W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*: Memories of the Holocaust in the Fluid Cartography of a "Natural History of Destruction"

Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction

Michael Holden

Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-5181-3501

Contact: Michael Holden, michaeljoseph.holden@rhul.ac.uk, Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey, United Kingdom, TW20 0EX

Abstract:

This article will trace the "map-like" quality of W.G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn*, and will demonstrate the ways in which this characteristic of Sebald's prose works can assist in illuminating the quiet echoes of historical traumas such as the Holocaust that permeate his oeuvre. Fundamentally, however, a normative understanding of mapping is inadequate to the complexities of Sebald's meditations on history, memory, place, and destruction; accordingly, the article will complicate such understandings by presenting the novel as a kind of "fluid cartography." The mutability inherent in the notion of fluid cartography is apt to Sebald's writing, and can offer an enhanced understanding of the author's methods of representing memory and the past, along with the ways in which such concerns become embedded in the landscapes depicted. This article will focus on aspects of Holocaust memory that are inserted in such a way, and which become connected – through the fluid cartographical reach of the text – to a broader history of both human and natural destruction.

Keywords

Sebald, Holocaust, cartography, memory

All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us.

-W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (101)

Early on in W. G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn*, the unnamed narrator-protagonist finds himself at the edge of a cliff, standing on "perforated ground" that he feels might "[give]

way at any moment" (*Rings*, 68). At this point in the narrative, his anxious unease has a very specific, natural cause; the narrator notices a proliferation of nesting holes below him, burrowed into the cliff-face by sand martins. More broadly, however, the notion of "perforated ground…which might…[give] way at any moment" could be read as a succinct metaphorical summary of the wider Sebaldian literary project. "The moral backbone of literature," notes Sebald, in an interview just prior to his untimely death in 2001, "is about that whole question of memory," and it is indeed (and perhaps above all else) questions of memory that form the fabric of the moral and aesthetic enquiries that permeate his entire oeuvre (Jaggi, para.11). Particularly, Sebald often appears to situate himself at the intersection of memory, history, and their embedment within certain spaces, and it is these concerns that are constitutive of what Naomi Stead refers to as "Sebald's larger attempt to represent and memorialise the lasting trauma of the Holocaust in an oblique and understated rather than literal way" (41). That the Holocaust figures as an obfuscated center-point to his works is a notion that seems to be confirmed by Sebald himself. On the topic of writing the Nazi genocide of the Jews, he notes in an interview with *The Guardian*'s Maya Jaggi:

> I knew that writing about the subject, particularly for people of German origin, is fraught with dangers and difficulties. Tactless lapses, moral and aesthetic, can easily be committed. It was also clear you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So you would have to approach it from an angle, and *by intimating to the reader that these subjects are constant company*; *their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes*. If one can make that credible, then one can begin to defend writing about these subjects at all (para.13, emphasis added).

Likewise, in this vein, John Banville notes in his review of Sebald's essay collection, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, that all of the author's major works engage with the catastrophes of the twentieth century – particularly the Holocaust and the Second World War – but they "do so in the most delicate, anti-dramatic and moving fashion. Where others shout, Sebald murmurs" (para.2). Much like the narrator on the cliff in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's readers occupy an unstable space that is woven from a diffuse and somewhat disparate mnemohistory, one which gestures obliquely toward past tragedies; Sebald constructs massive-yet-fragile narratives that at times feel liable to collapse under their own weight, or perhaps from the holes with which they are riddled.

Here, my primary intention is to demonstrate the fundamentally map-like quality of Sebald's works. Notably, Sebald's methods of representation are often discussed by scholars in ways that enmesh space, memory, and history. Silke Arnold-de Simine, for instance, notes that "museums, collections and archives" – spaces with an explicit *mnemonic* function – "feature prominently in all of Sebald's texts," and suggests that: "[h]is texts are repositories…Sebald's writing is based on a poetics of collecting" (27). She notes, further, that "W.G. Sebald claimed that he envisioned his prose text *Austerlitz*...as an alternative Holocaust museum" (19). Indeed, the article by Arnold-de Simine that I refer to here is predicated on an explicit reading of *Austerlitz* as a "museum-text," in which she compares the novel directly to Daniel Libeskind's extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Laura García-Moreno, similarly, notes that "[o]ne could say that [Sebald] spatializes time and temporalizes space" (360). and goes on to posit that the "*excavation* of the past" is a key narratological feature of *Austerlitz* (365). Cultural geographer Daniel Weston, meanwhile,

