Allegory of the Maze:

Searching for the Essence of W.G. Sebald's Labyrinth of Destruction

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"The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself,

and it is a powerful one, is allegory."[1]

- Walter Benjamin

For a wasp to make its nest, it begins with its own saliva and a mouthful of wood fibers. Working with these two materials alone, the wasp constructs a structure that houses an entire ecosystem. For author W.G. Sebald, "the wasp's nest is a kind of ideal vision: an object that is extremely complicated and intricate, made out of something that hardly exists."[2] One might describe Sebald and his prose in a similar manner: the writer as wasp and his words and images as saliva and wood. Although it is reductive to confine Sebald's genre-bending approach to a few attributes, his style is characterized by a meditative and melancholic tone, a fixation on collective and individual memory, and an obsession with walking. Of his four novels, *The Rings of Saturn* perhaps most exemplifies the Sebaldian genre; following a semi-fictionalized version of Sebald himself on a walking tour along the eastern coast of England, *The Rings* weaves together a meandering narrative of personal memory and historical happenings.[3] The walk provides scaffolding to the sinuosity of the narrator's digressions, which are interspersed with various sorts of images—diagrams, illustrations, and most notably, black-and-white photographs. The specific interplay between text and image in Sebald's work has long been a topic of scholarly discussion, as Sebald ultimately places the task of interpretation upon the reader. While the text does not define or caption the images, the images do not necessarily reflect what is written in words.

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[1]Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998).
[2]Sarah Kafatou. "An Interview with W. G. Sebald." *Harvard Review*, no. 15 (1998): http://www.jstor.org/stable/27561118, 32.
[3]W.G. Sebald and Michael Hulse, *The Rings of Saturn* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2016).

Haunting Sebald's work is the destruction wreaked by Germany on the rest of Europe. Before leaving his homeland to spend the majority of his adult life in England, Sebald (b. 1944) grew up in a Bavarian village where he was sheltered from much of the horrors of World War II. The war affected him in one very personal way, however: his father was a German soldier and subsequent prisoner of war. Sebald's choice to inhabit the identity of an outsider living abroad, in a country heavily impacted by the past actions of Germany, provides *The Rings of Saturn* with startling clarity. In a 1997 interview, Sebald elaborates on how a family photo album, which he originally viewed with naiveté, triggers a "negative revelation" when he revisits it as an adult saddled with knowledge: "You had no term for history, no concept of history; you didn't know anything about the Third Reich; you didn't know what role your parents might have played in this historical phase."[4] After a period of years, he picks the album up again and the once bright images are now darkened by the shadows of history, laid out before him as "visual evidence."

In seeking to ascribe an understandable utilitarian function to the photographs within *The Rings of Saturn*, the reader might assume that the photographs are positioned as evidentiary components, as visual fragments meant to confirm the veracity of the text. But this purported relationship between the photograph and the word is never articulated by Sebald himself nor by his narrator—it is only assumed by readers who "let themselves be convinced by a photograph."[5] Instead, Sebald weaves the photographs throughout the words without any discernible pattern, despite the fact that patterns and coincidences form the very basis of his labyrinthine writing. The photographs thus operate in a way that maintains a certain degree of separation between them and the surrounding words. And yet, just as Sebald is not confined to a single genre, the

[4]Christian Scholz and W.G. Sebald, "'But the Written Word Is Not a True Document': A Conversation with W.G. Sebald on Literature and Photography," essay, in *Searching for Sebald : Photography after W.G. Sebald* (Los Angeles, CA: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 104–9.
[5]Scholz and Sebald. "'But the Written Word Is Not a True Document.', 106.

alternate mediums he employs do not fulfill only one purpose nor do they function in only one way. The narratives and the photographs are inexplicably intertwined. In the same interview, Sebald addresses how the photographs inform the words and conversely, how the words impact his perception of the images; to him, "the written word," unlike the photograph, "is not a true document."[6] On the page, the photograph is a "very real nucleus" around which there is a "large empty space," waiting to be filled with context of some kind—except, "you don't know the context for the depicted person and which landscape it is." The writer's job, then, is to enter into this image and "pull out strings" with which to weave a surrounding narrative; much like the wasp's nest emerges from saliva and wood, the digressions of Sebald's narrator often emerge from simple origins, such as a photograph of a window.

Both photograph and word are evidentiary on a fundamental level, as they purport something to be true—the photograph captures something that ostensibly once existed, while the written word is staking a claim or pushing a particular account. *The Rings of Saturn* is an exploration of the interplay between these two mediums that both exist to capture moments in time. This paper aims to examine the Sebaldian narrator's obsession with always returning to an origin through his self-made mazes of words and images. He purposely creates ambiguity through neglecting to articulate the specific relationship between a given photograph and the narrative into which it is nestled. This ambiguity of meaning encourages the reader to engage in attentive discursive thinking to mirror the meandering, yet meticulously circular, structure of the numerous narratives. The innate trust that one places into a photograph is challenged—by

[6]Scholz and Sebald. "'But the Written Word Is Not a True Document,'" 106.

questioning their first glance, the reader is prompted to adopt a prolonged gaze in their attempt to grasp the essence of an interaction between photograph and text.[7]

Sebald and his narrator are ultimately attempting to capture things that neither language nor image can capture alone. In a reflection on the writing of Sir Thomas Browne, the English physician and author whose presence floats throughout *The Rings*, the narrator seems to hint at his own objectives: "We study the order of things, says Browne, but we cannot grasp their innermost essence."[8] Sebald urges the reader to be an active, rather than passive, observer of his reconstructive efforts; each narrative stands atop a foundation of destruction, imbuing the overall project with a sense of futility. This paper begins with the narrator's respective relationships to pilgrimage and the quest for historical accuracy, before arriving at a quartet of images whose allegorical function encapsulates Sebald's method of building up only to break down—revealing the *essence* of something that on the surface appears to be complex.

[7]"'Gazing into Eternity': Sebald & The Aesthetics of Passage." WordPress.com, June 6, 2020. https://sebald.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/gazing-into-eternity-sebald-the-aesthetics-of-passage/.
[8]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 19.

