

# 4 / 3 / W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*

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[This material was originally posted on [Writing with Images](#). Please see the table of contents for the context of these remarks. Send comments, criticism, etc., to the author [here](#) or by Facebook. There is more on Sebald's book in [chapter 5](#) and [chapter 6](#).]

## *Sebald's place in the history of novels with images*

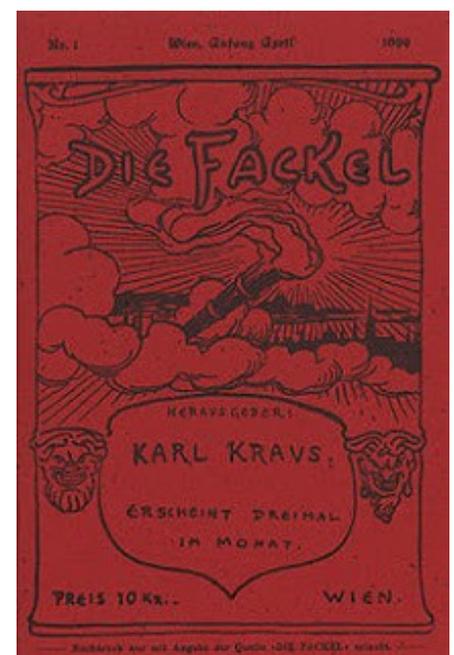
Sebald's popularity among academic critics may have distorted the wider history of novels with images, in that he has become the principal focus of scholarship even though his work is in some respects anomalous. His illustrated novels, poems, and essays are closer to nonfiction, and more experimental with regard to the boundaries of history, memoir, and fiction than some earlier novels with photographs. That investment in raising questions of veracity while exploring historical trauma makes Sebald's novels markedly different from their surrealist predecessors, despite the fact that surrealist strategies are woven throughout his novels. The history of postwar twentieth-century novels with photographs is far wider than Sebald's oeuvre, and that wider history is in some danger of being occluded by the assumption that Sebald's work can stand for the possibilities of postwar novels with included photographs. It seems to me that even the precedents for Sebald's work are not yet clear. They include surrealism, but surrealist practices may not be his principal source. He himself has spoken of 19th century German forms of narrative as a precedent for his writing, if not his images. The Germanist Sander Gilman, a lifelong friend of Sebald's (I believe they went to university in Freiburg together, although I haven't been able to verify that), told me Sebald told him he got the idea of putting images in his novels from Karl Krauss's *Die Fackel*.

If that is true—and I don't have a reason to doubt it—it implies an entirely different genealogy than the one that is usually posited, which leads from André Breton and Walter Benjamin forward—with no intermediate steps—to Sebald's practice beginning in the 1990s. I hope that in the next few decades the historiography of the general subject of writing with images will become clearer; in the meantime, in considering the history of novels with images, it might be prudent not to emphasize Sebald's practice unduly: we may be reading backwards from his influence on academic critics and experimental writers in the present century, inferring that he should be given an equally important place in the earlier history.

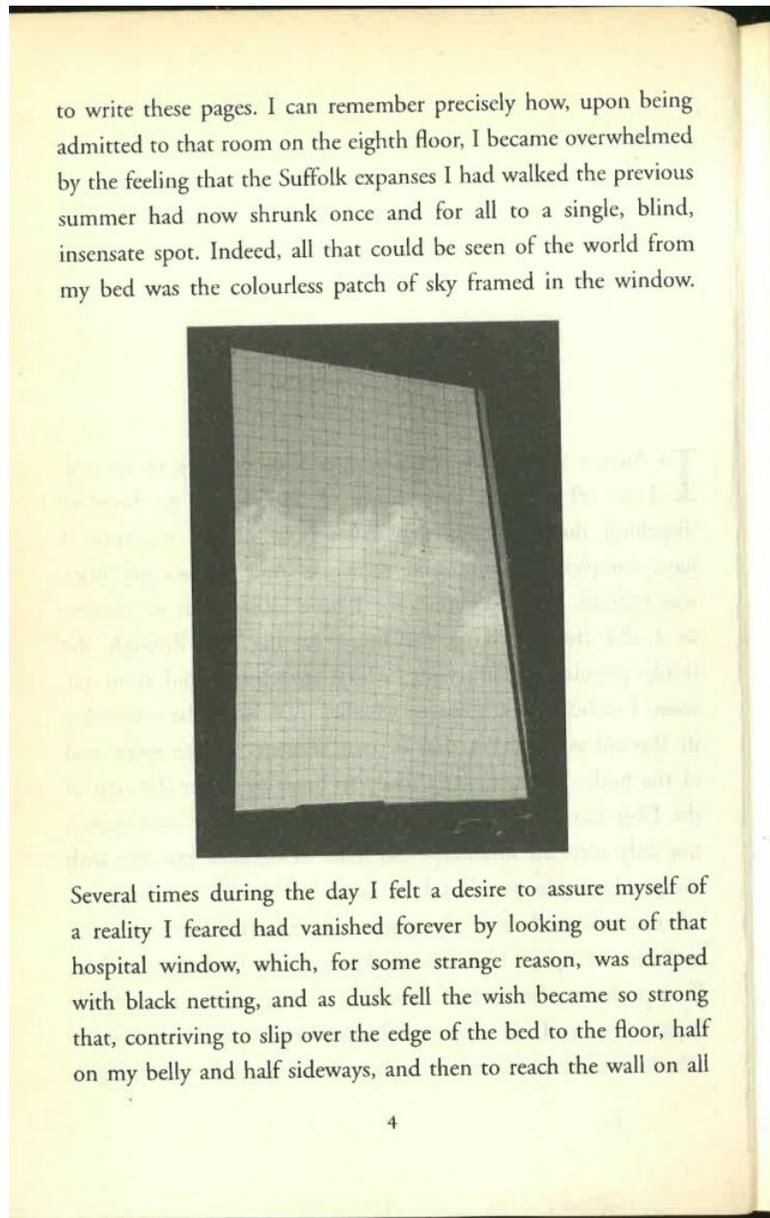
In this chapter I will consider three photographs in *Rings of Saturn*, and then two more general questions: the epistemological veracity of his images in this book, which are often manipulated and difficult to read; and his qualities as a novelist, aside from the question of images.