offers a Derridean reading of *The Rings of Saturn*, in which he contends that "Sebald's texts describe a "situated perspective" which reads the traces of various tropes of history and memory in the landscapes that they traverse, and thus interrogate the variant fortunes of personal and general historical narratives," and that "in Sebald's texts, "memory", constructed in a complex of spatial and temporal location, provides the grounds upon which a critique of the erasing of the individual in traditional historiography is undertaken" (173). Stead, meanwhile, reads *Austerlitz* through the lens of its relationship to architecture. In the world-view crafted within the novel, she notes, we see "architecture as premonition of disaster, as monument to barbarism, and as instrument of oppression," and, not least, we are privy to "*Austerlitz*'s overriding aversion to architectural giganticism" (42). All of these architectural features, notes Stead, are situated within "the overriding theme in *Austerlitz*," which she interprets as "memory: individual and collective, forgotten and retrieved, the fragility of human memory in the face of the crushing forces of history" (42). This article will follow similar spatial and material lines, in the sense that I will present a reading of *The Rings of Saturn* in terms of memory, history, and space. My intention, however, is to introduce the hitherto seldom-considered perspective of cartography, and specifically, theoretical notions of *fluid* cartography and countermapping.

I contend, then, that it is possible to view Sebald's texts as *map-like* in character,[1] and as such, I will begin my analysis here by justifying this view. Such explication will be crucial in order to open my reading on firm ground, before I attempt to unsettle the stability of this vantage point later on. I will go on to argue that, rather than tracing a relatively conventional route along the points of a map (as per a travelogue, perhaps – a designation that is sometimes hesitatingly attached by scholars to *The Rings of Saturn*), Sebald instead offers a "fluid cartography" to his readers within this novel. In this text, we are presented with a transnational, trans*temporal* journey (oftentimes, *mental* journey) that takes meandering detours around – and skirts the edges of – the central topic of the Holocaust. These meditations emerge (apparently) organically from wanderings, chance meetings and (crucially) specific, concrete places, or *anchoring points on the map*. At this juncture, it is important to introduce Isabel Capeloa Gil and João Ferreira Duarte's conception of "fluid cartography," which they describe as a "deeply relational" form of mapping, one which "aims at *understanding instead of controlling*"; fluid cartographies are (typically metaphorical) mappings which:

> [address] the fluid disengagement of the modern world, the *diasporic displacements* and the complex changes that mark the transitive and transitional reality of modernity…A fluid cartography, moreover, traces *connections in contact zones* and perceives the limits that mark territory not as borders but rather…*borderlands*…A fluid cartography, then, perceives the territory as an emerging surface where *charting is equated with inscribing and translating, where different identities, times and locations come together* (3, emphases added).

Ultimately, it is my aim to demonstrate the level of precision with which the concept of "fluid cartography" can be applied to Sebald's works; in my view, the characteristics described by Gil and Duarte closely mirror those of the overarching Sebaldian literary project. In the terms of these authors, however, we might ask: what exactly is the "territory" depicted in *The Rings of Saturn*?

Memory, history, and space are central to the concerns of the novel, and it is precisely within the 'borderlands' of such concepts that Sebald's characters tend to roam. Nonetheless, it is

the notion of an “emerging surface” that is crucial here. The narratives of *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn* present the reader with a “surface” that appears to cyclically emerge from – and become re-submerged within – the oblivion of forgetting; “different identities, times and locations” do indeed coexist, interact, overlap, and occasionally collide within these texts, and it is here that the shifting nature of Sebald’s depiction of memory comes to the fore, and which will form my concern here. It is here, too, that the Holocaust emerges – albeit circuitously – as a central concern. The mnemonic meditations of the texts are stretched, warped, and twisted – at times beyond recognition – but the (geographical) points from which they originate still maintain an essential relationality. This is despite Sebald’s protagonists being pushed to breaking point by their wanderings, as suggested by the mental collapse of the unnamed narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, who succumbs to mental exhaustion as a result of his extensive, meditative walking. As Anna K. Schaffner notes of this character: “Human existence appears to him as nothing but a grand theater of cruelty and absurdity, and, fittingly, his body expresses his philosophical misgivings by succumbing to complete paralysis at the end of his journey into the heart of saturnine darkness” (67).

