975.

more densely theoretical works, but he certainly knew their study of Franz Kafka. In fact, he quotes several passages from the 1976 German translation in his essay on Ernst Herbeck (BU, 147). The passages Sebald quotes in this essay concern the motif of the bachelor in Kafka's work. Deleuze and Guattari see this figure as "*der* Deterritorialiserte schlechthin" ("the deterritorialized person as such").²¹ Sebald, of course, is not a bachelor – in reality, he was a married man with a love of dogs and a penchant for watching television shows like *Fawlty Towers*²² – but in his literary peregrinations he presents himself as consistently alone.

Like the trajectories described by Deleuze and Guattari – and in decided contrast to the notion of pilgrimage – Sebald's walking tour in *The Rings of Saturn* is a complicated journey that proceeds unsystematically, taking detours, relying on chance rather than planning, and disregarding the notion of a specific destination to be reached. This unstructured way of travelling is precisely the escape he needs after his long period of hospitalisation. It is a kind of movement that depends at once on "lines of articulation" and "lines of flight", and the book that results from it is one that is structured by "principles of connection and heterogeneity".²³ Using as their guiding metaphor the burrow constructed by Kafka's unspecified animal, Deleuze and Guattari announce in *Toward a Minor Literature* their route of approach to the Czech writer's world:

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse, a tight passage, a siphon. We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point.²⁴

This description of their procedure corresponds in many respects to Sebald's method in undertaking his walking tour. The territory he enters is not merely a specific part of Suffolk: he also journeys into history, memory, and reading. The first chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* opens with an account of the time, place, and motivation for the walking tour, but it shifts very rapidly into

²¹ In the original French, Deleuze and Guattari capitalise the word "Déterritorialisé" – Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*. P. 129. In the English translation the word is not capitalised and the bachelor is simply described as "the deterritorialized" – Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. P. 71.

²² Richard Sheppard: Dexter-Sinister: Some Observations on Decrypting the Mors Code in the Work of W.G. Sebald. In: *Journal of European Studies* 35:4 (2005). Pp. 419–463. Here: P. 440.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London – Minneapolis, MN 1987. Pp. 3; 7.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. P. 3.

ruminations about Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Browne, Rembrandt's painting of Dr Tulp, Brehm's *Life of Animals*, and Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings*. The chapter meanders in a seemingly disoriented, and certainly disorienting way among these topics, returning at the end to Browne's *Hydriotaphia*. The second chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* picks up the story of Sebald's foot tour once again, taking us now for the first time on the initial stages of the journey itself. Through this narrative structure we enter the territory twice and from two different points of approach. This configuration is characteristic of *The Rings of Saturn* and will be repeated with multiple variations throughout the entire book. In this sense, Sebald's narrative mimics the structures of observation and reflection manifested by the animal in Kafka's "Burrow" as well as the analytic method of Deleuze and Guattari.

Structurally, *The Rings of Saturn* corresponds to techniques of Kafka that Deleuze and Guattari emphasize: processes of "segmentation" and "proliferation" that often create the effect of an "assemblage". The model for "segmentation" is Kafka's narrative "The Chinese Wall", in which the wall itself is said to be composed of disconnected segments constructed by disparate teams of workers, who start building in one place, complete one part of the wall, and then move on to a totally different part of the country where they construct yet another disconnected segment. "The Chinese Wall" is, among other things, a reflection on Kafka's own methods of writing, reproduced in the scholarly edition of his works and the paperback reading edition derived from it.²⁵ Here we see Kafka starting and stopping, initiating a new idea or a new narrative line, creating his own works by assembling the same kinds of discontinuous segments his narrator describes in "The Chinese Wall". The more difficult the transitions between the segments, "the less the assemblage is capable of effectively fleeing and following its own line of escape", Deleuze and Guattari comment.²⁶ Like the animal inside and outside his burrow, the assembled text keeps pointing to escape routes that it is unable to take, and so it remains imprisoned in the very mechanism that is created by its attempts to flee. On the surface, the "segments" of Sebald's text are less disconnected than the segments of Kafka's Chinese Wall; but, on closer inspection, this is only an effect created by his uniform tone and seamless presentation.