### *The first photograph*

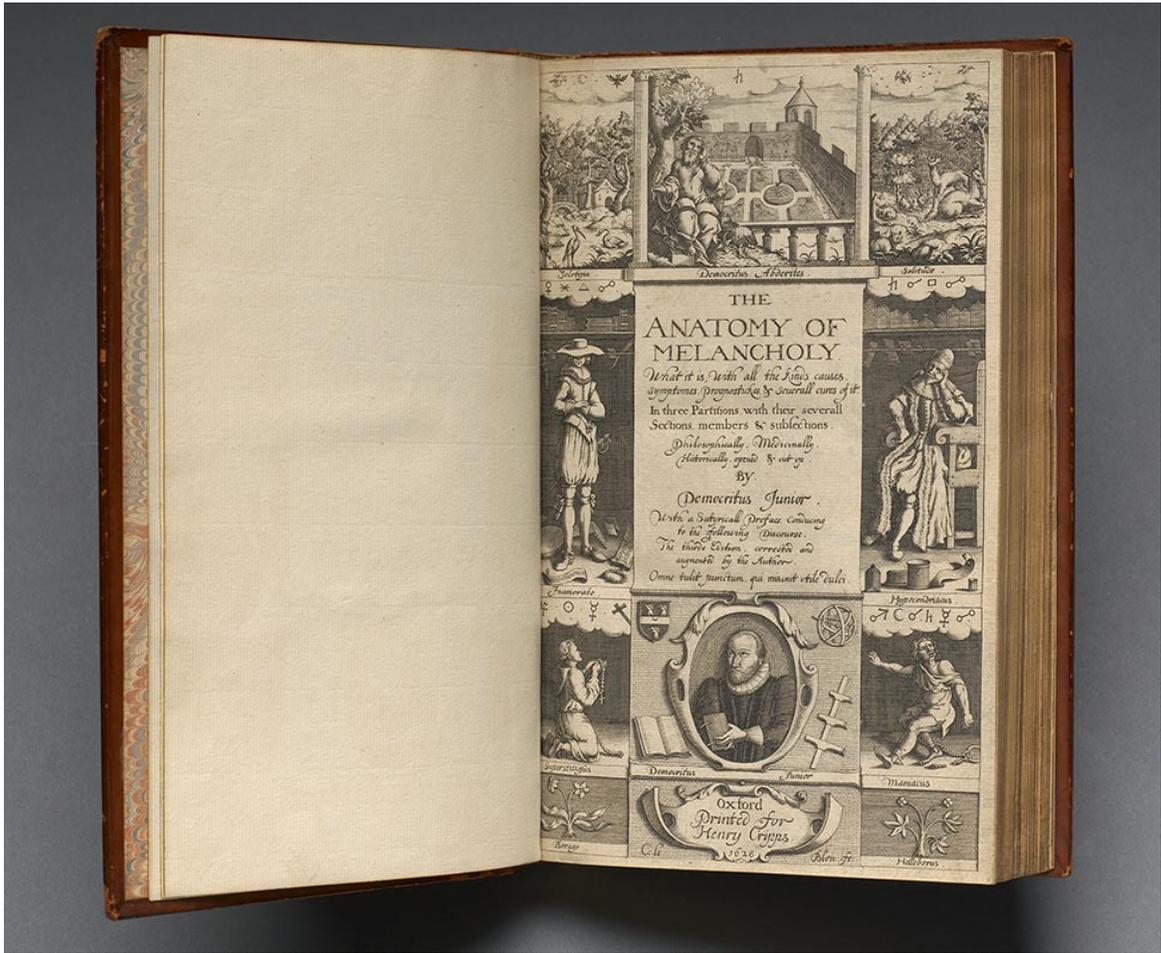
The first illustration is a nearly empty window, with pale clouds and, "for some strange reason," black netting. It's an interesting choice, this initial image, and



it can be justified as an emblem of the blankness into which the narrator had fallen, and the empty pattern that he would try to fill with his recollections of walks in Suffolk. But in terms of the interaction of narrative and image, it may serve several other functions.



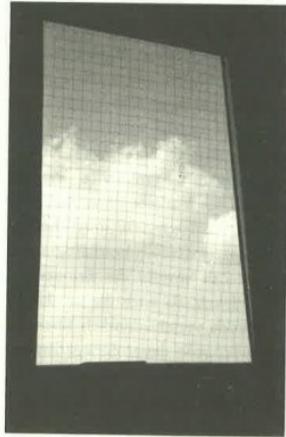
From a writer's point of view it can be helpful to keep initial images simple because that way they do not immediately both anchor and overwhelm the narrative. A complex, forceful image, by its nature, risks attracting too much of the reader's attention—she may return to it again and again, expecting it to contain all the elements of the text in emblematic or embryonic form, the way that some Baroque frontispieces do.



Sebald's photograph has only a few points of similarity to the text, most notably to Thomas Browne's quincunx pattern, which is the book's fifth illustration.

The German edition makes this photograph more of an emblem by centering the word "window" just above the illustration:

ich, in einem Zustand nahezu gänzlicher Unbeweglichkeit, eingeliefert wurde in das Spital der Provinzhauptstadt Norwich, wo ich dann, in Gedanken zumindest, begonnen habe mit der Niederschrift der nachstehenden Seiten. Genau entsinne ich mich noch, wie ich, gleich nach der Einlieferung, in meinem im achten Stockwerk des Krankenhauses gelegenen Zimmer überwältigt wurde von der Vorstellung, die in Suffolk im Vorsommer durchwanderten Weiten seien nun endgültig zusammengeschrumpft auf einen einzigen blinden und tauben Punkt. Tatsächlich war von meiner Bettstatt aus von der Welt nichts anderes mehr sichtbar als das farblose Stück Himmel im Rahmen des Fensters.