I Pilgrimage – Shrouded window – Purgatory – Saturn's influence on a soul

The Rings of Saturn is actually the English translation of the original German title: *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. The subtitle, "An English Pilgrimage," is notably absent from the English version of the text. With a lack of explanation from Sebald himself, it is left to the reader to decide whether the narrator's journey through Suffolk is indeed a pilgrimage.[9] The word *pilgrimage* usually refers to a journey of a long distance "made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion."[10] Despite omitting the subtitle which flags the pilgrimage as a key aspect of the narrative, Sebald begins the first chapter by explaining his reason for his East Anglian walk:

> 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. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast.[11]

It is not solely in the title where Sebald alludes to the cosmic order. The material planes through which Sebald's narrator walks, both physically and ruminatively, are situated within the framework of the universe, rather than within a commonly shared notion of the divine. It is beneath the "Dog Star," or Sirius, which itself implies a "general fatalism,"[12] when the narrator begins his vaguely defined journey—the walk is presented without a definite finish, unlike a traditional pilgrimage wherein the pilgrim is trekking toward a place or a person or *something* of significance. Sebald's narrator, in contrast, aims simply to drive away the "emptiness"

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[9]Lise Platt, "Introduction" essay, in *Searching for Sebald : Photography after W.G. Sebald* (Los Angeles, CA: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 54.
[10]"Pilgrimage." Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed April 4, 2025. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/pilgrimage_n.
[11]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 3.
[12]Simon Cooke. "Sebald's Ghosts: Traveling among the Dead in the Rings of Saturn." *Journeys* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 53. https://doi.org/10.3167/jys.2010.110103.

consuming him, not to explicitly achieve an enlightened state; and yet, Sebald's narrator—and the reader by extension—*does* reach a version of enlightenment.

The narrator essentially experiences the pilgrimage twice, first through physically walking the landscape and the second through reflecting on that walk. *The Rings of Saturn* actually begins at the end, when the narrator is writing from the hospital in Norwich to which he was taken "in a state of almost total immobility." Despite the nonchalance he purportedly felt while roaming the countryside, the narrator then reveals that "in retrospect, [he] became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror" which enveloped him when "confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place."[13] Given that this act of reflection is "perhaps" the reason for the dissolution of the narrator's health, why does he then dedicate the following pages to retracing the past? What is there to gain from continuous retrospection? Writing itself is, as the Sebaldian narrator describes it, "an act of self-mutilation."[14] By first witnessing and then writing, the narrator enables his own destruction, paralleling the death and despair of the subsequent narratives.[15] These stories create the narrator's "tomb" in which he is laid to rest, despite still being very much alive.[16] Martin Blumenthal-Barby describes the narrator's task as an ultimately futile act of "self-massacre."[17] In his attempt to articulate stories of injustice and give a voice to the voiceless, the narrator transforms into a victim himself; this commitment to continually remembering is how the narrator enacts "justice." Blumenthal-Barby defines the narrator's perception of justice as "the obligation not only to remember the dead but

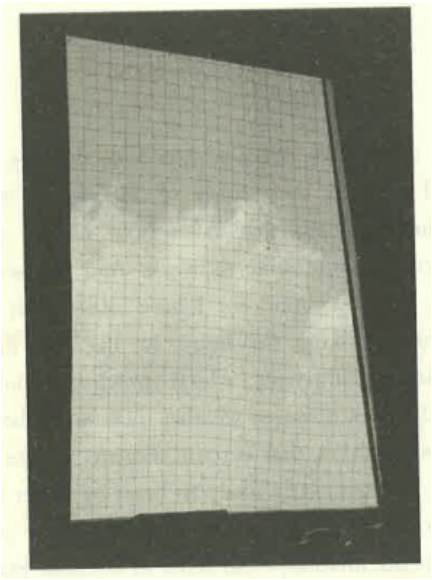
[13]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 3.
[14]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 257.
[15]Martin Blumenthal-Barby, "Holocaust and Herring: The Resuscitation of the Silenced in W.G. Sebald's 'The Rings of Saturn.'" *Monatshefte* 103, no. 4 (2011): 555. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41330038.
[16]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 257.
[17]Blumenthal-Barby, "Holocaust and Herring," 538.

also to protect them from misappropriation."[18] In doing so, Sebald's narrator repeatedly harms himself as he reconstructs and relives the stories of the disenfranchised. He solidifies his tomb in his writing, forever lost to the endless retelling of history "in order to eschew collaboration with the discourse of the oppressors."[19] In his battle against the victor's dominant retelling of events, the narrator utilizes the ambiguous photograph to spark suspicion within the reader regarding what is *actually* being portrayed, encouraging them to turn a critical eye to the history at hand.[20]

Roland Barthes, whose work significantly influenced Sebald, posits photography as another medium in which death prevails. While the writer seals himself in his tomb of words, stuck in a perpetual endeavor to accurately portray history, the photographer "must exert himself to the utmost to keep the Photograph from becoming Death."[21] Despite the photographer's efforts, the subject of the photograph is inevitably *embalmed* in a process Barthes calls "a micro-version of death (of parenthesis)"; the subject becomes an object, a "specter" of reality.[22] The qualifier "parenthesis" clarifies the concept of a "micro" death, as it is not a full death but more of a purgatorial interlude. One might view *The Rings of Saturn* similarly—the pilgrimage is a purgatory in itself, a wandering between worlds in search of the other side. The narrative's very first image depicts a window that is, "for some strange reason," "draped with black netting"—by the end of the pilgrimage, as we will soon see, Sebald's narrator seems to unearth this reason. The window is a transitional space, separating the narrator from the "Suffolk expanses" of the outside world while he remains confined to his room on the hospital's eighth floor. The beginning of the narrative is inherently paradoxical—it starts at the end, with the narrator staring out at the "colourless patch of sky framed in the window" and reflecting on the past year of

[18]Blumenthal-Barby, "Holocaust and Herring," 538.
[19]Blumenthal-Barby, 555.
[20]Blumenthal-Barby, 543.
[21]Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010).
[22]Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 14.

walking while he himself is currently immobile. His self-destruction seems nearly complete at this point, but the window's liminality prompts the first of his internal digressions. It is within this grave of a room that the external world is reduced to a "single, blind, insensate spot," and the



narrator is consumed by worry that the reality he once experienced so intimately had "vanished forever."[23] The window as the initial image and its relation to the narrative's final passage spurs a reimagining of the concept of pilgrimage. For the narrator, the pilgrimage's point is to find an origin, to grasp the essence of the scenes witnessed, rather than to arrive somewhere entirely novel.