Nonetheless, a book like *The Rings of Saturn* is distinctly labyrinthine: the reading process is one in which we repeatedly wonder where we are. The text is distinctly more complex than that of any of Kafka's fictions. The structure of *The Rings of Saturn* is very different from the proliferating episodes of Kafka's three novels, as Deleuze and Guattari describe them. Still,

²⁵ Franz Kafka: *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*. Ed. by Jost Schillemeit. Frankfurt am Main 1993 (Vol. I) and 1992 (Vol. II).

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. P. 87.

one statement the French theorists make about Kafka's novels does apply even more closely to Sebald's narratives: "This method of segmentary acceleration or proliferation connects the finite, the contiguous, the continuous, and the unlimited".²⁷ A glance at the table of contents in *The Rings of Saturn* bears this out, as places, people, and topics come and go without clear rationale, separated only by dashes. Sometimes a sort of symmetry emerges, as when Sir Thomas Browne is treated in the first and last chapters or Roger Casement at the beginning and end of chapter 5, but at other times connections emerge across chapters in a much less orderly fashion. A series of poets and writers flicker in and out: Borges, Diderot, Conrad, Victor Hugo, Swinburne, FitzGerald, Chateaubriand. Some of them have links to the country Sebald is traversing, others do not. Ireland is a topic of discussion in chapters 5 and 8; China occurs in chapters 6 and 10; Germany, in chapters 2 and 10, and so on. The dashes separating the various topics in the table of contents highlight the disjointed nature of the textual assemblage, while the steady flow of the narrative within each chapter seems to weld the parts seamlessly together.

The unified appearance of the text is greatly helped by Sebald's tendency to combine multifarious material, often only associatively related, into unusually lengthy paragraphs. It is also aided by his unfailingly even style, which imitates over long stretches the imperturbable manner of the nineteenth century realist Adalbert Stifter while also incorporating direct quotations from many other sources.²⁸ While still in hospital and under the influence of painkillers after his operation, Sebald felt, he tells us, as if he were simultaneously inside the protective iron railings of his bed and floating up above and away from it in a hot-air balloon. The passage does not exactly copy passages verbatim but, rather, assembles minute elements from Stifter's description into new combinations.²⁹ Unlike the "impoverished" style Kafka employs, Sebald's style is unusually rich. Not only does it reassemble elements plucked from other contexts, it is consistently toned down and slowed down. "The first characteristic of a minor literature", Deleuze and Guattari say in their book on Kafka, "is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization".³⁰ Despite the obvious differences between Kafka's and Sebald's use of German, I believe that this statement also applies very well to Sebald. If Kafka's language is a language of marginalisation, Sebald's is, in effect, a language of exile.

²⁷ Ibid. P. 58.

²⁸ See the passage where he embeds words and phrases from Stifter's story "Der Condor" (1840); see Adalbert Stifter: *Gesammelte Werke in sechs Bänden*. Wiesbaden 1959. Vol. 1. Pp. 14, 19, 22.

²⁹ Patrick Bahner: *Kaltes Herz: W.G. Sebalds Die Ringe des Saturn*. In: *W.G. Sebald*. Ed. by Franz Loquai. Eggingen 1997. P. 126.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. P. 16.

Indeed, exile is a dominant theme in *The Rings of Saturn*. From Ovid, whose exile in Tomi is recalled in Thomas Browne's imaginary library, to Chateaubriand, exiled for a time in Suffolk, and the young Joseph Conrad, exiled from Poland to become a wanderer on the high seas, the book circles around different types of displacement from one's native land. Conrad's father, engaged in a translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer* that he will never succeed in finishing, describes the book to his son as the story of people uprooted from their homes, exiled, lost, eliminated, or avoided (RS, 130; RS, 107). The Ashburys, with whom Sebald had stayed on a trip to Ireland some years before his walking tour of Suffolk, fall into this category. As Sebald tries to fall asleep in the room they have provided him, he reflects that they live "wie Flüchtlinge" ("like refugees") [RS, 250; RS, 210] beneath their own roof. In his later discussion of the silk industry Sebald tells of Huguenot refugees who had settled in Norwich in the early eighteenth century as weavers in the newly flourishing textile factories (RS, 335; RS, 283). Indeed, the European and English silk industry is itself the result of a migration: the secret transport of silkworm eggs from China to the West in a hollow bamboo walking-stick. To sustain the industry, mulberry trees had to be grown in Europe as well. Sebald himself is, if not exactly exiled, at least away from home and in many respects "dépaysé" ("dislocated"). Indeed, he even seems to wish he had suffered a more literal form of exile. He identifies so strongly with his friend Michael Hamburger, who had come to England as a refugee from Nazi Germany, that he feels as if he had been a previous inhabitant of Hamburger's study. As Eric Santner comments, he seems to "want to appropriate the latter's story of exile as his own".³¹