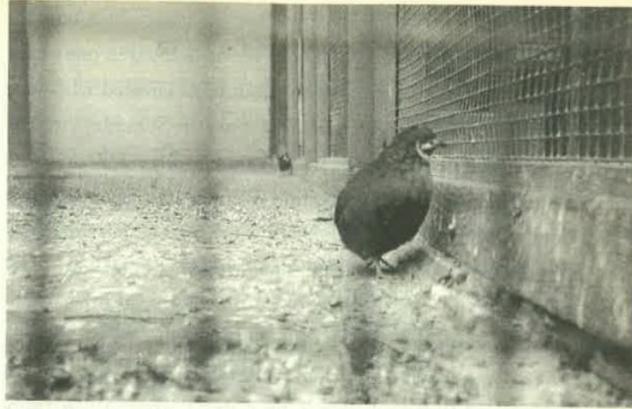
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Der im Laufe des Tages des öfteren schon in mir aufgestiegene Wunsch, der, wie ich befürchtete, für immer verschwundenen Wirklichkeit durch einen Blick aus diesem sonderbarerweise mit einem schwarzen Netz verhängten Krankenhausfenster mich zu versichern, wurde bei Einbruch der Dämmerung so stark, daß ich mich, nachdem es mir irgendwie, halb bäuchlings, halb seitwärts gelungen war, über den Bettrand auf den Fußboden zu rutschen und auf allen vieren die Wand zu erreichen, trotz der damit verbundenen Schmerzen aufrichtete, indem ich mich an der Fensterbrüstung mühsam emporzog. In der krampfhaften Haltung eines Wesens, das sich zum erstenmal von der ebenen Erde erhoben hat, stand ich dann gegen die Glasscheibe gelehnt und mußte unwillkürlich an die Szene denken, in der der arme Gregor, mit zitternden Beinchen an die Sessellehne sich klammernd, aus seinem Kabinett hinausblickt in undeutlicher Erinnerung, wie es heißt, an das Befreiende, das früher einmal für ihn darin gelegen war, aus dem Fenster zu schauen. Und genau wie Gregor mit seinen trübe gewordenen Augen die stille Charlottenstraße, in der er mit den Seinen seit Jahren wohnte, nicht mehr erkannte und sie für eine graue Einöde hielt, so schien auch mir die vertraute Stadt, die sich von den Vorhöfen des Spitals bis weit gegen den Horizont hin erstreckte, vollkommen fremd. Ich konnte mir nicht denken, daß in dem ineinanderverschobenen Gemäuer dort unten noch irgend etwas sich regte, sondern glaubte, von einer Klippe aus hinabzublicken auf ein steinernes Meer oder ein Schotterfeld, aus dem wie riesige Findlingsblöcke die finsternen Massen der

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This signals not only this image's special position as an icon or emblem of what will happen in the book, but it also alerts readers to note the relation of all the following images to their accompanying text. It is a frontispiece to the extent that it suggests rules and themes for reading.

*The Chinese quail*



The grounds, in contrast to the waning splendour of the house, were now at their evolutionary peak, a century after the heyday of Somerleyton. The flower beds might well have been better tended and more gloriously colourful, but today the trees planted by Morton Peto filled the air above the gardens, and several of the ancient cedars, which were there to be admired by visitors even then, now extended their branches over well-nigh a quarter of an acre, each an entire world unto itself. There were sequoias towering more than sixty yards, and rare oriental planes, the outermost extremities of which had bowed down as low as the lawn, securing a hold where they touched the ground, to shoot up once more in a perfect circle. It was easy to imagine this species of plane tree spreading over the country, just as concentric circles ripple across water, the parents becoming weaker and dying off from within as the progeny conquers the land about them. Some of the lighter-coloured trees seemed to drift like clouds above the

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This image, the third one in chapter II, was what first interested me about Sebald. It is the reason I wrote to him in 2001 (more on that in the final chapter), and the reason I organized a conference in Ireland in 2005 on the subject of his images. By a circuitous route, it also depicts one of the main subjects in my own writing, which all these notes on “Writing with Images” are intended to explain and, somehow, to help.

What’s striking about the quail image is its sudden injection into the narrative, in which it sits like an animal in a cage. (The wire mesh of the cage should resonate for a reader with the unexplained netting over the open window in the book’s first photograph, giving this image a peculiar weight.) The pages leading up to the image of the quail are about the heyday of the country estate that the narrator is visiting. He has been evoking the unparalleled splendor of the estate in the late 19th century, and then he remarks that the place seemed “fine” now that it was “imperceptible nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion.” After he describes the quail, the narrator continues to praise the decrepit, overgrown grounds.

But the sentence after the one I have quoted has a strange reversal:

*However... I was saddened to see, in one of the deserted aviaries, a solitary Chinese quail, evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage and shaking its head every time*

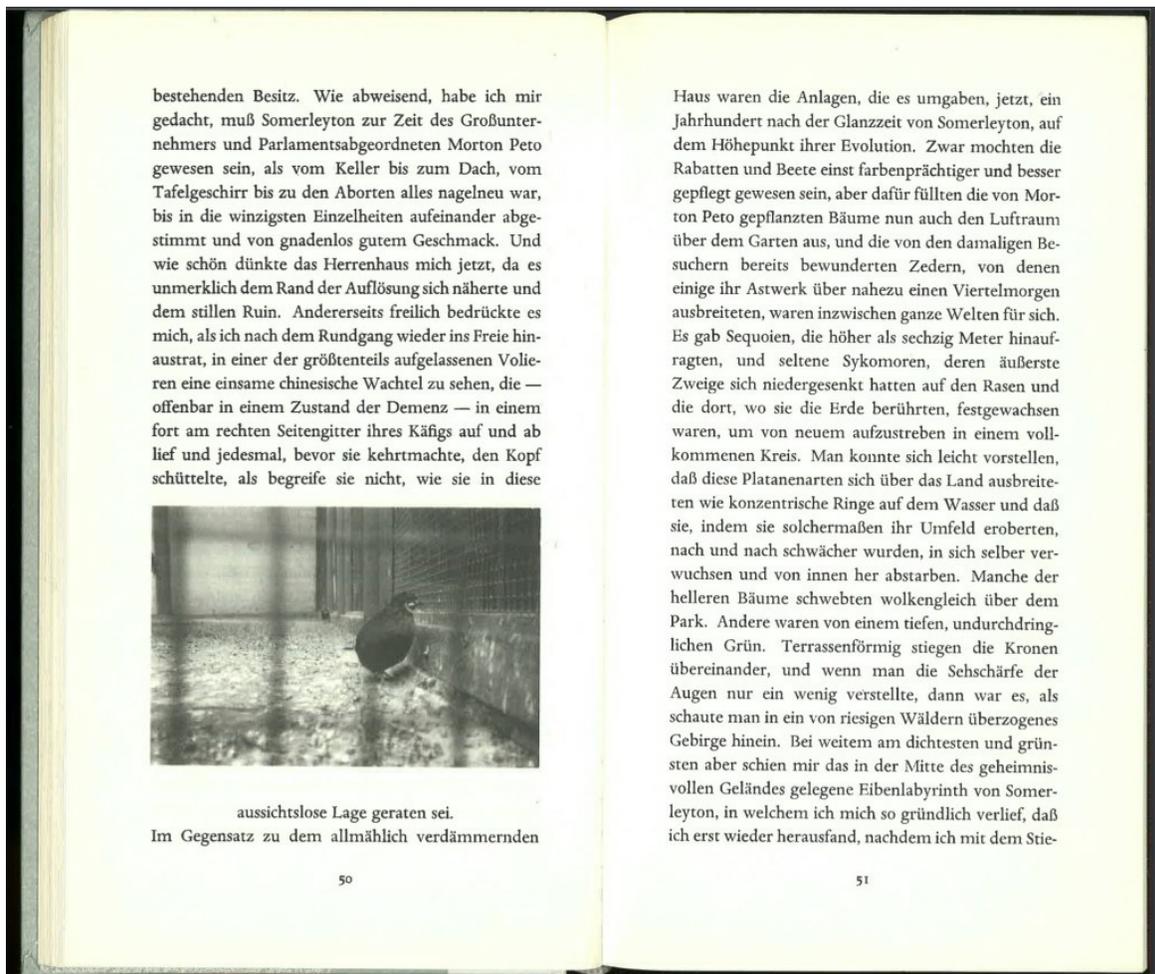
| *it was about to turn, as if it could not comprehend how it had got into this hopeless fix.*