The window reappears in the final passage of *The Rings of Saturn*, albeit not explicitly. In true Sebaldian style, the narrator traces his way through the labyrinth only to arrive back at the original thought, but this time with a renewed perspective. Referencing another passage of Browne's,[24] the narrator alludes to the netted window:

> It was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits

[23]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 4.
[24]Sebald, 296. The narrator is referencing Browne's book *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*.

> of the field, 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 for ever.[25]

The presence of the black netting, initially a source of confusion for the narrator, crystallizes to a certain extent. Akin to a distracted soul, Sebald's narrator becomes preoccupied with the window and the landscape that purportedly exists on the other side of it. Seeking confirmation that the outside world has not disappeared, the narrator quite literally drags himself to the window sill where he enters into the first of many digressions, as he is reminded of Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa.[26] Like Samsa, the narrator finds "an utterly alien place" through the window: a "maze of buildings," completely absent of human beings save for one nurse and an ambulance. Sebald's image of the window possesses a specific transcendental quality with its view of ethereal clouds framed within complete darkness. The hospital room and all surrounding context fades away, providing the reader with some semblance of the "artificial silence" in which the narrator is "cocooned."[27] When held in conjunction with the book's final passage, it is plausible that the window belongs to a waiting room of sorts, in which the narrator is held until he embarks on his retrospective pilgrimage of melancholy. If his journey through the mazes of history is to be understood as purgatorial, there is then an implication of innate suffering. The soul—the narrator—sweeps away the black mourning ribbons obscuring his view of the desolate landscapes, consequently preventing himself from passing onto the next realm. Now, this is not to say that Sebald's narrator is literally on the brink of death. Rather, he is a writer "faced with the impossibility of writing" in a world where creation ultimately "lies already [in] the shadow of

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[25]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 296.
[26]Sebald, 5. The narrator is referring to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.
[27]Sebald, 5.

annihilation."[28] Sebald's narrator constructs a labyrinth of literary allusions, blurry photographs, and anecdotal encounters in order to catabolize his witnessings, both historical and immediate, into a tangible origin point.

Tracing the roots of destruction, and thus inflicting on oneself a state of ruminative suffering, requires an individual to have a melancholic temperament. Susan Sontag attributes the melancholic character's superior ability to read the world to the fact that they are "haunted by death."[29] Here Sontag is writing in regards to Walter Benjamin, whose influence and identity as a saturnine permeates *The Rings of Saturn*. As stated earlier, Sebald's universe is one situated within the cosmic order, not a divine one. The planet Saturn influences the mood of the narrator, who is the anchor of the entire narrative. It is around him that the many rings—his digressions and ancillary tales—circulate; a saturnine individual is one whose temperament is melancholic, slow, and inherently "self-conscious."[30] Sebald's narrator is a saturnine, as he constantly reconstructs himself in relation to what he witnesses. The posthumous quality to Sebald's writing lends itself to the overall feeling that the narrator is a ghost flitting between historical and personal narratives, inhabiting the shoes of others in hopes of imbuing new life to stories that have long died away. Blumenthal-Barby remarks that a saturnine is typically peripatetic, even occasionally a pilgrim. He cites the first epigraph from *The Rings*:

> One must above all pardon these unhappy souls who chose to go on a pilgrim-
> age on foot, who walk along the shore, and who look, without understanding,
> upon the horror of the struggle and the deep sorrow of the vanquished.[31]

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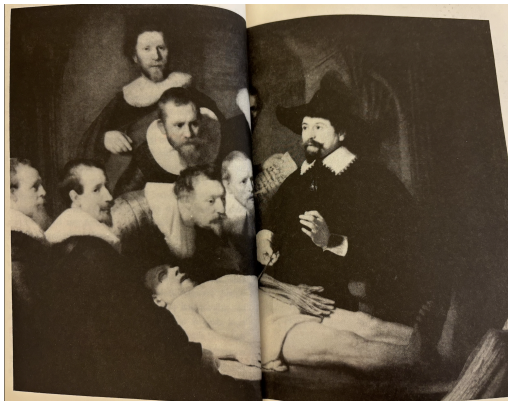
[28]Sebald paraphrasing Thomas Browne. *The Rings of Saturn*, 24.
[29]Susan Sontag, introduction to *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, by Walter Benjamin, (London: NLB, 1979), 16.
[30]Sontag, "Introduction," 14.
[31]Originally in French: "Il faut surtout pardonner à ces âmes malheureuses qui ont élu de faire le pèlerinage à pied, qui côtoient le rivage et regardent sans comprendre l'horreur de la lutte, le joie de vaincre ni le profond désespoir des vaincus." Written by Joseph Conrad in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska, 23rd-25th March 1890.

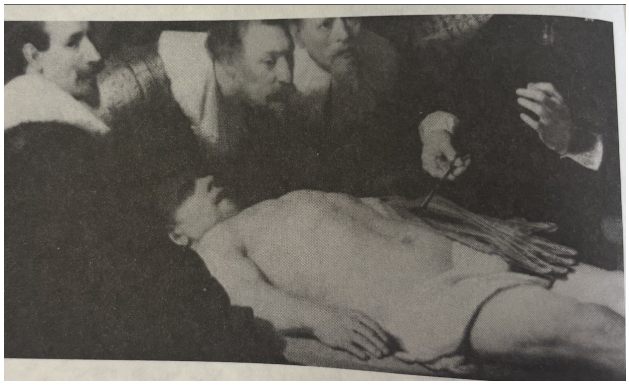
As a saturnine pilgrim, the narrator seeks the enlightenment produced from discovery of the origin, or the essence, of such horrors. From the deserted landscapes, barren establishments, and dilapidated estates, the narrator reconstructs the histories of the vanquished; as Sontag says, "The more lifeless things are, the more potent and ingenious can be the mind which contemplates them."[32] To Benjamin, the melancholic character finds faith in the accruing of "fragments or ruins"—Sebald's narrator is a collector of photographs (and other things), which are the fragments and ruins forming the foundation of his reconstructions. Despite the seeming futility of undertaking such a task, as "there is no antidote … against the opium of time,"[33] the narrator endeavours nonetheless to remember the "injustice" inflicted upon the oppressed.[34] Meticulous in his study of the order of things, the narrator relies on the preservative power of photography as he challenges the loss of collective memory.

