

*The Circularity of Melancholia: On Memory
and Forgetting in W.G. Sebald's The Rings of
Saturn*

1. Introduction	3
2. Sebald's Style and Intent	3
2.1 Historical Background	3
2.2 Melancholia as an Influence on Sebald's Writing Style	4
2.4 Benjamin's Angelus Novus	6
3. Sebald's Method of Assemblage	10
3.1 Uncanny images	10
3.2 Use of Photography	11
3.3 Quote-based Personalities	12
3.4 Adorno's Allegory and Melancholia	13
4. The Circular Structure of Melancholy	15
4.1 Michael Hamburger's Past	15
4.2 Death: Way Out of Melancholy's Circularity	18
4.3 Metamorphosis as Never-ending Cycles of Trauma	19
Conclusion	20
Bibliography	21

1. Introduction

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald composes a travel narrative with anecdotes from little known pasts and forgotten archival material, attempting to find meaning in painful but obscured traumas. Why does he use such a structure to convey historical trauma? My essay aims to understand Sebald's enigmatic method in *The Rings of Saturn*. In the first part of the essay, I will trace the historical and philosophical influences that culminated his writing: Freud's notion of *melancholia* - the inability to locate what one has lost; the philosophies of history of Adorno and Benjamin. Then, I will identify the typical structures that Sebald uses in his text - uncanny images, photographs, and quote-based personalities - and explain how they are a product of his influences. I will describe Sebald's way of montaging materials as creating an emotional structure for melancholia.

In the second part of the essay, I will show that melancholy takes on a circular structure in the narrative. Unable to recall the past, Michael Hamburger is unable to be released from his haunted past, obsessed with understanding his *déjà-vu* in the present. Sebald parallels metamorphosis with our ability to forget and thus gain a new life. Despite being able to forget, we will be forever stuck in the ever-renewing cycles of life, where trauma is inevitable.

2. Sebald's Style and Intent

Before I launch into a description of Sebald's writing style, I will, in this section sketch a brief backdrop of historical and theoretical influences that influenced the techniques that Sebald had adopted. After discussing about Sebald's historical context, I will discuss the influence of *melancholia*, as well as Adorno and Benjamin's influences.

2.1 Historical Background

The Rings of Saturn is preoccupied with the reconstruction of history. Growing up in an environment that suppressed discourse on Germany's Holocaust history, Sebald wanted to confront the historical truth as a German. W.G. Sebald was born in 1944 in Allgau, a village in conservative Bavaria. His father served in the Wehrmacht and became a prisoner-of-war in 1947. Sebald was to later never forgive him for his participation in the war and his later silence about it.¹ Even as a child, he felt uncomfortable about his own hometown's silence on Germany's war crimes. In an interview, he says, "I could easily say now that even as a boy I felt uncomfortable in that country. But whilst I was at school I didn't think about it. I had my mates, my girlfriends,

¹Lynne Sharon. Schwartz, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories, 2007), 10.

I went swimming and riding in the summer . . . it took the first separation from home to change anything.”² As an undergraduate in the University of Freiburg, he was irritated by his professors, supporters of Third Reich that became democrats without addressing their problematic past.³ He later found intellectual freedom studying in francophone Switzerland and finally emigrated to England, where many of his novels that address the Holocaust take place.

His approach to the Holocaust is philosophical, addressing the notion that many facts in history were often neglected or forgotten. Growing up in the conspiracy of silence, the crimes of the Holocaust emerged upon later with the shock of belated realization. Speaking about his experiencing of perusing family photo albums as a child, he writes, “and now the photographs are of Polish villages instead, razed to the ground, with only the chimneys left standing. These photos seemed quite normal to me as a child. It was only later. . . I only go home once a year, for two days, and I look at them now, and I think, ‘Good Lord, what is all this?’”⁴ His inclusion of obscure archival material in his work is an attempt to reveal the transience of historical moments, forgotten in archives and remaining forever in riddles.⁵ It is not truth in history that he tries to unravel, but rather the idea of history as unintelligible, as “beyond one’s ken”⁶, that he wishes to convey.⁷

2.2 Melancholia as an Influence on Sebald’s Writing Style

The idea of history as unintelligible or forgotten is closely related to the idea of melancholia. Melancholia, too, is key to understanding Sebald’s work. Susan Sontag remarks that “travels under the sign of Saturn, emblem of melancholy, are the subject of all three books Sebald wrote in the first half of the 1990.”⁸ As shown by the title of the book, melancholia plays an important role in influencing the writing style of the book.

²Carole Angier, "Who Is W.G. Sebald?," comp. Lynne Sharon, Schwartz, in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York, N.Y.: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 65.