Exile is the most dramatic form of removal from one's familiar territory. Nomadic existence is a less severe version of this estrangement. *The Rings of Saturn* is punctuated by recurrent visions of caravans making their way across the countryside, one of them an allusion to Kaspar Hauser's dream in Herzog's *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (a favourite film of Sebald's).³² At another point, the pseudo-oriental façade of a spa hotel reminds Sebald of a caravanserai (RS, 105; RS, 85); and later, as he struggles to make his way through the wind and sand of a sudden storm on the Suffolk coast, he imagines himself as the last survivor of a caravan whose other members have perished in the desert (RS, 273; RS, 229). Finally, towards the end of the book, he

³¹ Santner: *On Creaturely Life*. P. 178. Santner also adduces passages in other works by Sebald where the narrator "manifests a peculiar will [...] to write himself into another person's history". What Santner terms Sebald's "'narratophilia', his erotically charged pursuit of what are for the most part men with stories of trauma and bereavement" is, he argues, an essential part of Sebald's history of modern life, which "is always already a history of sexuality". Ibid. Pp. 178, 196.

³² Sheppard: "Dexter-Sinister". P. 443.

explicitly invokes the caravans that bore silk from the China Sea to the Mediterranean (RS, 328; *RS*, 277). At these moments in the book, “nomadology” seems to supplant history, as Deleuze and Guattari recommend in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

The story of silk – which also includes Thomas Browne, son of a Norwich silk merchant – becomes a metaphor for the travelling structure of *The Rings of Saturn*. A miniature of the wandering structure of the book is created not only by the dual trajectory of silk from east to west – first as product, then as eggs – but also by the method through which the worms produce their silk. Before the silkworm begins to spin its cocoon, it first sets up a silken support in which to cradle it. This support is woven in an erratic manner: it consists of a “weitläufiges, unordentliches, unzusammenhängendes Gewebe” (“an extensive, disorderly, fragmented web”) [RS, 326; *RS*, 275]. It would be hard to find a more appropriate image for the structure of *The Rings of Saturn* itself. This rough, unstructured web finds correspondences in other phenomena described in the book: “das verwinkelte englische Fußpfadsystem” (“the labyrinthine system of footpaths” in England) [RS, 296; *RS*, 250]; the capillary system of tree roots that permits Dutch elm disease to spread (RS, 314; *RS*, 264); the radar system (RS, 271; *RS*, 227) and the network of radio masts (RS, 283; *RS*, 237); flight trajectories during the Second World War and in the present. These networks, like those in Sebald’s later novel *Austerlitz*, are corollaries of the dense motivic structure of his writing, which resembles in this respect that of German Poetic Realism. Yet – and this distinguishes Sebald’s writing from that of his nineteenth century predecessors – the web his texts create is woven on a loom that is also an instrument of torture or a cage (see illustration in RS, 334; *RS*, 282). Like the burrow of Kafka’s animal, also a metaphor for writing itself, the web of the text is both a line of escape and a form of imprisonment. Of the spinning loom, Sebald writes that this machine,

vielleicht gerade aufgrund ihrer vergleichsweise Primitivität besser als jede spätere Ausformung unserer Industrie verdeutlicht, daß wir uns nur eingespannt in die von uns erfundenen Maschinen auf der Erde zu erhalten vermögen. (RS, 334)

perhaps because of its relatively primitive character, makes more apparent than any later form of factory work that we are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented. (*RS*, 283)

This idea is closely related to Kafka’s understanding of the role of the machine in modern life. As in Kafka’s “Report to an Academy”, whose narrator, the captured ape, claims to owe his survival to a small hole in the wooden case in which he was transported from Africa to Europe, the line of escape may be only an imaginary respite from entrapment in the cage.