(Actually there are two birds in the photo, and the fact that one goes unmentioned, and possibly unnoticed, is a symptom of the quality of attention Sebald expects his readers to pay to images: more on that later.)

This “however” (“Andererseits”) is unexpected, because the quail doesn’t interrupt the evocation of past splendor but the praise of “dissolution and silent oblivion.” The quail’s “dementia” may be understood as a sign that the fall into “dissolution and silent oblivion” isn’t painless, but if it is such a sign, it’s forgotten immediately after the image is shown, and the narrator continues about the estate’s “waning splendor.”

So there is a kind of Chinese box here: the quail is imprisoned in its cage; the representation of the quail is imprisoned in its photograph; the photograph is imprisoned on the page, between two disparate thoughts; and the recognition of “dissolution” is imprisoned between evocations of the past. When I first encountered this image, I thought it was a good model for a tightly constructed imbrication of photograph and text: frames around the image hold it in place, and those frames continue within the image (or, in the inevitable reversed logic, begin from it). Needless to say this sort of logic binding photograph and narrative cannot be generalized to cases that do not depict cages or nets or coordinate grids (as in an example later in the book) or that aren’t about “oblivion”: but this example shows just how much remains to be done with the interaction of images and text.

Note that in the German edition, Sebald has arranged things so that the final words of the sentence “how it had got into this hopeless fix” appear just after the photograph, centered on the page like a caption:



Just before the image are the words “how it had gotten into this” (“wie sie in diese”), and just after, the words translated as “hopeless fix” (“aussichtslose Lage geraten sei”). The result is striking: the quail couldn’t comprehend

how it had gotten into this—insert image!“hopeless fix.” The word “this” (“diese”) becomes what linguists call a deictic marker, a pointer, indicating that the image is the predicate of the sentence, and turning the end of the sentence into a caption, as if the photo of the bird depicted “[this] hopeless fix.”

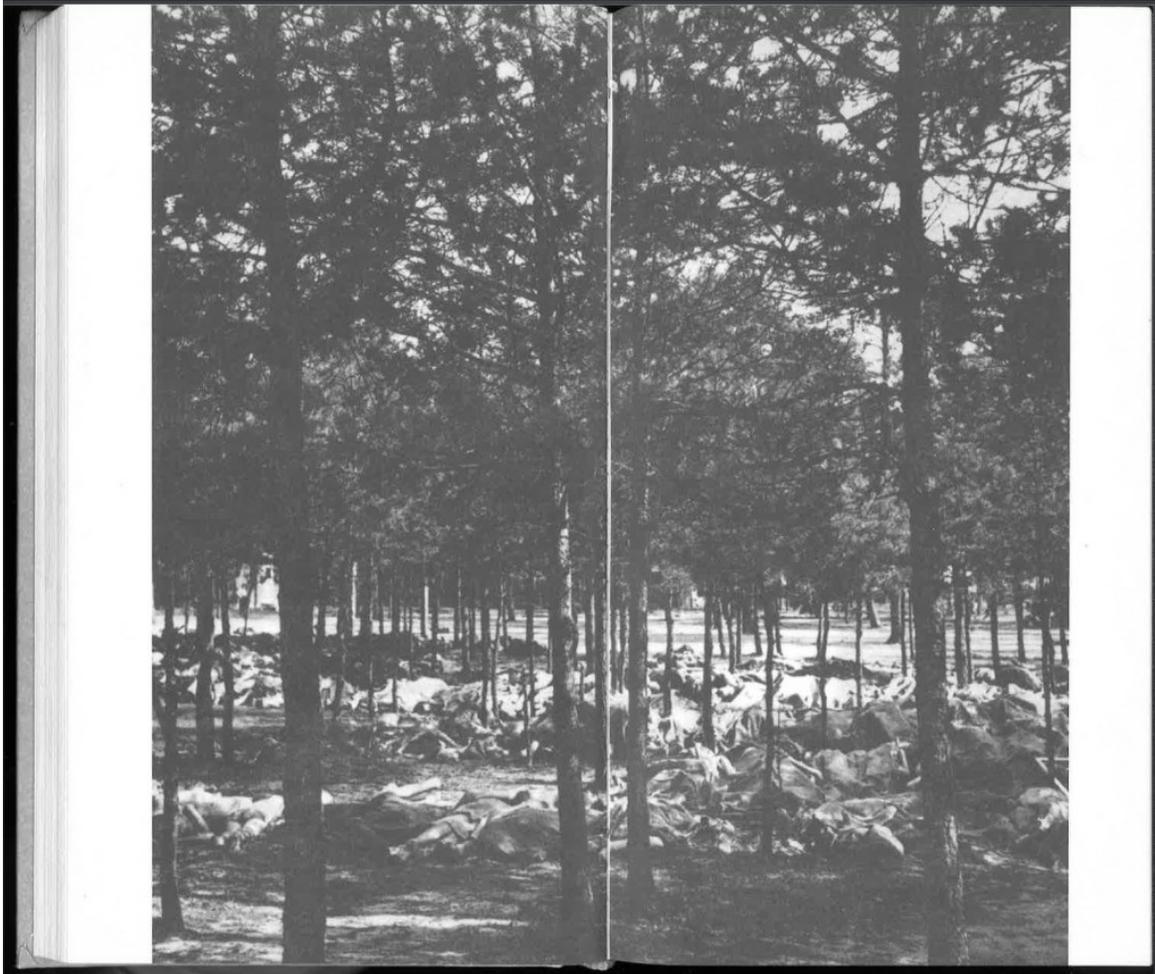
It is difficult to imagine a tighter relation between narrative and photograph, as if Sebald wanted to bolt the two together—as if he was afraid that otherwise they would fall apart. This incipient or latent fear is, I think, a prevalent theme in his four novels. I will have more to say on this in the last chapter, but I think it is also a practical matter, an attempt to persuade the reader to read up to, over, and past the images, without entirely interrupting the flow of reading—with some stark exceptions, as in the photo of Bergen-Belsen I will consider next.