³Ibid. ““When I went to the University of Freiburg to read German literature, I couldn’t get anything out of the teachers there. It was totally impossible, because they all belonged to that generation...And of course they were all democrats. Except that it later emerged that they were all ardent supporters of the regime in one way or another. . . There was something completely disingenuous about the whole setup of the humanities in the universities at that time, and I didn’t like it at all.”

⁴Angier, 67.

⁵Charles Simic, "Conspiracy of silence," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations With .W.G. Sebald* (New York, N.Y.: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 149. ““how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.”

⁶Joseph Cuomo, "A Conversation With W.G. Sebald," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations With W.G. Sebald* (New York, N.Y.: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 115.

⁷Arthur Lubow, "Crossing Boundaries," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations With W.G. Sebald* (New York, N.Y.: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 165. “These are questions a historian is not permitted to ask, because they are of a metaphysical nature. And if one thing interests me, it is metaphysics”

⁸Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls* (London: Penguin, 2009), 44.

According to Hippocrates, melancholia is a temperament and a physical condition caused by an excess of black bile.⁹ This explains the Ancient Greek roots of the word μέλας (*melas*), "dark, black" and χολή (*cholē*), which mean black and bile respectively. The English author Sir Thomas Browne, who was mentioned both in the beginning and the end of *The Rings of Saturn*, explored the physical manifestations of a melancholic disposition in his work *Religio Medici* (1643).¹⁰

The Freudian definition of melancholia is most relevant to the context of my investigation. Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning. According to Freud, mourning is a "reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty an ideal and so on"¹¹ In mourning, the mourner breaks his libidinal ties to his lost objects and move on to new ones, while the melancholic suffers an inability to mourn and break these ties. Failing to mourn, he cannot "abandon[] a libido-position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him."¹³ For Freud, the melancholic is aware "of the loss giving rise to the melancholia , but not what it has lost in them. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss."¹⁴ Evidently, the melancholic narrator of undertakes his journey to dispel a sense of emptiness and loss caused by the relieving of his responsibilities, as the first sentence of *The Rings of Saturn* show, "In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work."¹⁵

Aristotle ponders in *Problemata xxx*: "Through what is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts turn out to be melancholics (μελαγχολικοί)?"¹⁶ Unable to locate their object of loss, the melancholics channel their energy to creation. Unable to remember or locate what he has lost, the traveler in *The Rings of Saturn* follows clues, attempting to creatively recompose the history through details and clues he finds familiar. While melancholics use creativity to mediate their loss, their creativity does not compensate for mourning, because in engaging in acts of creativity, they are not re-attaching

⁹Hippocrates, *De aere aquis et locis* W. H. S. Jones, Ed., "Hippocrates, *De aere aquis et locis*, PART 10, , accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0251%3Atext%3DAer.%3Asection%3D10>.

¹⁰Brian Patrick Eha, "The Cosmographer of The Self: On Sir Thomas Browne," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, , accessed May 10, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-cosmographer-of-the-self-on-sir-thomas-browne/>.

¹¹Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, comp. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991, origi. 1917), 164.

¹²Jeffrey M. Jackson, "Philosophy as Melancholia: Freud, Kant, Foucault," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 13, no. 3 (2008): 301.

¹³Ibid. Quoted in Jackson, 302.

¹⁴Freud, 166. Quoted in Jackson 304.

¹⁵W. G. Sebald and Michael Hulse, *The Rings of Saturn* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 1.

¹⁶Aristotle, *Problemata xxx*, 953a10.

their libidinal ties to new objects, but rather imprisoning oneself in one's own newly created world or world of thoughts. Adorno identifies this style of thinking as similar to Kant's philosophy, in which freedom can only be had when humans break away from empirical and sensuous experience. This is because, for Kant, it would appear to us that every empirical object exists as a part of a natural causation. To attach oneself to empirically existing objects would thus be to embed oneself in a deterministic world, where we have no control over causality, and thus have freedom. In this case, freedom could be sought in solipsism and isolation, when one has control over one's own thinking. For example, Kant identifies the need of a "disinterested" and objective aesthetic judgement, where one's thoughts are in control of the aesthetic object, rather than be affected by it. Adorno however criticizes his position, suggesting the creative melancholic is trapped in the self-concealed imprisonment of creative subjectivity, like "an armored animal in its layers of carapace it vainly tries to shake loose."¹⁷

2.4 Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*

Another important influence on Sebald is Walter Benjamin's *Ninth Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which he has made references to repetitively throughout his oeuvre of work. Frequently using an abundance of intertextuality and obscure cultural references in his work, Sebald's work is an exercise for the reader to unravel the textual clues as if they are historical artefacts refuse to profess the source of terror and pain it conceals. They are like ruins that refuse to profess what had devastated them. As Simon Ward suggests, ruins is a central concern in his works, which enable a way to rediscover the past in the present.¹⁸