[32]Sontag, "Introduction," 16.
[33]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 24.
[34]Blumenthal-Barby, "Holocaust and Herring," 538.

II *The Anatomy Lesson* – Abrams' Model Temple – The Fates – View of an exile

Elusive as ever, Sebald never explicitly instructs the reader as to how he wants the photographs and text to be understood. Instead, he first nudges the reader in the direction of skepticism through discussion of Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson*.[35] Situated amongst the narrator's initial ruminations about Thomas Browne in chapter one, the painting purports itself to be a depiction of the dissection of Aris Kindt, a man killed for his crimes. With a fleeting glance, the painting appears to be exactly what its title describes: a body laid out before a group of surgeons, all of them observing it as the doctor instructs. But Sebald's narrator urges the reader to take a closer look; on the page following the painting's two-page spread, there is a cropped excerpt of the painting honing in on Kindt's lifeless body and a selection of the surgeons who surround him.





Interestingly, none of the eyes of the observing men are actually directed at the body—rather, they are staring at a *representation* of the body, a "schematic plan of the human being," in an anatomy book. This cropped version of the painting highlights one man in particular, whose gaze penetrates the fourth wall to connect with the gaze of the viewer, seemingly asking "do you see what I see?" What *is* seen, therefore, is different from what was *initially* seen—the narrator directs our attention to the body's disproportionately-sized hand and its incorrectly positioned

[35]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 14-15.

tendons. To the narrator this is not an "unfortunate blunder," but rather there was "deliberate intent behind this flaw in the composition." The grotesquely-rendered hand is a subtle signalling by Rembrandt of his affiliation with "the victim, and not the Guild." Perhaps a saturnine like Benjamin and Sebald, Rembrandt "alone sees that greenish annihilated body, and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man's eyes."[36] By providing the reader with a curated fragment of the overall painting, the narrator prompts a change in perspective and plants a clue as to how one might approach the supposedly evidentiary photographs scattered throughout the narrative.

The repetition of *The Anatomy Lesson* reinforces the fact that the painting is "a narrowly selective interpretation" of this historical event. Sontag argues that a painting or a prose description can "never be other" than this type of interpretation, while a photograph is a "narrowly selective transparency" of reality.[37] Despite this notion, however, that the camera "capture[s] reality" rather than just interpreting it, photographs are "as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are"; the presumption that photographs are inherently truthful—in that they accurately represent the subject—grants photography an authority not immediately given to the written word. Sontag challenges this authority, claiming that "one never understands anything from a photograph. … Only that which narrates can make us understand."[38] Taking both the narrator's hint and Sontag's assertion into account, we might examine the narrator's encounter with Thomas Abrams, and the resulting photograph, with a more speculative gaze in order to elucidate the purpose of the reconstructive efforts undertaken by both men, respectively.

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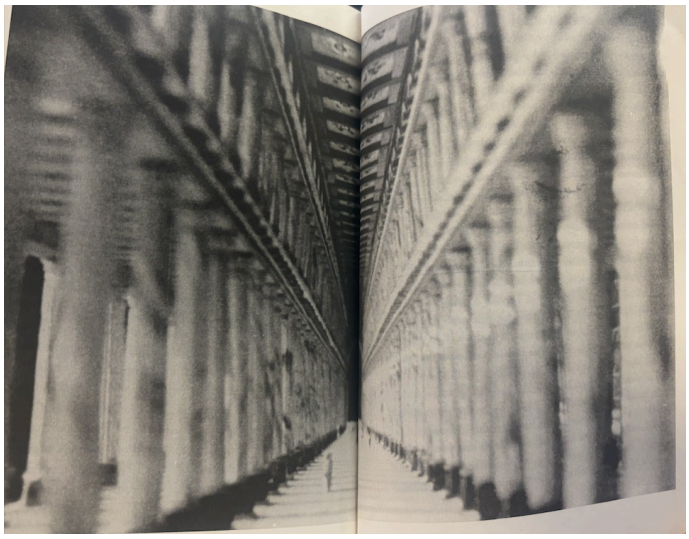
[36]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 17.
[37]Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001), 6.
[38]Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

Thomas Abrams[39] is an old acquaintance to whom Sebald pays a visit in the book's ninth chapter. A farmer with an intense passion for model-making, Abrams has spent twenty years building a model of the Temple of Jerusalem. Desiring to recreate it "exactly as it was at the beginning of our time," Abrams' process moves so slowly that change from year to year becomes difficult to visibly track. The invisibility of immediate progress coupled with time's relentless march leads Abrams to question the point of his obsession with "such an apparently never-ending meaningless and pointless project."[40] Might we not ask the same question of Sebald's narrator? Sebald himself called the photograph a "true document," and yet Sontag is claiming that it is impossible to ever understand something solely from looking at a photograph. Narration is required to ascribe meaning, to tell us what the takeaways from such a viewing *should* be, but if it too fails in accurately recreating an experience, why attempt the task of reconstruction in the first place? The photograph of Abrams' temple in conjunction with the surrounding narrative is particularly intriguing— the photograph is presumably a visual reflection of the temple described by Abrams in the preceding text, making it a representation of a representation of a once-tangible temple. However, as is the case with the majority of the featured photographs, Sebald's narrator neglects to directly acknowledge its presence. The out-of-focus photograph is ostensibly the very same model temple, and yet it is possible that it is not Abram's temple of Jerusalem at all. While a casual viewer might place their trust in this image's appearance, Sebald's reader has already been warned that a cursory glance is not sufficient if grasping the photograph's essence, truly *seeing* it, is the goal.