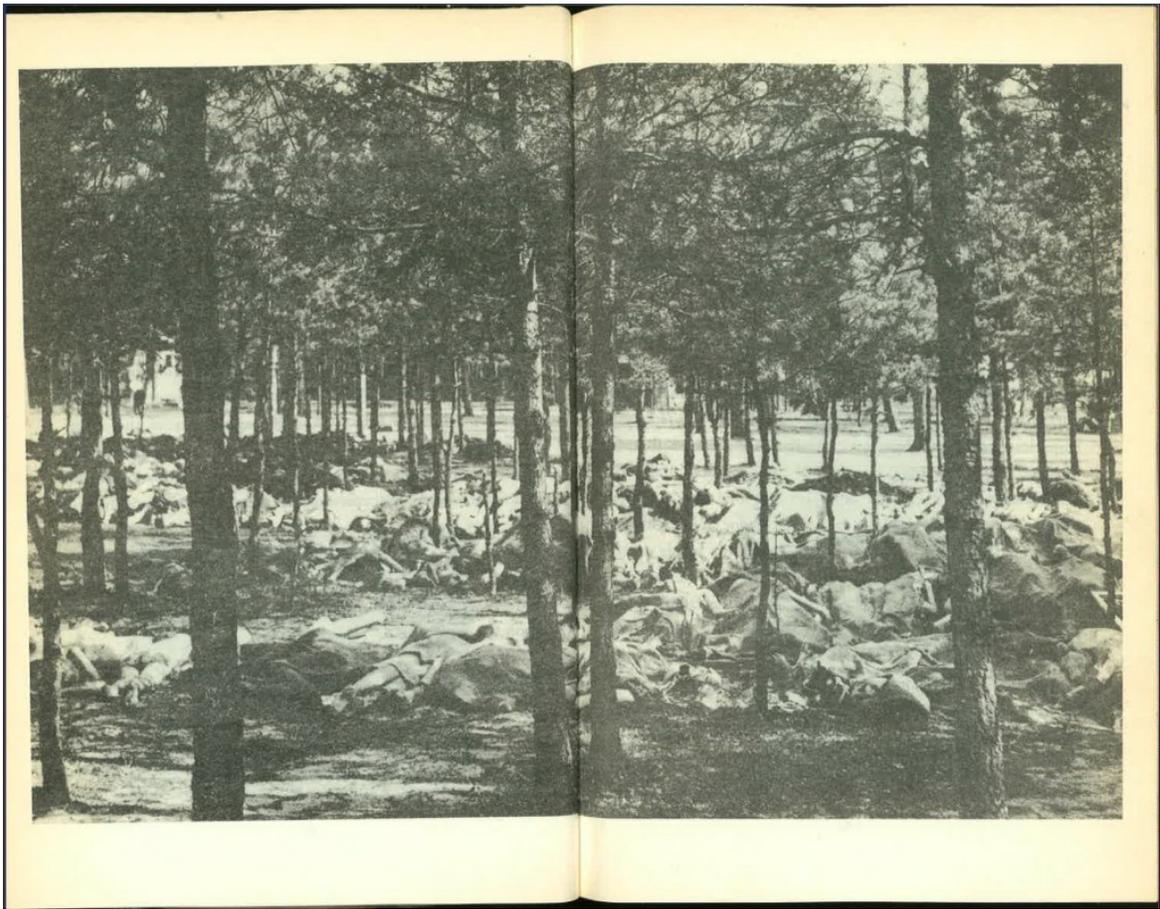
There is a poignant coda to the image of the quail: when Lise Patt and her friends visited Somerleyton in 2004, they were “surprised to find the same lonely quail in his prison cage.” (*Searching for Sebald*, p. 494.) Their photograph is reproduced as part of a photo-mosaic. The quail is pitiful, head down at the back of its pen, against a cement block wall, veiled by an out-of-focus bar.



The grounds, in contrast to the waning splendour of the house.

The photograph of corpses at Bergen-Belsen, printed across two pages, is a shock to anyone who first turns the page after Sebald's brief mention of the liberation of the camp.





In both the German and the English edition (top and bottom, respectively), Sebald has managed the layout so the line "...liberated the camp of Bergen-Belsen on the 14th of April 1945," leads directly to the page turn that reveals the image. In both, "1945" is the last thing on the page preceding the image:

Farben. Der Rücken wird blau, Backen und Kiemen sind rot unterlaufen von Blut. Zu den Besonderheiten des Herings gehört übrigens auch, daß sein toter Körper an der Luft zu leuchten beginnt. Diese eigenartige, der Phosphoreszenz ähnliche und doch von ihr grundverschiedene Leuchtkraft erreicht wenige Tage nach dem Eintritt des Todes ihren Höhepunkt und nimmt dann in dem Maße ab, in dem der Fisch in Verwesung übergeht. Es ist lange Zeit, ja ich glaube bis heute ungeklärt geblieben, was für eine Bewandnis es mit dem Leuchten der leblosen Heringe hat. Um 1870, als allerorten an Projekten zu einer totalen Illumination



unserer Städte gearbeitet wurde, sollen zwei englische Wissenschaftler mit den seltsamerweise zu ihren Forschungen passenden Namen Herrington und Lightbown das absonderliche Naturphänomen untersucht haben in der Hoffnung, daß sich aus der von den toten Heringen ausgeschwitzten luminösen Substanz die Formel zur Erzeugung einer organischen, sich fortwährend von selber regenerierenden Lichtessenz würde ableiten lassen. Das Scheitern dieses exzentrischen Planes war, wie ich letztin in einer Monogra-

phie über die Geschichte des künstlichen Lichts gelesen habe, ein kaum nennenswerter Rückschlag in der sonst unaufhaltsamen Verdrängung der Finsternis.