Unable to understand an impermeable past, the victim has to invent a way of understanding the impermeable past to mediate his loss. The way of finding an explanation is not dissimilar to Janine, a Flaubert scholar, who Sebald describes to resemble the angel in Dürer's *Melancholia I*: "Steadfast among the instruments of destruction, her response was that the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended towards perfection. And the fact was that whatever she might be looking for amongst her papers or her books, or in her head, she was generally able to find right away."¹⁹ Like Janine, Sebald too is guided by the subject of his interest - the traumatic past - by "a fascination for obscure detail rather than by the self-evident."²⁰ Despite her desk resembles a "virtual paper landscape [that] had come into being in the course of time... [establishing] new

¹⁷"what transcendental philosophy praised in creative subjectivity is the subject's own self-concealed imprisonment within itself. The subject remains harnessed within everything objective it thinks, like an armored animal in its layers of carapace it vainly tries to shake loose; yet it never occurred to those animals to vaunt their captivity as freedom. It would be well to ask why human beings did so."Theodor Adorno, "On Subject and Object," trans. H. Pickford, in *Critical Models*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 252. Quoted in Jackson 310.

¹⁸Simon Ward, "Ruins and poetics in the works of W. G. Sebald," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 59.

¹⁹Sebald, 9.

²⁰Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 7.

deposits all around on the floor”,²¹ she is capable of recognizing the obscure details that distinguish one document from another. In face of apparent disorder, she articulates order and creates sense.

Attempting to decipher the enigmatic but horrific picture of the past, Sebald adopts a distanced view that is simultaneously evokes horror and amazement. Upon confronting scenes of destruction, he makes the following remark:

At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place.²²

Like Kant’s spectator of the sublime, that is “any spectator who beholds massive mountain climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them, wastelands lying in deep shadow and inviting melancholy meditation, and so on is seized by amazement bordering on terror...”,²³ Sebald is both detached and attached, amazed and horrified, “unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with [a] paralyzing horror”. From this scene, one can see Walter Benjamin’s influence on Sebald’s writing. No doubt, the said passage is a reference to the angel of history in Benjamin’s essay *Ninth Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which, as Sebald had professed multiple times, is a muse to and a recurring motif in his writing²⁴:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His 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, and make 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. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²⁵

Like Sebald’s narrator, *Angelus Novus* views history retrospectively in a detached standpoint, in which not the glorious edifices of past civilizations but their detritus are seen. For

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Immanuel Kant and Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of judgment* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett, 1987), §26,129.

²⁴The perspective of the angel of history is present in many of his works, such as in *Vertigo*, where the narrator views his past from a “giddy-making vantage point . . . but also an angel’s perspective.” Quoted from Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 17.

²⁵Benjamin, 249.

Benjamin, history is not as a series of constructive acts, but a series of destructive acts that build up over time, where “one single catastrophe [...] keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”²⁶ In face of the irrecoverable past, Sebald weaves overlooked archival material with *bricolage*²⁷ into “documentary novels”,²⁸ to something meaningful and makes sense.

2.5 Adorno's *Natural History*

Like Benjamin, Adorno also attempts to recover metaphysical meaning from material decay, which the course of history catalyzes. In his understanding of history, Adorno, also a postwar writer, attempted to prevent metaphysical destruction by secularizing the notion of metaphysics, and by investing meaning in the material – which, unlike ideas, does not become void with the passing of time. His idea of recuperating recovering meaning in the material by building a *Natural History*, was first developed in an essay published in 1932 *The Idea of Natural History* and later in his seminal work *Negative Dialectics*.²⁹

Influenced and inspired by Benjamin, Adorno also sees history as a series of destructions. His project, in the *Negative Dialectics*, and as outlined in his essay *The Idea of Natural History*, aims to overcome the idea that historical progress is antithetical to nature. As he writes in *The Idea of Natural History*, “The real intention here [in this essay] is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history.”³⁰ The aim of overcoming the antithesis of nature and history is to “secularize metaphysics”³¹ through grounding metaphysics in a “material basis,” for without a material basis, all historical change may be “stuff that happens for no particular reason, or with no comprehensible causal determinacy”³² Without a material base, historically-formed meaning will easily decay, as it does not have a material base. Adorno's goal is thus, to found a natural history, for if meaning could be grounded in a materially sound “natural history”, historical meaning could then be hinged to something unchanging, and the threat of meaninglessness will thus be eliminated.

²⁶Walter Benjamin et al., *Illuminations*: (New York: Schocken Books, 2013), 12.

²⁷“Ich arbeite nach dem System der Bricolage – im Sinne von Lévi-Strauss. Das ist eine Form von wildem Arbeiten, von vorrationalem Denken, wo man in zufällig akkumulierten Fundstücken so lange herumwühlt, bis sie sich irgendwie zusammenfügen.” *Wildes Denken. Gespräch mit Sigrid Löffler* (1993). In: *Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis. Gespräche 1971-2001*. Hg. von Torsten Hoffmann. Frankfurt am Main 2011, S. 84.