In the following section of this article, I will outline my rationale for viewing Sebald’s texts as map-like in character, with occasional reference to his later work *Austerlitz*, too, in order to gesture toward the broader applicability of this reading; following this, I will offer some examples of the fluidity of the Sebaldian cartography as it exists in the pages of *The Rings of Saturn*, and will explain some of the ways in which this relates to Holocaust memory. Later in that novel, some time after the narrator describes his unsettling cliff-top encounter with the sand martin burrows, we find ourselves in Belgium, at Waterloo. Here, in a Benjaminian fashion, the narrator takes to task the enormous monument erected to the battle, and the panorama housed nearby: “This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was” (Sebald, *Rings*, 125). Despite the enormous solidity of the monument and the apparently-privileged perspective afforded by the panorama, the narrator reveals the stability of such constructions to be little more than deceptive *trompe l’œil*. This vantage point is scarcely more secure than the crumbling cliff-top, riddled with holes, and this latter vantage point is precisely the kind offered to the reader by Sebald in his literary works.

Charting a course: the map-text

“Suffolk,” “Norwich,” “Portersfield Road,” “Charlottenstraße,” “Valais,” “Lake Geneva,” “the Jura,” “the Cévennes,” “Oxford,” “the African continent,” “the Iberian peninsula,” “the Mediterranean,” “the Tuileries gardens,” “Rouen,” “Normandy,” “the Atlas mountains,” “the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital,” “the parish church of St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich” – across the first ten pages of *The Rings of Saturn* alone, Sebald introduces eighteen real-world, *mappable* locations (*Rings*, 1-10). On just the first page of *Austerlitz*, meanwhile, Sebald makes mention of “England,” “Belgium,” “the city of Antwerp,” and, particularly, the narrator’s route around the center of that city: “I remember the uncertainty of my footsteps as I walked all round the inner city, down Jeruzalemstraat, Nachtegaalstraat, Pelikanstraat, Paradijsstraat, Immerseelstraat and many other streets and alleyways” (1), shortly after which he finally comes to rest (on the second page of the novel) at “Astridplein, next to the Centraal Station” (2). A cursory internet search reveals that these six streets do indeed sit within central Antwerp, and that the narrator’s route is a viable (if somewhat wandering and circuitous) one. Across the twelve pages of Sebald’s prose that I have referred to here, I have listed a total of twenty-eight real-world locations, and this dense proliferation of specific

geographic markers is a technique that persists across virtually the entirety of Sebald's oeuvre. The pages of *The Rings of Saturn* are comprehensively saturated with such markers from start to finish; some convey the "mental departures" taken by the novel's protagonist, while others (crucially) describe his physical wanderings – in all cases, however, the two types of journeys are invariably linked (Weston, 178).

Weston suggests that all four of Sebald's novels "are characterized by spatial motifs of voyaging," and it is through such journeys that his characters depart upon their extended meditations on memory and history (173). Indeed, as Weston also notes, "the walks that [*The Rings of Saturn*] reports upon provide the underpinning foundations for the construction of a narrative of mental departures. The common themes that these departures converge upon are drawn from characteristics read in the spaces that the text traverses" (178). Within the text, the narrator recounts his extended walking tour of the Suffolk coast, a journey that he undertakes in order to "[dispel] the emptiness that takes hold of [him] whenever [he has] completed a long stint of work" (Sebald, *Rings*, 3). Weston suggests that "[t]he interplay between notions of emptiness and the process of re-filling that Sebald's *bricolage* of cultural memory engages in is crucial to the meanings established in his text," and that it is precisely the emptiness of, and "lack of distinguishing features" upon, the Suffolk coastline that allows for the "possibility of relation to other times and spaces" (in this sense, in fact, one might read *The Rings of Saturn* as a kind of narratological filling-in of a blank map) (178-179, original emphasis). The crucial point here is that the text narrates a journey that traces a route between multiple (real) geographical locations. It is from these real-world anchor-points that the novel's extended metaphysical contemplations unfold. The level of mimetic cartographic detail provided by Sebald suggests that it would be possible to comprehensively map the route taken by his protagonist (and the mnemonic and historical connections he draws at various points along them) if we so chose.[2] The *mappability* of the text lies in the proliferation of specific spatial markers that exist within it.