Probably the most important theme of *The Rings of Saturn* is that of collapse, decay, and destruction. In this respect it anticipates Sebald’s later essay, *On the*

Natural History of Destruction. Yet, the signs of destruction in *The Rings of Saturn* are not all of recent date. The shrine at Walsingham, for example, was one of the earliest English holy sites to be plundered in the wake of Henry VIII's injunctions against pilgrimage. Stripped of its gold and silver in 1538,³³ the shrine eventually fell into ruin, and ritual journeys to Walsingham virtually ceased for a long period.³⁴ A sixteenth century poem called "The Wracks of Walsingham" tells the story of the shrine's destruction and mourns the ruin of a place where once "palmer's did throng".³⁵

In *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald links the destruction and decline of Walsingham with Dunwich, also located in Norfolk, which he presents as a place of pilgrimage for melancholy writers (RS, 192; RS, 159). This city, which rose to prominence in the thirteenth century "as rapidly as it was to decay",³⁶ was the place to which Algernon Swinburne repaired with his companion Theodore Watts Dunton to recover his composure following bouts of nervous illness. Dunwich, ravaged by two hurricanes, in 1285/86 and 1328, was attacked by continued flooding and erosion over the succeeding centuries; the inhabitants fled further and further from the coast, and Dunwich itself was swallowed up by the waters. The place became a vast wasteland. Walking from Southwold to Dunwich through fields of wind-blown sedge evidently had a tranquillising effect on Swinburne (RS, 193; RS, 160). Here it was, Sebald recounts, that Swinburne had a vision of Kublai Khan's palace in minute and fantastic detail. The sheer emptiness of Dunwich seems to have given rise to the extravagant vision of oriental splendour. In this way, English landscape is linked with the East, adding to the complex geographical network that subtends the book's presentation of space familiar and far away. Places of pilgrimage, whether literal or metaphorical, are a way of mapping a world that is constantly threatened by decay and destruction.

Towards the end of *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald describes how silk is harvested from the cocoons of silkworms. Shallow baskets are suspended over a wash kettle full of continually boiling water: after three hours, the worms are dead and the silk can be unwound from the cocoons. When one batch is finished, the next is begun, "so lange, bis das ganze Tötungsgeschäft vollendet ist" ("and so on until the entire killing business is completed") [RS, 348; RS, 294].

³³ See James Simpson: Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547. In: *The Oxford English Literary History*. Oxford 2002. Vol. 2. P. 414.

³⁴ Simon Coleman and John Eade: *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*. London – New York, NY 2004. P. 47.

³⁵ The poem is included in Singer: *Places of Pilgrimage* as Appendix B. Pp. 169–70.

³⁶ Carl Stephenson: *Borough and Town: A Study of Urban Origins in England*. Medieval Academy of America 1933. P. 165.

With these words, Sebald alludes to other killings: not only the herring catch, of which he presents a photo early in the book, but also the killings perpetrated in Nazi concentration camps. On the day when Sebald completed writing up the account of his walking tour, 13 April 1995, his wife's father died in a German hospital. Reflecting on "unsere beinahe nur aus Kalamitäten bestehende Geschichte" ("our history, which is but a long account of calamities") [RS, 350; RS, 295], Sebald recalls that heavy clothes of black silk taffeta or black crêpe de Chine were once de rigueur for upper-class ladies in mourning. And so the narrative returns to silk. Sebald recounts a passage in which Thomas Browne discusses the superstition of covering mirrors or landscape paintings in the house of a dead person with black silk in order to prevent the soul from seeing itself as it leaves the body and flies to its heavenly home.³⁷ This reference to the soul's flight to heaven should not be taken, however, as a comforting ending to an individual human pilgrimage through life.³⁸ Rather, Sebald attributes the passage to Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a collection of common errors and mistaken beliefs. Concluding his book with an allusion to superstition, Sebald undoes yet again the pilgrimage model against which his Suffolk walking tour is constructed.³⁹

He reverses as well the oldest model of "English pilgrimage": the missionary journeys of Saint Boniface, the English monk who attempted first to evangelise the Frisians and then, at Pope Gregory's request, organised the church in Bavaria and established a bishopric there and several more in other parts of Germany.⁴⁰ In contrast to Boniface, Sebald moved from Germany to England. As a result of Sebald's German origin, England becomes, by means of his walk through Suffolk, a palimpsest for German history. One example can

³⁷ Sebald notes that he has been unable to locate this passage in Thomas Browne's text (RS, 350; RS, 296). I have searched for it there but without success.