Ich hatte die Strandfischer längst hinter mir gelassen, als ich am frühen Nachmittag den halbwegs zwischen Lowestoft und Southwold hinter einer Kiesbank gelegenen Brackwassersee Benacre Broad erreichte. Der See ist umgeben von dem grünen Kranz eines Laubgehölzes, das aufgrund der fortschreitenden Erosion der Küste von der Meerseite her allmählich abstirbt. Sicher ist es nur noch eine Frage der Zeit, bis die Kiesbank in einer Sturmnacht durchbrochen wird und die ganze Gegend ihr Ansehen verändert. Aber doch konnte man an dem Tag, an dem ich dort an dem stillen Ufer saß, glauben, man schaue hinein in die Ewigkeit. Die Dunstschleier, die am Morgen landeinwärts trieben, hatten sich aufgelöst, das Himmelsgewölbe war leer und blau, kein Hauch regte sich in der Luft, wie gemalt standen die Bäume, und nicht ein einziger Vogel flog über das samtbraune Wasser. Es war, als sei die Welt unter einen Glassturz gerückt, bis aus dem Westen mächtige Quellwolken heraufkamen und langsam einen grauen Schatten über die Erde zogen. Vielleicht ist es diese Verdüsterung gewesen, die mich daran erinnerte, daß ich vor mehreren Monaten aus der *Eastern Daily Press* einen Artikel ausgeschnitten hatte über den Tod des Majors George Wyndham Le Strange, dessen Domizil das große steinerne Herrenhaus von Henstead jenseits des Brackwassersees gewesen war. Le Strange habe, so hieß es in dem Artikel, während des letzten Krieges in dem Panzerabwehrregiment gedient, das am 14. April 1945

Among the herring's most striking external features are its powerful tail fin, the narrow head, the slightly prominent lower mandible, and its large eye, with a black pupil swimming in the silvery-white iris. The herring's dorsal area is of a bluish-green colour. The individual scales on its flanks and belly shimmer a golden orange, but taken together they present a metallic, pure white gleam. Held against the light, the rearward parts of the fish appear a dark green of a beauty one sees nowhere else. Once the life has fled the herring, its colours change. Its back turns blue, the cheeks and gills red, suffused with blood. An idiosyncrasy peculiar to the herring is that, when dead, it begins to glow; this property, which resembles phosphorescence and is yet altogether different, peaks a few days after death and then ebbs away as the fish decays. For a long time no one could account for this glowing of the lifeless herring, and indeed I believe that it still remains unexplained. Around 1870, when projects for the total illumination of our cities were everywhere afoot, two English scientists with the



apt names of Herrington and Lightbown investigated the unusual phenomenon in the hope that the luminous substance exuded by dead herrings would lead to a formula for an organic source of light that had the capacity to regenerate itself. The failure of this eccentric undertaking, as I read some time ago in a history of artificial light, constituted no more than a negligible setback in the relentless conquest of darkness.

I had long left the beach fishermen behind me when, in the early afternoon, I reached Benacre Broad, a lake of brackish water beyond a bank of shingle halfway between Lowestoft and Southwold. The lake is encircled by deciduous woodland that is now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea. Doubtless it is only a matter of time before one stormy night the shingle bank is broken, and the appearance of the entire area changes. But that day, as I sat on the tranquil shore, it was possible to believe one was gazing into eternity. The veils of mist that drifted inland that morning had cleared, the vault of the sky was empty and blue, not the slightest breeze was stirring, the trees looked painted, and not a single bird flew across the velvet-brown water. It was as if the world were under a bell jar, until great cumulus clouds brewed up out of the west casting a grey shadow upon the earth.

Perhaps it was that darkening that called to my mind an article I had clipped from the *Eastern Daily Press* several months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake. During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945,

This is arguably the most disturbing image in the book, and it works more as a break, a fracture in the text, than either an “interruption” or a “distraction” (as these are theorized in [chapter 7](#)). “Distraction” is too mild a term, and “interruption” does not capture what happens when a reader sees this image. Because Sebald does not immediately return to the theme of the Holocaust, and because this is the first appearance of the Holocaust in *Rings of Saturn*, the image almost seems to come from a different narrator, one who wishes to break in to the current narrator’s monologue in order to underscore what he is missing. As other readers have noticed, there is a weird resonance between the dead bodies in the forest glade and the evocations of “billions” of herring on the pages preceding the photograph. Sebald has just described how herring look in life and in death, how they suffocate, how they were tortured for scientific purposes, how they have been poisoned by modern industry and agriculture, and how they looked in the sea when they swam in vast shoals. There is also a visual parallel between this image and a photo just 7 pages before it showing thousands of herring on a factory floor.

Those parallels and others will occur to a reader as she reads the two or three pages after the image has appeared, creating—for me at least—a double consciousness. One part of me follows the narrator as he continues with funny stories of an eccentric aristocrat (the one who, when he was young, had helped liberate Bergen-Belsen); another part of me keeps thinking of the image, collecting parallels and echoes from the preceding pages on the herring industry. It’s as if part of me wants to make sense of the image by drawing on whatever material I can recall from the past few pages, bolstered by the thought that Sebald must have intended most, if not all, of the parallels I find—while another part of me recognizes that Sebald intended the image to be an anomaly, what philologists call a *hapax*, a unique occurrence in a text. In that second reading, the point of the image’s singularity, and the absence of any direct description of it in the text, is to underscore the impossibility of understanding it by comparing it with anything.

It is difficult to decide if the main significance of the image is its unassimilable shock, compounded by the retrospective realization that it cannot be interpreted, or whether the awareness of the narrator’s insistence that it cannot be interpreted is itself the shock, which reverberates throughout the book, as the reader returns to images that are perfectly well interpreted by their contexts.