²⁸McCulloh, xx.

²⁹See *Negative Dialectics*: Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it. Not to be denied for that reason, however, is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. (320)

³⁰Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252.

³¹Ibid

³²Tom Whyman, "Understanding Adorno on 'Natural-History'," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 4 (2016): 454, doi:10.1080/09672559.2016.1206604.

So, what is “nature”, or “natural”? As Adorno has said, there is no way for us to derive ahistorical concepts from a historical reality. Adorno writes, “if philosophy possesses anything at all, then it can only be finite, and not infinite”.³³ A philosopher’s attempt to conceptualize something as eternal will only lead to the “naïve hypostasis of its own finiteness”.³⁴ That is to say, the philosopher articulates with something finite as the representation of something infinite. There is thus no way to represent the eternal - the idea of naturalness - without being criticized. Adorno aligns the philosophers’ attempt of representing eternal ideas to the use of the allegory in poetry, as Benjamin had written about in the *Trauerspiel*. Inspired by Benjamin, Adorno gained the insight that what history and nature shared in common was transience. He quotes Benjamin, “In nature the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognise history.”³⁵ Commenting on the passages, he writes that “the deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience.”³⁶

Furthermore, as Adorno already hints from his quotations of Benjamin, “‘History’ is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience”,³⁷ language can be used to represent history as it can represent the transience, and in particular with the aesthetic device of the allegory. As Adorno writes,

Benjamin shows that allegory is no composite of merely adventitious elements; the allegorical is not an accidental sign for underlying content. Rather there is a specific relation between allegory and the allegorically meant, ‘allegory is expression.’ Allegory is usually taken to mean the presentation of a concept as an image and therefore it is labelled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but a historical relationship.³⁸

For Adorno, the aesthetic device of allegory is unlike the symbol, an image or a shape which contours are arbitrary selected to represent an eternal idea, such as the alphabet S is arbitrarily chosen to symbolize the sound S. In contrast, the relationship between the allegorized and the allegory is not accidental. It “[plays] out of a particularity”.³⁹ The allegory is an image, creating a likeness to the allegorized. It is concrete and not abstract. As Adorno writes, an

³³Theodor W. Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Rodney Livingstone, *Lectures on negative dialectics: fragments of a lecture course 1965/1966* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 80.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Adorno, *The Idea of Natural-History*, 179. (Quoted in Benjamin’s *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*)

³⁶Adorno, *The Idea of Natural-History*, 262.

³⁷Adorno, quoted from Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177.

³⁸Adorno, *The Idea of Natural-History*, 262–263.

³⁹Ibid.

allegory is an “image”.⁴⁰ It establishes a “historical relationship”,⁴¹ because it acknowledges a historical reality with the visual particularities of reality.

3. Sebald’s Method of Assemblage

In this section, I will identify three typical ways which he constructs his narrative: Uncanny images, photographs and characters constructed from facts and quotes. Then, I will explain how they confirm the influences that I have discussed in the section above.

3.1 Uncanny images

The Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage is a travel narrative, whereupon arriving at each destination of his pilgrimage, most of them deserted ruins, Sebald would wander through the site and ruminate lengthily on random details or animals that uncannily catch his attention. For example, while he was walking through the abandoned country house Somerleyton Hall imagining the building in its past glory, every inch of its space of its interior meticulously decorated with luxurious good taste, he suddenly stumbles upon a solitary, demented Chinese quail: “However, on emerging into the open air again, I was saddened to see, in one of the otherwise 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.” Later, after retelling Le Strange’s strange pecuniary interest and his life in the Henstead manor, his vision shifts, discovering the uncanny sight of a couple laying on a beach from an elevated perspective but resemble a two-headed monster at a distance:

A couple lay down there, in the bottom of the pit, as I thought: a man stretched full length over another body of which nothing was visible but the legs, spread and angled. In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man's feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusc washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

While some of these uncanny descriptions end without further explanation, ending without resolution. Without resolution, these anecdotes give a jarring effect as neither the reader nor the narrator of the story know what the cause of uncanniness was.