³⁸ Scholars who interpret this passage positively seem to be ignoring the fact that it refers to Browne's books of common superstitions, the *Pseudodoxica Epidemica*. See Mark R. McCulloh: *Understanding W.G. Sebald*. Columbia, SC 2003. P. 82. Also see John Zilcosky: *Sebald's Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost*. In: *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*. Ed. by J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead. Seattle, WA 2004. Pp. 102–120. Here: P. 109.

³⁹ See Thomas Neuner: *Der Leser als Wanderer – W.G. Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. In: *Medien Observationen* <http://www.medienobservationen.uni-muenchen.de/artikel/literatur/neuner_sebald.html>. Neuner describes the allusion to Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* as "vielleicht einen versteckten Hinweis auf die Haltung Sebalds, die man hier nur als ironische Absage an alle Sinn- und Wahrheitssuche des modernen Pilgers interpretieren kann".

⁴⁰ Note that Sebald shares his first name with Boniface's original name, Wynfrid or Wynfrith. I am grateful to Patrick Fortmann for the idea of introducing Boniface here and for the suggestion about his name.

be seen in his conversation with a gardener at Somerleyton about the Allies' bombing campaign against Nazi Germany. Instead of visiting historic sites in Germany, Sebald visits locations in England connected with the Second World War. Scenes in which he looks from the eastern coast of England towards Europe and scenes where he looks from Europe (Holland, for reasons of geographical proximity) back towards England suggest some kind of reciprocity, as if in addition to the iron balcony from which Granville shows inhabitants of Saturn curiously gazing towards Earth, there might be another iron balcony on our own planet, from which we could gather to observe those in outer space. This implied reciprocity adds a strange dimension to the mapping of space in *The Rings of Saturn*.

The simultaneous presence of two mental maps of historical space – one English, the other German – is the result of Sebald's inner split between his two "homes". Regardless of his location, he is not fully at home anywhere; he is always in some sense dislocated. This phenomenon may also account for the curious impression he creates that there is no fundamental difference between natural and man-made disasters.

What is the opposite of pilgrimage? In the Middle Ages it might have been seen in the aimless wandering of certain Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks, derogatorily called *gyrovagi* (sixth to eighth centuries)⁴¹ or the practice of roaming the countryside begging for money under the pretence of going to the Holy Land, "la Sainte Terre" (whence the verb "to saunter").⁴² A crusade presented a more complicated phenomenon, since it consisted of military aggression disguised as a kind of pilgrimage. In the nineteenth century there was the Grand Tour of Europe, a kind of cultural pilgrimage by which one acquired various snippets of knowledge; today, there is the more debased variant of travel, tourism.⁴³ More appropriate to Sebald's book is the notion of travel to faraway places in order to take possession of land and build a new home there. The latter is, of course, colonialism, an important theme in *The Rings of Saturn*. Just as medieval pilgrimage was, among other things, a way of "mapping" or visualising geographic space, so nineteenth century colonial endeavours – represented here by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Roger Casement's

⁴¹ See Singer: *Places of Pilgrimage*. P. 3.

⁴² See Henry David Thoreau: *Walking*. In: *Collected Essays and Poems*. Ed. by Elizabeth Hall Witherell. New York, NY 2001. P. 225.

⁴³ I am grateful to Fred Amrine and Helmut Puff for these suggestions. Like the traveller making the Grand Tour, Sebald acquires pieces of historical knowledge that resist seamless incorporation into a single narrative. Like the present-day tourist, he visits sites featured in readily available guidebooks. He avoids the commercial aspects of tourism, however (he does not purchase souvenirs, for example); and the boarded-up pizza café in The Hague is the closest he comes to the fast-food business.

probe of the slave trade and support for the “white Indians of Ireland” (RS 157; RS, 129) – were a kind of inverse pilgrimage. Taken together with the many forms of trade that flourished in the same historical context – sugar and silk, ships and caravans – the trajectories recalled in *The Rings of Saturn* lead more often to the abuse of power than to spiritual salvation. The networks they form are joined by the networks of radio masts, the clusters of military installations, and the flights of bomber planes to create a map of destructive travel, the traces of which the melancholy wanderer still observes upon the face of the earth. In this way, the foot traveller becomes a pilgrim after all: one who seeks an extraterrestrial position from which to understand the long history of destruction.