The narrator's analysis of Rembrandt's painting has already activated the reader's suspicion regarding the subsequent photographs; in Sontag's view, the innate trust an individual

[39]Abrams is based on a real man named Alec Garrard. For the sake of this paper, I will be using the pseudonym. Read more about Alec Garrard here: https://craftsmanshipmuseum.com/artisan/alec-garrard/
[40]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 244.

places in the photograph negates real understanding, "which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks."[41] The temple photograph captures the futile nature of Abrams and Sebald's projects: if we are to doubt the veracity of this image, as the narrator implies we should, then are we to doubt the very existence of the model temple and thus the narrative woven around it? Abrams is the archetypal artist at work, entrapped in his obsession with the process of reconstruction; as the project progresses, the difficulty of his task deepens due to his "increasingly accurate knowledge" of the original temple of Jerusalem.[42] Despite interminable hours of research, the



whole of Abrams' work is "based on nothing but ideas, ideas which change over the years and which time and again cause one to tear down what one had thought to be finished, and begin again from scratch." The photograph of the model temple is bifurcated by the book's crease, which consumes the vanishing point and creates an illusion of an endless hallway. The very physicality of the book then reinforces the futility of striving for "the utopian ideal of historical representation," in the same way that Rembrandt's painting—namely the narrator's fixation on Kindt's mutilated hand—instills in the reader a sense of suspicion regarding Sebald's own usage

[41]Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.
[42]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 245.

of photography.[43] After all, the photograph is nothing more than a "semblance of knowledge," as it alleges that the captured subject once existed exactly as it appears in the image, leading the viewer to believe that they understand what they see simply from seeing it. This faulty belief that one is able to understand merely from looking imbues the photograph with a conclusive force, despite the mutability of the foundation on which Abram's project rests.

The photograph of the model temple could have provided a neat ending to the narrator's pilgrimage, had he wanted to conclude on a more redemptive note. The image appears immediately after Abrams' ruminations—as retold through the narrator—regarding whether all he has done so far "has not been a wretched waste of time."[44] The photograph's placement asserts that Abrams' utopian ideal is achievable, that history *can* be reconstructed if one ventures far enough in their rebuilding efforts; the presence of the image transforms the mere simulacrum of the temple, which exists in a state of perpetual progress, into a stagnant and solidified piece of history. And yet, this is not how the narrator's peregrination ends; instead, his digressions divert course, and Abrams is left behind in the midst of his obsession while the narrator continues to weave new narratives that are each underlain by destruction. In our aim to reach the center of the narrator's labyrinth—as he continues to construct it around us—it is helpful to revisit the Ashbury sisters of chapter eight. Although there is no photograph accompanying this specific encounter, discussion of the parallels between the work of the three sisters and that of the narrator further illuminates the latter's process of destruction.

The Ashbury sisters, like Sebald and by extension his narrator, are exiles from regular society. Secluded in their decrepit house, the sisters spend hours a day "sewing multi-coloured

[43]Michael Byrns, "The Legitimacy of the Photograph in W.G. Sebald's The Rings of Saturn ," WordPress, April 29, 2018, https://sites.williams.edu/engl-209/uncategorized/the-legitimacy-of-the-photograph-in-w-g-sebalds-the-rings-of-saturn/.https://sites.williams.edu/engl-209/uncategorized/the-legitimacy-of-the-photograph-in-w-g-sebalds-the-rings-of-saturn/.

[44]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 245.

pillowcases, counterpanes and similar items."[45] The written depiction of the "three unmarried daughters, much of an age," weaving "work[s] of art so colourful and of such intricacy" only to undo the products of their labor "on the same day, the next day or the day after that" brings to mind the three Fates who spin and cut the thread of human life. The arbiters of the ultimate pilgrimage—life, or the march toward death—the Fates build the complex structure of a human's life, only to inevitably break it down. The cyclical nature of the narrator's own narrative quest mirrors the sisters' continual stitching, unstitching, and restitching, as he urges the reader to perform the Sisyphean task of "struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false."[46] In recalling a visit to the Waterloo Panorama—a domed rotunda with an elevated vantage point at the center—the narrator notes the unavoidable shortcomings of reconstruction; despite the panorama's extreme realism, it remains a mere "representation of history."[47] He notes that "see[ing] everything from above, seeing everything at once," does not guarantee understanding "how it was"; the narrator then goes on to imagine the bloody scene—"the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans"—as he wonders if gaining the "much-vaunted historical overview" is an actual possibility, and if so, must we attain it by standing atop a "mountain of death"? As an onlooker, the narrator attempts to unearth the essence of the historical scene laid out before him—it is plausible, at least according to Thomas Browne, that "the greater the distance" from a scene or subject, "the clearer the view."[48] And yet, the narrator's bird's-eye-view provides no more than a superficial amount of knowledge. While history itself is real, memory is incomplete, faulty, and unobtainable outside of one's own

[45]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 212.
[46]Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 66.
[47]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 125.
[48]Sebald, 19.

experience—even if one *was* involved at the Battle of Waterloo, who is to say that they can accurately recall it? Can a moment ever be captured precisely as it happened?

Sebald's own identity as an exile, which ostensibly extends to that of the narrator, is transferred onto the viewer through the grainy photographs; one becomes an outsider in the sense that they are peering into an unfamiliar or impersonal scene, *and* in that they are unsure of what specifically they are looking at. As discussed earlier, an unaware observer might spare no more than a second's glance on the photographs included by Sebald, believing that the image's relationship with the surrounding narrative is binary—they either reflect each other, or they operate entirely independently. Sebald, or the narrator, however, wants a sense of uncertainty to be triggered within the reader, as it initiates a prolonged gaze. As Lisa Diedrich states, "Sebald's work problematizes the mode of production of historical knowledge and confronts the ghostly aspects of history, the absences that are covered over but still felt and transmitted in the historical unconscious."[49] The photographs in conjunction with the text encourage the reader to learn to see realities that are not physically visible, but are nonetheless very present.

[49]Lisa Diedrich, "Gathering Evidence of Ghosts: W.G. Sebald's Practices of Witnessing," essay, in *Searching for Sebald : Photography after W.G. Sebald* (Los Angeles, CA: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 257.