3.2 Use of Photography

Another narrative technique that Sebald is famous for is combining photographs into his novels. The photographs in the novel are not referred to or describe by the text but serve as a supplement to the text. Rather than putting across an informational message about the theme at hand directly, they are often seemingly disconnected and out of place. It is the job of the reader to figure out and contextualise the photographs themselves. Let me give an example. Before beginning his narration of Major George Lyndham Le Strange, Sebald inserts the following photograph into the narrative:



It is an innocent two page spread of woods, with unidentifiable objects under the tree. It seems out of place, as it follows a section about the slaughter of Herring. And yet, the text that follows the photograph suggests that Major George Wyndham Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment

that liberated Bergen Belsen - a concentration camp during World War II. Realizing that Le Strange had liberated a concentration camp, the wary reader would flip back a page and contemplate - what are the things at the foot of the tree? Perhaps, they are bodies? In an anecdote that I have described in the *Historical Background* section of this paper, Sebald writes that he only realized that his family photo album contained photographs of Polish villages razed to the ground when he grew up. He was quite shocked as this had never occurred to him as an innocent child perusing through photo albums. The photograph in Sebald's book, an innocent, near identical reproduction of visual reality is but a decoy for the ugly truths of history. With its multiple punctums of focus, the reader does not know how to read the photograph unless he or she knows what had happened. Knowing that the historical context is absent, the photograph is melancholic, as one knows something was amiss but not what was amiss.

3.3 Quote-based Personalities

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the characters seem to lack an integrity as they are composed of statements, reported quotes, and facts, but are never given the agency to speak out themselves. Their subjectivity is absent in the novel.

His biography of Charles Algernon Swinburne is typical of his method. Describing Swinburne, he starts with a statement from Swinburne's companion Watts-Dunton, who "reportedly said that...at meals [Swinburne] eats like a caterpillar and at night he sleeps like a dormouse."⁴² Then, taking the caterpillar, Sebald connects Swinburne and the silkworm, a motif that symbolizes resurrection.⁴³ Like a silkworm, Swinburne "kept his head bowed over his plate, devouring an enormous helping of beef in silence"⁴⁴ over dinner:

One of the visitors to Putney at the turn of the century wrote that the two old gentlemen put him in mind of strange insects in a Leiden jar. Time and again, looking at Swinburne, this visitor continued, he was reminded of the ashy grey silkworm, *Bombyx mori*, be it because of how he munched his way through his food bit by bit or be it because, out of the snooze he had slipped into after lunch, he abruptly awoke to new life, convulsed with electric energy, and, flapping his hands flitted about his library, like a startled moth, clambering up and down the stands and ladders to fetch the one or other treasure from the shelves. The enthusiasm which seized him as he was thus engaged found expression in rhapsodic declamations about his favourite poets Marlowe, Landor and Hugo, but also in not infrequent reminiscences of his childhood on the on the Isle of Wight and in Northumberland.⁴⁵

⁴²Sebald, 165.

⁴³See Section 4.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Sebald, 165-166.

Connecting particularities, he associates Swinburne with the silkworm in a Leiden jar, then as a convulsing moth that seems to be charged with electric energy, then rewinding temporally, as the poets Marlowe, Landor and Hugo, and finally and abruptly taking the readers back to his childhood on the Island of Wight and in Northumberland. Only at the end of the chapter are Swinburne's words directly quoted, as Swinburne asks his aunt to tell him more about the first grand ball she went as a girl. In framing his quotations, Sebald uses direct quotation only after indicating that the narrator is three temporal and associative layers removed from the quoted subject. Taking Swinburne's words from the "long since deceased"⁴⁶ visitor's record from "a century and half into the past",⁴⁷ he imagines Swinburne as a big head and fiery-haired boy in his painted portrait beseeching Aunt Ashburnham on the Isle of Wight to tell him more.⁴⁸

Because his prose is constituted of individuals who report facts about facts about facts, his characters are individuals with unstable fact-based identities. Some scholars suggest that his fact-based narrative is an attempt to create individualities based on facts. Albes suggests that the individual's livelihood is based on the quotation from the predecessors, who are themselves partly represented by quotes. Likewise, Kawaschima suggests that Sebald's biographical narratives are endlessly derivative. For Kawaschima, Sebald's subjects could be derived from the equation " 'x' whose value can only be derived from his narrative about life, and other people ."⁴⁹ Baumgärtel also suggests that his characters are not constructed through their experiences in linear time and fixed physical spaces, but rather defined by their interests and obsessions, which connect them to figures from other spaces and temporalities.⁵⁰ The egos in the text are area discursive and speech-generated. They are like pictures, or a text, that invite intertextual readings, rather than an active subject that has agency in the world.⁵¹ Like the photograph, or the uncanny anecdote, these characters inspire melancholia with their absence and abjectivity.

Furthermore, the infinite informational digressions reveals its failure of the series of described facts to lead to a neat resolutions. Like the solitary Chinese quail, the couple shaped like a two-headed monster, the Bergen Belsen, the abject character does not explain itself. All of them are mysteries that refuse explanation.

3.4 Adorno's Allegory and Melancholia

In Adorno's idea of *Natural History*, he suggests that the allegory can be used to reconstitute the past, as the allegory is capable of representing the past, as the sign of the allegory

⁴⁶Sebald, 166.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid. "Tell me more, Aunt Ashburnham, please tell me more."

⁴⁹Kentaro Kawaschima, *Autobiographie und Photographie nach 1900 Proust, Benjamin, Brinkmann, Barthes, Sebald* (Bielefeld, 2011: Transcript), 239.