*Images that are hard to read, gray, featureless, unreliable, poorly reproduced, or otherwise aestheticized*

Several commentators have noted that certain photographs in *Rings of Saturn* are barely legible, for example the illustration of an experiment in lighting (that is the image that comes just before the Bergen-Belsen image), or the photo, above, that shows the Chinese Empress Tz'u-hsi (Cixi in Pinyin; it is odd that Sebald uses the old Wade-Giles transliteration).

As Lise Patt says, we are “asked to accept” these “patches of gray lying on the page” as documents, and to give them “evidentiary status.” For Patt, this means that instead of the “*effect of reality*,” we are given “the varied *effects of photography*,” and find ourselves in the realm of the “fictive photograph.” (Lise Patt, *Searching for Sebald*, pp. 47-8, 50). It is a trope in the scholarship to note how the photographs in *Rings of Saturn* fail as evidence, how they erode “confidence in the power of representation,” how they “express doubt about systems of representation” or “put visual representation into question.” (John Beck, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, 2004; and Christina Kraenzle, in *Searching for Sebald*, 131, 138, respectively.)

Several claims overlap here. First is the notion that *Rings of Saturn*, at least in respect to its photographs, is a project aimed at undermining confidence, or demonstrating insufficiencies, in photography itself—a position that I think over-represents the individual functions of the photographs, and over-reaches the concerns of the narrative. It is true, as Christina Kraenzle suggests, that the narrator is skeptical “about the reliability of vision as a source of knowledge”—the pages on the *Anatomy Lesson* demonstrate as much—but I would be more inclined to conclude with her that Sebald is interested in what cannot be represented, than to conclude, as she also does, that the book puts “visual representation into question.” (*Searching for Sebald*, 141-2.)

That large assertion aside, there is a double claim in the secondary literature: on the one hand, the more nearly illegible photographs make us question their veracity (“we are forced to renegotiate our contract with the photograph’s... agreed-upon ability to represent the world”); and on the other, that questioning both requires us to read them as manipulated objects (and attend to “the disorienting ‘*affect* of the Real”’), and also is made possible by our awareness that they are manipulated objects. This double claim sets in motion a particular kind of reading. We are aware of the manipulation and choice of photographs, and therefore we think about the photographs’ inadequacy; we see the inadequacy, and so we notice more of Sebald’s manipulations and choices. We also begin to read differently: instead of reading through the book, as the narrative asks us to do, we tend to *examine* the book, reading back and forth. Because the images of beaches, bridges, marshes, and rivers are often “maddeningly similar” and nearly free of content, a reader may thumb back and forth, looking at their placement on the page, “the degree or type of bleed,” or some other clue about their ordering: in other words, a reader may look at the images both for their traces of veracity (the first point) and their degree of manipulation, self-similarity, ordering, and formatting (the second point).

die ehrwürdigsten Traditionen, war eines der Anzeichen ihres von Jahr zu Jahr rücksichtsloser werdenden Anspruchs auf unumschränkte Ausübung der Macht. Und wie alle absoluten Machthaber zeigte auch sie sich bestrebt, die Exaltiertheit ihrer Position der Welt und sich selber vor Augen zu führen durch einen jedes Vorstellungsvermögen übersteigenden Aufwand. Allein ihr Privathaushalt, dirigiert von dem hier zu ihrer



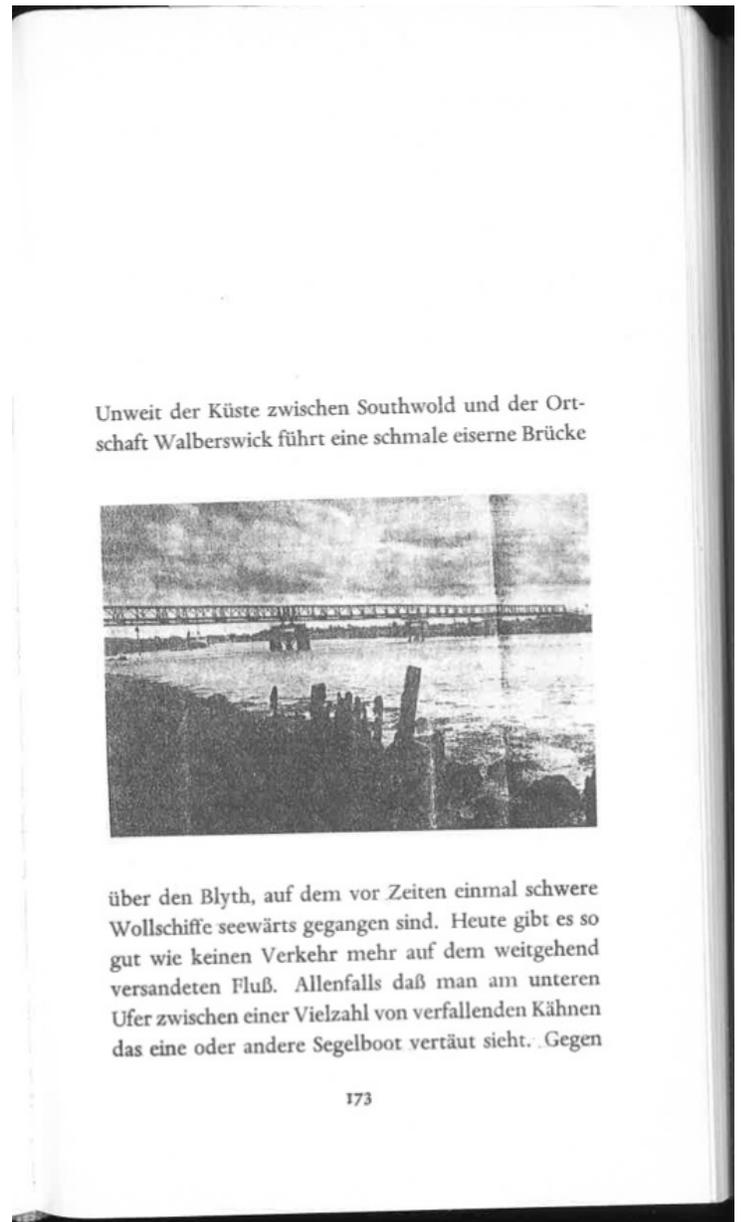
Rechten stehenden Obereunuchen Li Lien-ying, verschlang alljährlich die damals wahrhaft horrende Summe von sechs Millionen Pfund Sterling. Je ostentativer aber die Mittel wurden zur Demonstration ihrer Autorität, desto mehr wucherte in ihr die Angst vor dem Verlust der Allgewalt, die sie mit so viel Um-