III Winter Garden – Shadow worlds – Nature's surfeit – Power of allegory

A defining characteristic of the narrator's purgatorial pilgrimage is its immobility. Although the narrative's structure is inherently mobile, as the narrator meanders along East Anglia's coastline while weaving in and out of numerous historical and personal tangents, it concludes in the very place it began: the transitioning soul distracted by the shrouded window revealing "landscapes or people or the fruits of the field."[50] The recurrence of the window in the narrator's final allusion is merely one layer in Sebald's labyrinth of destruction, and it reinforces both the narrator and the reader's identity as witnesses to the retelling of history unfolding before them. Barthes, too, is a witness, and in understanding his own search for the "essence" of a photograph, we begin to make sense of the essence that the narrator is searching for—and prompting the reader to search for—through his incorporation of photographs and other images.

The Winter Garden photograph sits at the center of Barthes' own "Labyrinth" of photographs, and yet it is entirely absent from the book itself. Barthes' discovery of this photograph, which exists only for him and would be nothing but "an indifferent picture" to anyone else, is a result of his search for his late-mother's "*being*."[51] While other images show her as she was in life, Barthes' qualms with these pictures rest in their inability to capture the "essence of her identity." As he searches for her, he witnesses the history of her life; "moving back in time with her, looking for the truth," Barthes staves off her death. He becomes an outsider looking in, working backward to arrive at the origin of the maze: the Winter Garden. The parallel between Barthes' pictorial pilgrimage and that of the narrator is one of inversion—in the same way that Barthes does not provide the Winter Garden photograph for the viewer, Sebald's narrator never explicitly states that *The Rings of Saturn* is rooted in the

[50]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 296.
[51]Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 66.

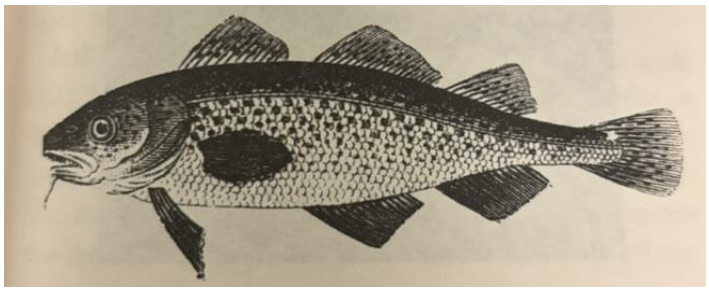
Holocaust. Instead, certain photographs (and other types of images) are layered to create an allegory for the Holocaust—once again, he constructs only to tear down by meticulously building a narrative whose foundation ultimately rests in destruction. While the Winter Garden is the only photograph that truly exists for Barthes—in that it illuminates the "thread" drawing him toward "Photography"—the Holocaust is all that exists for the narrator, at a base level. Through his ramblings in Suffolk, England essentially becomes a palimpsest of German history;[52] although each digression forms its own maze of details and images, the "traces of destruction" related to the Holocaust are inevitably present, however subtly.[53]

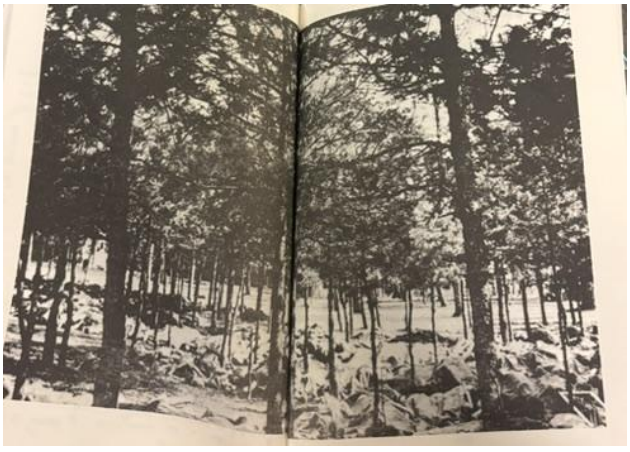
In the same way that the photographs and narratives do not function in a binary manner, the pilgrimage itself does not inhabit one form. Taking place both amongst the landscape and in the narrator's ruminations, the pilgrimage becomes a tour of death. The narrator, who on one level is a distracted soul wandering through purgatory, is also a tour guide through the various worlds that he inhabits as a spectre-type witness. The multi-layered quality of Sebald's work is well-articulated through his analysis of Thomas Browne's perspective of existence:

> [He] saw our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond. … He therefore sought to look upon earthly existence, from the things that were closest to him to the spheres of the universe, with the eye of an outsider, one might even say of the creator. His only means of achieving the sublime heights that this endeavour required was … [by] creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences.[54]

[52]Judith Ryan, "'Lines of Flight': History and Territory in The Rings of Saturn." *W.G. Sebald*, January 1, 2009, 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042027824_007.
[53]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 3.
[54]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 18-19.

Sebald's own process is essentially summarized in this excerpt, as *The Rings of Saturn* is a culmination of numerous shadow worlds woven together to create an encompassing allegory for the Holocaust. Sebald's narrator places distance between the reader and the destruction through his towering mazes of words and images; we are then tasked with discerning said destruction from these "sublime heights," which ostensibly allow us to acquire the clarity to which only an outsider has access. A primary example of this labyrinthine construction, which ultimately functions to extract the Holocaust from the shadows, occurs as a series of four images within chapter three.[55] These images appear consecutively—the fishermen and herring, the illustration of a herring, the unnamed forest that appears to be populated with soldiers, and the mass grave—but relate to each other in a webbed fashion rather than a linear one. Sebald takes a defamiliarized approach to the topic of mass death, laying the foundation for the reader through allegorical means.





[55]Chapter III is titled "Fishermen on the beach – The natural history of the herring – George Wyndham Le Strange – A great herd of swine – The reduplication of man – Orbis Tertius."