⁵⁰Patrick Baumgärtel, *Mythos und Utopie: zum Begriff der "Naturgeschichte der Zerstörung" im Werk W.G. Sebalds* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 63.

⁵¹Ibid.

is a particularity taken from the concrete past to represent it. It is not abstract, but concrete; it is an image, creating a likeness to the allegorized. As Adorno writes, an allegory is an “image”.⁵² It establishes a “historical relationship”⁵³ because it acknowledges a historical reality with the visual particularities of reality. No doubt, Sebald’s extensive use of photographs to represent the past in *The Rings of Saturn* is a prime example of an allegory. Literally, a photograph establishes a concrete connection between the past and the present by capturing the past in a photograph, which itself is a part of a bigger picture. Leaving the image open for the readers to interpret, the photograph fulfills the function of the allegory, for it is not a sign with a fixed meaning.

Secondly, Sebald uses quotes to represent the individual. Like photographs, quotes are primary evidence, but may not be used to conclusively reflect the psychology of a character. Like a photograph, it is a true part of a whole. The discursive and speech-generated egos in the text, like pictures, reflect the characters only partially. As Sebald does not associate these figures with specific characteristics, these text-based egos are ambiguous. Like photographs, they are vague and invite intertextual readings.⁵⁴ Like film essays, such as Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, Sebald embeds his text with affective and poetic potential. Always perched on the cusp of knowing the source of the uncanny, Sebald fills his narrative with the unspeakable *Stimmung* of melancholy, where one feels a sense of loss without knowing what exactly is the source of loss. The sensation of loss, which is melancholy, is the finite effect generated from the finite representation of the unrepresentable past.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

4. The Circular Structure of Melancholy

“How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor? Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect?”

—W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*⁵⁵

To reiterate Freud: melancholia is caused by the failure of locating one's object of loss. In the last section, I have shown that Sebald deliberately structures a text that refuses to reveal where the source of trauma is, creating a sense of melancholia.

Losing a memory is traumatic, for a piece of memory deeply impressed on the mind is personal and evident to oneself only. When the external evidence is destroyed, only the structure of emotions remains, serving to articulate order in discrete memory fragments. In this section, I will show that the emotional structure of melancholia is circular.

Already shown in the beginning chapter, Sebald was in a hospital in Norwich recovering from the physical effort of walking through the ruins. While Sebald did not explicitly say so, the route that he has taken in the book was probably the one that he had just taken before, for Norwich was near Suffolk, where his journey began. Moreover, *The Rings of Saturn*, according to its title, is a pilgrimage.⁵⁶ A pilgrimage is a circular route taken by pilgrims to pay homage to religious figures. It is circular and repetitive, offering no exit. In this section, I will explain my proposition with a close reading of the passages on Michael Hamburger as well as the concluding passages on death at the end of the book.

4.1 Michael Hamburger's Past

The circular nature of melancholy is well demonstrated by Michael Hamburger. A melancholic, Michael Hamburger does not know what he has lost, as he has lost his memories. Writing of his lost childhood in Berlin after taking a walk in a city which he had left behind for a long time in 1947, Michael Hamburger mourns the fact that he can no longer remember the Berlin of his childhood:

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as this surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too

⁵⁵Sebald, 182.

⁵⁶The German title is *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*, which in English is *An English Pilgrimage*.

many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable. If I now look back to Berlin, writes Michael, all I see is a darkened background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers and letters in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag.⁵⁷

Describing the “rubble” of his home, Hamburger realizes that the material basis for his memories has fallen, causing memory to be irretrievable. Because the basis of his spiritual life, which arises from the material, is destroyed, “a shift in [their] spiritual life”⁵⁸ occurs. He becomes a melancholic, unable to know what he has forgotten. Without material cues for him to remember his past, memories of the intact building of his home “appeared to me like pictures in a rebus that I simply had to puzzle out correctly.”⁵⁹ As the external referent for his memories have been lost, he could only recall the pictures of the past with “mental exertion”:⁶⁰

It was as if it were now up to me alone, as if by some trifling mental exertion I could reverse the entire course of history, as if—if I desired it only—Grandmother Antonina, who had refused to go with us to England, would still be living in Kantstraße as before; she would not have gone on that journey, of which we had been informed by a Red Cross postcard shortly after the so-called outbreak of War, but would still be concerned about the wellbeing of her goldfish, which she washed under the kitchen tap every day and placed on the window ledge when the weather was fine, for a little fresh air. All that was required was a moment of concentration, piecing together the syllables of the word concealed in the riddle, and everything would again be as it once was....⁶¹

As shown with the apparent effort with which he attempts to retrieve his memory - he could not, for memory is not internal, but external. It is not something that can be stored in the mind. When memory is not actively in use, its nature could change. As, David Stern quotes Wittgenstein in a study on memory: “Memory can be compared with a storehouse only so far as it fulfills the same purpose. Where it doesn't, we couldn't say whether the things stored up may not constantly change their nature and so couldn't be stored at all.”⁶² Memory is evoked by what we see or repeatedly practice, for the function of memory is to help us act in daily life without constantly referring to a dictionary or a directory. It arises through noticing patterns, such that recognitions. Instead of being passively triggered, memory is activity which “aris[es] out of a system of distributed resonances...similarities may emerge as related items interact, reinforcing their

⁵⁷Sebald, 177-178.