*The Rings of Saturn* includes some of Sebald's most concerted experiments in undermining the veridical, evidentiary function of photographs and drawing attention to their damaged, degraded, manipulated state. As such it has been very influential: many books, from [Tan Lin's \*Seven Controlled Vocabularies\*](#) to [Jesse Ball's \*Silence Once Begun\*](#), pursue the strategies Sebald initiated in *Rings of Saturn*. Photographs with minimal, indifferent, or illegible content are reproduced badly, in low contrast, without detail, or with signs of age. It is an aesthetic of the careless, the inexpert, and the everyday, but also the hopeless, the disillusioned, the pessimistic. It is as if the world cannot be well represented by photographs, so photographs have to be curated to retain what veracity they have and also, illogically, manipulated and even antiqued in order to demonstrate their inadequacy. The practice therefore involves a false nostalgia, because photographs have to be printed in a certain way in order to express a property that is implied to be inherent in photography in general. The world Sebald actually photographed in Suffolk and Norfolk wouldn't have been that grey and listless: it had to be made that way in order to underwrite the themes of loss, oblivion, destruction, and historical amnesia. Without those historically grounded themes the practice of indifferent photography, indifferently reproduced, can become a kind of anemic aesthetization, as it does for example in Tan Lin.

When the manipulation of the photographs becomes too apparent, for example in the Xeroxed image of the bridge that we are told was for a Chinese railway, the effect is also precious. That does not happen often in Sebald, but it opens the way to the fetishization of the book itself, and the entire [theme of artists' books](#).

I mention these points to underscore how precarious Sebald's practice in this book is: he means to explore the unreliability of photographs, and their relation to what cannot be seen, remembered, experienced, or represented, and to do so he manipulates them and reproduces them in such a way that they avoid what he called "high photographic quality." (Interview, in *Searching for Sebald*, p. 106.) But that very manipulation is an aesthetization, and it is distracting, making us think more about the author than the narrator, prompting us to "fetishize" the photographs (*Searching for Sebald*, 508-9), creating the impression that historical loss is adequately represented by repeatedly Xeroxing a photograph, reducing trauma to a kind of impoverished photographic aesthetics. Authors including Tan Lin and Jesse Ball have found this practice seductive, but it is also precious, anemic, fetishistic, and, in the end, even cowardly, because it does not let the photographs, and the world behind them, speak as fully as they could.

Sebald's best photographs in *Rings of Saturn*, I think, are the anomalous ones, like the first three I have discussed. The weaker practice is the illegible photographs, the Xeroxed photographs, the indifferent seacoasts and rivers, the interchangeable nearly empty landscapes. They could be made into anomalies if Sebald had wanted to pay attention to them individually, but his interest was in having them work integrally with a continuous flow of narration.



Unweit der Küste zwischen Southwold und der Ortschaft Walberswick führt eine schmale eiserne Brücke



über den Blyth, auf dem vor Zeiten einmal schwere Wollschiffe seewärts gegangen sind. Heute gibt es so gut wie keinen Verkehr mehr auf dem weitgehend versandeten Fluß. Allenfalls daß man am unteren Ufer zwischen einer Vielzahl von verfallenden Kähnen das eine oder andere Segelboot vertäut sieht. Gegen

#### *Sebald as a novelist (aside from the images)*

Although it is not my subject here, I want to register that I am not often convinced by Sebald's narratives aside from their photographs. His novels have been catnip to academics because of their familiar range of references. *Rings of Saturn* makes six scholarly references in its opening 10 pages: Kafka's "Metamorphosis," Charles Ramuz, Flaubert's sense of language, Dürer's *Melencolia*, the 1911 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*. (Sebald's remarks on Browne have recently been reprinted in [an edition of the \*Urn Burial\*](#); the publisher calls Sebald's comments "magisterial."). Readers who have read *Urn Burial* will understand the opening and closing of *Rings of Saturn* better than those who haven't; readers who know the significance of the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* will understand why Sebald mentions it, and so forth. Of these six references, I don't know Ramuz, and I'm aware I'm missing something in Sebald's description of his friend the Ramuz scholar. Sebald's references point with great precision to a certain limited class of readers: academics and university-educated people, mainly in Europe, principally of Sebald's generation or the three or four before him.

This isn't an argument for a certain kind of more populist novel, or against cultural allusions. Nor am I arguing that Sebald is condescending, elitist, or exclusive: on the contrary, I think his range of references comes naturally to him, and it is presented as openly and affectively as it could be. What bothers me is that some of his commentators do not take that into account: the implication sometimes is that the narrow social and economic range of Sebald's

readers is invisible or uninflected, so that the writing is simply literature. I think of scholars like [Mariano Siskind](#) in this regard: it is necessary to remain attentive to the narrow social and historical readership implied in Sebald's work.

The novels are also full of an easy melancholy, a kind I recognize as an historian's malady. Sebald's prose is sympathetic, mellifluous, continuous, and sometimes hypnotic, but it has a limited expressive and tonal range: its typical mode is indulgently sad, circuitously reticent, limitlessly retrospective. The affective and stylistic range is narrow. (There are counterexamples: there is a great emotional range, for example, in [Sebald's comments on Walser](#).) If Sebald's books had been published without illustrations, I wonder if they would be as widely read: in comparison to other novelists born in the 1940s, such as Martin Amis or Ian McEwan, Sebald's emotional and tonal range is muted.

His narrators love to be immersed in the continuous loss of historical memory, of places and people who have disappeared. Often I suspect the melancholy tone coddles the author's unhappiness rather than challenging it. Each new mention of someone's death, a building that has been destroyed, a library burnt, a location lost (all those from the first five pages of *Rings of Saturn*) deepens the melancholy and sweetens it.

But none of that is my subject here, just as my antipathy to [Breton's treatment of Nadja](#) wasn't the issue in relation to [that book](#): I only wanted to note these reactions for the sake of honesty.