The narrator begins this series of images with a still from a short film depicting the trawling of herring. He provides a brief summary of the film, which details the history of herring fishing, and goes on to discuss the proliferation of herring birth rates, noting that if they were "all to develop unhindered" the earth would quite literally be suffocated by the fish.[56] Those who undertake the task of fishing herring use nets "made of coarse Persian silk" which "do not enclose the catch," but rather create a wall against which the fish swim until their gills "catch in the mesh." The narrator continues his methodical explanation of the brutality: "they are then throttled during the near-eight-hour process of hauling up and winding in the nets. Because of this, by far the majority of the herrings are lifeless by the time they are hoisted out of the water."[57] This systematic elucidation of how the herring die is inserted between the first photograph of the fishermen and the second image, which is an illustration of a glum-looking herring. The latter's presence is somewhat perplexing to the viewer, but it is quite intentional on the part of Sebald and his narrator; the digressions which surround it, as previously stated, are concerned with the life cycle of herring in a largely factual and detached manner. However, the discussion immediately preceding the illustration adopts a more philosophical tone. In the same methodical manner as before, the narrator summarizes one man's mutilation of a pair of herring, which was performed in order to "investigate more closely the fishes' capacity to survive."[58] He did this by "cutting off their fins and mutilating them in other ways," which the narrator classifies as "the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster." The illustration sitting below all of this stares back at the reader, anthropomorphized by the narrator, who asserts that "we do not know what the herring feels." Despite the consoling idea that herring are free from the "fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher

[56]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 55.
[57]Sebald, 56.
[58]Sebald, 57.

animals in their death throes," we will never know the truth. The illustration, then, serves as a break in the text that instills an uncertainty within the reader, as they struggle to understand the specific analogy or meaning behind the herring tangent. It is not until distance has been gained within the text itself that its meaning becomes startlingly clear.

The opacity of the herring narrative gradually lightens due to the physical distance placed between it and the reader. This distance occurs in two instances, the first being three pages following the illustration, and the second occurring in the last chapter's discussion of sericulture.[59] Beginning with the first instance, the narrator leaves behind the herring and embarks on a new digression, seemingly unrelated to the last, concerning Major George Wyndham Le Strange, a man who served in the "anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945."[60] This clear reference to the Nazi concentration camp is the closest the narrator comes to explicitly naming the Holocaust, but he quickly moves on in his story of Le Strange's eccentricities; however, before he does so, a double-page photograph occurs immediately after "1945." Doris Chon succinctly describes the experience of viewing this image for the first time: "Appear[ing] as an abstraction of muted gray tones [it] becomes a horrifying specter of mass death."[61] Chon notes that Sebald's inclusion of this photograph contradicts his "characteristic withholding of violent photographic images," but it does so in a way that still urges the reader to take a second look, to question what exactly they are seeing. The reader's ability to discursively think is prioritized in Sebald's approach—he does not want to "paralyze" the reader as he himself (or the narrator) is paralyzed upon reflection of his pilgrimage. Instead, he places this photograph within the story of Le Strange to hint that the

[59]"Sericulture," Merriam-Webster, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sericulture. Defined as "The production of raw silk by raising silkworms."
[60]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 59.
[61]Doris Chon, "Moths, Photographs, and Emigrants: The Capacity for Transmigration in the Work of W. G. Sebald," *Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2016): 271. https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.58.2.0251.

major's retreat from society resulted from "the harrowing trauma of what he had witnessed," and to allow the reader to piece together the allegory for themself.[62] The parallels between the story of the herring and the depiction of the mass grave start to become explicit—for example, the bodies covered by blankets are highly reminiscent of the lifeless herring piled atop one another in the first photograph. The men standing amongst the fish resemble the narrow trunks of the tall trees in the final image, highlighting the tension between nature and mankind that is present throughout *The Rings of Saturn*. Even in such a desolate landscape, a wasteland perhaps, can one find humanity—or a lack of it.

The second instance of distance between the herring and the reader which allows a clearer understanding of the allegorical representation of the Holocaust occurs at the book's end, when the narrator delves into the history of sericulture, or silkworm rearing. While the reader has already seen the mass of bodies at Bergen Belsen, the intensive discussion concerning silkworms further elucidates the connections between chapter three's quartet of images. Remember, the narrator has already woven silk into the herring digression as the nets used to capture the fish are made of "Persian silk"; in this final section, we come to learn how the destruction of the herring is preceded by the destruction of the silkworms—as the narrator says in chapter one, "On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation."[63] Within this section is an overview of the process of breeding silkworms, and the narrator's methodical explanation of the blatant brutality mirrors his earlier explanation regarding the herring capture and dissection:

> We see the hatching, the feeding of the ravenous caterpillars, the cleaning out of the frames, the spinning of the silken thread, and finally the killing, accomplished in this case by not putting the cocoons out in the sun or in a hot oven, as was often the practice in the

[62]Chon, "Moths, Photographs, and Emigrants," 271.
[63]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 24.

> past, but by suspending them over a boiling cauldron. The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed.[64]

The narrator's orderly method of describing the silkworms' life cycle, which is abruptly curtailed through a torturous boiling process, distances the reader from the horror at hand. A slight detail, of which the narrator glosses over as he did earlier with the mention of Bergen Belsen, is that this violent scene originates from an educational video created and produced by the Reich Association of Silkworm Breeders in Berlin. The tedium with which the narrator relays the scenes he witnesses on screen is in jarring juxtaposition to the "outstanding description of corporeal violence," however, this quasi-instructional breakdown of the "killing business" causes the reader to adopt the eye of a detached outsider, making the violence appear foreign and unrelatable at first. The reader's ability to discursively engage with the text and images, however, prompts the mental image of the herring thrashing around in their silken nets, as the narrator's streamlined explanation of their capture is reflected in the killing of the silkworms. These two discussions of the "most efficient death[s]," specifically in conversation with the photograph of the mass grave, position the Holocaust in the forefront of the reader's mind with a fresh sense of horror; one realizes that they are incapable of extricating themself from the Holocaust and its scope of mass destruction.[65]

The inescapability of the Holocaust is reinforced by the narrator's choice to convey such destruction through depicting the tension between nature and humankind. The narrator's process of defamiliarizing Germany's mass extermination of non-Aryan people, namely those of Jewish

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[64] Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 294.
[65] Eluned Summers-Bremner, "Reading, Walking, Mourning: W. G. Sebald's Peripatetic Fictions," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 34, no. 3 (2004): 312. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30224611.