⁵⁸Sebald, 177.

⁵⁹Sebald, 178.

⁶⁰Sebald, 178.

⁶¹Sebald, 178-179.

⁶²Stern, 204.

common aspects,”⁶³ as remembering is a process of seeing *family resemblances*. And thus, having already migrated elsewhere, Hamburger’s memories have become defunct. He admits that he could no longer remember his old house, despite the effort, “But I could neither make out the word nor bring myself to mount the stairs and ring the bell of our old flat. Instead I left the building with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach and walked and walked, aimlessly and without being able to grasp even the simplest thought...”⁶⁴

While his past memories are no longer available for active use, Hamburger’s memories of the past are vague and not totally wiped away. Aware that his memory is damaged, he compares his memory to “a gramophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes, [which] has less to do with damage to the machine itself than with an irreparable defect in its programme.”⁶⁵ The loss of memory haunts him, convincing him that there is something in the present happening as a consequence of the past, as he tries to rewind the tunes of his past again and again without avail.

Having lost his memory, he becomes convinced that he is seeing “double visions”. When Sebald, the narrator, visits Hamburger in his home in Suffolk, Michael talks about his relationship with Hölderlin, who he feels an unexplained affinity towards, because his birthday falls two days after his, and because he has an unexplained and irrational urge to imitate Hölderlin, signing his poems and letters off as “your humble servant Scardanelli”, and to keep unwelcome guests who come to stare at one at arm’s length by addressing them as Your Excellency or Majesty.”⁶⁶ It is because he heard that a water pump in his garden bore the date of 1770, in which Hölderlin was born, that he chose to live in the present house. Just after making plans to live on Patmos island did he discover that Hölderlin dedicated the Patmos hymn to the Landgrave of Homburg, and Homburg was also the maiden name of his mother. Michael wonders whether he and Hölderlin could have perceived each other, “How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one’s own precursor? Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect?”⁶⁷ Haunted by past memories and unable to establish relationships with others in the present, he yearns for companionship sought by traversing time and space through “elective affinities”⁶⁸ – unexplained coincidences. In these unexplained coincidences, Michael hopes to discover traces of his past, which must have somehow changed the course of his life without him having known it.

Obsessively harking back to the past, Michael’s melancholy takes on a circular structure, as he feels that without knowing his past, he cannot go forward without understanding why he is venturing forth into the future on his particular path. Thus, his path forward in time is also to go back. His melancholy is circular because the “double visions” that he encounters will always be an encounter with his past, that he has forgotten.

⁶³Stern, 208.

⁶⁴Sebald, 178-179.

⁶⁵Sebald, 188.

⁶⁶Sebald, 182.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Sebald, 186.

4.2 Death: Way Out of Melancholy's Circularity

Like the accidental wiping out of a hard disk, lost memories cannot be easily retrieved. One may wonder what the consequences of memory loss is, but to obsessively dwell on it could lead to insanity. Affected by Michael's pattern of thinking, Sebald can't help but suspect the insignificant characteristics that they share bond them somehow – both of them gave up teaching to write in loneliness, and are both allergic to alcohol. Because of the irrational belief that they somehow mirror each other, Sebald starts to have the strange feeling that he had lived in the house that Michael had lived before. And yet, Sebald knows that the entertaining of such an “unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication”⁶⁹ is futile and causes one to “lose [his] sense of reality”. These thoughts, “dispelled as speedily as they appear,” cannot be pursued “without losing one's sanity.”⁷⁰

The only way to recover from these spells of uncanniness is to attempt forgetting the past. To be haunted by past memories that are no longer relevant is similar to being haunted by a past life, because past lives should be no longer bother and be relevant to the present. This is perhaps the significance of metamorphosis, which is a motif in *The Rings of Saturn*. *The Rings of Saturn* begin with the image of Sebald as the upturned Kafkan beetle from *Metamorphosis* staring through and confined behind the window, waking up on as a new creature but carrying memories of his past form. Later characters are compared to and are related to silkworms, which metamorphose into butterflies: recall the image of Swinburne silently eating beef recalled the image of a silkworm “munch[ing] through his food bit by bit,”⁷¹; the Chinese Emperor Kuang-Hsu whose body laid wrapped in the “silken robes of imperial yellow”,⁷² to the silkworms that the Dowager Empress cultivated in her summer palace, to whom they were, unlike unreliable people, “the ideal subjects, diligent in service, ready to die, capable of multiplying vastly within a short span of time”.⁷³

Quoting Browne, Sebald suggests that mutation necessitates the death of previous forms to generate new forms. Browne claims, in the process “of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures”,⁷⁴ for “every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation.”⁷⁵ Death is a part of a life cycle, where our biological bodies are endlessly regenerated. He illustrates his example with the mythical creature *Baldlanders*, which undergoes the process of being transformed into a scribe, then into an oak, a sow, a sausage, a piece of excrement, a field of clover, a white flower, a mulberry tree, and a silk carpet. In each transformation, before generated anew, the previous form must die.

⁶⁹Sebald, 187.

⁷⁰Sebald, 185.

⁷¹Sebald, 138.

⁷²Sebald, 141.

⁷³Sebald, 151.

⁷⁴Sebald, 23.

⁷⁵Sebald, 24.

4.3 Metamorphosis as Never-ending Cycles of Trauma

While metamorphosis can generate new life, we are still trapped in the infinite cycle of death and renewal. Sebald uses Thomas Browne's theory of quincunx as an allegory for traumatic memories that we cannot completely forget as we carry on to our "next lives", away from trauma. While old forms must perish before new forms arise, all living creatures carry a common material form. Sebald cites Browne, who suggests that "quincunx"⁷⁶ is the essential structure which all matter, "in animate and inanimate matter: in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins..."⁷⁷ living and dead share. Because "quincunx" do not perish but become transformed, they carry our traumatic pasts in material form. Thus, "the chimaeras produced by our own minds [that] go far beyond any rational limit"⁷⁸ may be true, for while our conscious minds may not understand the fantastic, our collective traumatic pasts may linger in the material form in which previous lives have lived in. If we do not ignore, but pursue these instincts, we may converge with our pasts – such as that between Michael Hamburger and Sebald, who may have experienced traumas together.

Sebald closes the book by emphasizing this point again. At the end of the book, he writes of the custom where in a home where a death as happened, silk is draped over canvasses with landscapes or people, "so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever."⁷⁹ Spun by silkworms themselves as a cocoons to metamorphose, silk finally performs similar function for human beings. In helping them forget, the silk covering the canvasses become the cocoon for human beings, in which they become capable of shedding of traumatic memories and metamorphose into a new life. And yet, when they go into a new life, they will have to undergo the similar painful process to generate a new life.

⁷⁶Sebald, 19.

⁷⁷Sebald, 20.

⁷⁸Sebald, 22.

⁷⁹Sebald, 296.

Conclusion

In my essay, I first identified the historical and philosophical influences at play that shaped *The Rings of Saturn*. As a German post-war writer, he is influenced by Adorno's notion of *Natural History* and Benjamin's philosophy of history. Particularly relevant to my investigation is Adorno's conclusion that historical meaning can be restored by the artistic technique of allegory, as it takes a finite part of the concrete whole to articulate the past. This results in a melancholic representation of the past, as shattered pasts and memories would be left out of the picture. No doubt, the idea of *melancholia* is also an important motif throughout his *oeuvre*. In the context of my investigation, I have identified melancholia as a Freudian concept - the inability to locate a lost object. *The Rings of Saturn* is populated by uncanny images, photographs, and quote-based personalities. What these techniques share in common is that they are all marked by absence - of resolution, a bigger historical context, and subjectivity. These give Sebald's text a sense of melancholia, as the reader is made aware that something is absent in his text.

In the second part of my essay, I build on the notion that Sebald's techniques articulate the structure of melancholia, which is circular. Unable to "remember", Hamburger dwells obsessively on his present *déjà-vus*. Trapped in melancholia, time ceaselessly winds back to the past, stagnating in a circular motion. Hamburger cannot leave this circular structure of time and "move on". Comparing metamorphosis with the shedding of memory, Sebald suggests that there is a possibility of forgetting the past and gaining a new life. However, death only means the beginning of another cycle, where we have to experience trauma in order to die again and begin anew.

As a postwar writer, his allusion to the theory of the Quincunx as the structure that all living matter share could be read as aiming to give us an ethical lesson - as part and parcel of the ecological structure of the earth, we should avoid pain and destruction, for pain and destruction can come back to you when you metamorphose into a new life. While we may be able to minimize pain this way, Sebald seems to hint that there is no way that pain and trauma can be avoided anyway. Perhaps the way to avoid trauma and pain is to keep a "melancholic disposition" - the attitude of a wary passivity. And yet, how can we become melancholic before experiencing the ups and downs of life? Sebald's picture of life is too pessimistic. While youth and life might be ephemeral and thus melancholic, it is also precisely its melancholic nature that makes it beautiful.

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