descent, through displaying the application of that same systematic violence to non-human entities forces the reader to engage with legacies that would otherwise be forgotten. When speaking about the fishermen on the beach, whose presence prompts the digression into herring birth rates and thus herring death, the narrator says bluntly, "No one is interested in their legacy."[66] As the reader should know by now, the narrator rarely, if ever, speaks about anything in isolation; it is not only the legacy of the fishermen which no one cares about, but also those of the herring and the silkworms. In an interview with Sebald himself, he references the shadow worlds: "Behind all of us who are living there are the dead. In fact they are here coexisting with us, but we don't see them. We have unlearned the ability to see them."[67] The series of four images is a primary example of how the narrator generates distance between the reader and the origin of the maze, which is to say the Holocaust, in order to enable rediscovery through deep engagement with the circular narratives. Through his placement of images and textual allusions, the narrator anthropomorphizes, to some extent, the herring and the silkworms; this anthropomorphization—which occurs as one forms the connection between the piles of herring, boiled silkworms, and mass grave of bodies—simultaneously distances the reader from the violence and emphasizes the severity of such brutality. Barthes makes a similar claim to Browne, when he says that "history is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it."[68] The destruction of nature feels separate from the destruction of mankind—one is less inclined to care about the abhorrent treatment of herring and silkworms than they are about their fellow humans. However, the narrator frames all three of these entities as equals under "Nature," each equally incapable of being truly understood by "we, the survivors" who "still do not know how it was" despite

[66]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 53.
[67]Kafatou, "An Interview with W. G. Sebald," 33.
[68]Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.

viewing the destruction from all angles.[69] The eradication of nature precedes that of mankind, and yet those legacies of destruction are often erased from history. Even knowledge of the Holocaust, which is seemingly cemented in collective consciousness, is "enveloped by darkness," which the narrator works to combat through his educational reconstructions.[70]

The third image of the series is perhaps the one that is most shrouded in darkness. While aspects of the other three images can be loosely grasped both upon first glance and further scrutiny, this third image is starkly ambiguous. First of all, it is initially unclear if it is an extremely grainy black-and-white photograph or merely an illustration. While it *is* an illustration, its obscurity blurs the line between illustration and photography, thus challenging one's inclination to wholeheartedly place their trust in a photograph's purported veracity. How might an image such as this, where the subject much less the *meaning* is difficult to decipher, contribute to the narrator's allegorical method of enlightening the reader? Although it might appear that the image is randomly inserted into the narrative, the reader is aware that Sebald's work is rooted in patterns and connections—nothing is truly random. With this in mind, one might take note of the passage on the neighboring page, as it potentially provides insight into the image's purpose. After the narrator departs from the beach at which he thought about the herring, he sits on the shore of a lake "encircled by deciduous woodland that is now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea." Although the landscape is subsequently described as "tranquil" and quite idyllic, the narrator is incapable of simply enjoying himself as he sits beneath the shadow of inevitable death. While the image does not reflect his words—except for the presence of woodland—the narrator's morose description imbues the image with a connotation more sinister than what initially meets the eye.

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[69]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 125.
[70]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 19.

As the narrator wanders into the narrative of Major Le Strange and the subsequent photograph of Bergen Belsen, the reader finds themself circling back to the ambiguous image at hand—is it the *same* wooded landscape? Who are these people dotting the ground, very few of whom can be barely distinguished as men wearing uniforms? Are we staring at the decimation of the victims of Bergen Belsen in progress? Regardless of whether the image itself is explicitly connected to the final photograph, its ambiguity forces the reader to continue engaging in discursive thought and analysis—the forest image foreshadows the mass grave photograph in that it renders humanity's presence in even the most desolate or remote of landscapes. The "dying" woodland, the mental image of falling trees, reminds one of the herring and the "terrible sight of Nature suffocating on its own surfeit," which then leads the reader *back* to the mass grave.[71] Even as the narrative is pushed forward, one is continually led backward by the strings that are pulled out from the images—this stillness despite motion emphasizes the purgatorial nature of the narrator's—and the reader's—pilgrimage. In spite of traversing through numerous worlds and their sites of destruction, the narrator always concludes at the origin, albeit with an increased level of insight.

[71]Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 55.

IV Final Thoughts

The Rings of Saturn is Sebald's wasp nest. Its undeniable complexity stems from the most simple source of inspiration: a walk along the coastline. In his subsequent hospital stay, Sebald's narrator becomes a pilgrim as he begins to wander throughout his melancholic ruminations. The pilgrimage thus takes on a new identity, one of purgatory and stillness despite its inherent motion. The reader is then led through numerous mazes, making progress toward a perceived center or exit, only to be led back to the very beginning of the maze. Through his incorporation of images, most notably black-and-white photographs of amateur quality, Sebald's narrator urges the reader to slow down as they progress through the labyrinth. The interplay between the images and their surrounding narratives is not binary—neither medium functions in isolation, nor do they operate entirely in tandem. The narrator purposefully creates ambiguity by neglecting to explain a photograph's specific relation to the text it touches, and this ambiguity propels the reader to adopt a prolonged gaze. This attentive engagement with the words and images allows the reader to see *past* their first glance; they begin to question the veracity of the photograph, as well as the purpose of the circular narratives. Like the three Ashbury sisters, Sebald's narrator is a perpetual weaver—he meditates on the ubiquity of destruction, walking miles and miles of East Anglia only to arrive back at the origin of all his horror: the Holocaust. Everything circles back to the Holocaust, and the *holocausts* preceding the former. The destruction of the landscape, the animals who inhabit it, and then of mankind itself—this is what preoccupies the narrator as he travels through the shadow worlds in search of the essence underlying them all.

The narrator becomes a "collector … engaged in the pious work of salvage."[72] He accrues fragments of history, both personal and collective, and uses them to form the foundation of his reconstructions. Although time cannot be reversed and nothing can truly be captured exactly as it

[72]Sontag, *On Photography*, 76.

happened, the narrator works tirelessly to salvage what has been lost in order to open the reader's eyes to realities beyond the ones immediately before them. In doing so, he dusts off the stories of the silenced and imbues them with a new voice. In this sense, the narrator's work of reconstruction is never finished as there is no shortage of victims throughout history. The purgatorial pilgrimage, it seems, is bound to continue until the wandering soul finds its way past the window without getting distracted.

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