In addition to the above, there exist further features of Sebald's narrative technique that suggest the possibility of reading his works as "map-like." In *The Rings of Satur*n, and later, in *Austerlitz*, a multitude of heightened vantage points and bird's-eye views give the reader the impression of frequently looking down upon the unfolding narrative as if from a great height. This vertiginous perspective can be clearly seen, for instance, when Sebald's narrator is recovering in the Norwich and Norfolk hospital,[3] early in the pages of *The Rings of Saturn*:

> I dragged myself, despite the pain, up to the window sill. In the tortured position of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the glass. I could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him. And just as Gregor's dimmed eyes fail to recognize the quiet street where he and his family had lived for years, taking Charlottenstraße for a grey wasteland, so I too found the familiar city, extending from the hospital courtyards to the far horizon, an utterly alien place. I could not believe that anything might still be alive in that maze of buildings down there; rather, it was as if I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble, from which the tenebrous masses of multi-storey carparks rose up like immense boulders (5).

At this moment, the narrator is recuperating from a kind of mental exhaustion, manifesting in a "state of almost total immobility" that takes hold of him "a year to the day after [he] began [his] tour" of the Suffolk coast (Sebald, *Rings*, 3). I will return shortly to the question of a sense of *alienation* from the particular vantage point expressed above, here signified by the narrator's identification with Kafka's Gregor Samsa, but for now, the question of height is most pertinent. The narrator notes that his room is located on the hospital's eighth floor, yet the vantage point expressed in the passage above gives the impression that he is peering down upon the city of Norwich from a much greater height (Sebald, *Rings*, 4). To interpret the buildings below as a "maze" for instance (itself a near-cartographical description of city streets), would almost require an aerial vantage point – a bird's eye view – while the notion of looking down as if "from a cliff upon a sea of stone" conveys a similar sense of acute verticality; coupled with the disorientating sense of alienation the narrator feels at this moment, the impression is decidedly one of dizzying vertigo.[4] Given the persistent focus on history and memory within the novel, and the fact that the narrator is recuperating after a mental collapse precipitated by his walking tour, this perspective (at this particular moment) would seem to accord with the somewhat stomach-churning sense – expressed by Sebald himself in *On the Natural History of Destruction* – of time as a "dark…abysm" which, "when you look down" upon it, makes you "feel dizzy and afraid" (Sebald, *Destruction*, 74). The overall picture, however, is somewhat more complex.

Often, Sebald provides the *reader*, too, with just such a heightened vantage point, albeit not frequently one so extremely vertiginous as that described above. This is crucial, I contend, in viewing the texts under discussion here as map-like, rather than as works which merely reel off a succession of geographical locations that are more or less relevant to the plot; Sebald frequently creates a sense of looking at things from above (sometimes, *directly* above), and of observing from a height the topology of the places and situations he describes. A little later in *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, the narrator notes how "[u]nder the wonderful influence of the painkillers coursing through me, I felt, in my iron-framed bed, like a balloonist floating weightless amidst the mountainous clouds towering on every side" – whilst not an actual viewpoint within the reality of the novel, the notion of weightless floating (here induced by the mind-altering effects of painkillers) is an apt characterisation of the perspective often offered to the reader (17). We have already seen, too, the narrator's description of the towering monument at Waterloo, and the overhead perspective afforded by the panorama of the battle housed there, along with his view from the cliff-top, riddled with the holes of sand martins. Later, during the early stages of the narrator's journey, he strikes up a conversation with a gardener at Somerleyton Hall. The man describes to him how he watched RAF bombers taking off for raids in Germany as a teenager, noting – in decidedly aerial terms, as if from the cockpit of one of the RAF planes – that "I pictured in my mind's eye the German cities going up in flames, the firestorms setting the heavens alight" (Sebald, *Rings*, 38). This perspective, notes the author's interlocutor, was strengthened by the man's employer, Lord Somerleyton, who "brought [him] a big relief map of Germany," from which he could begin to comprehend in more concrete terms the location of the "place names [he] had heard on the news" – he goes on to describe how poring over this map becomes something of an obsession (Sebald, *Rings*, 38-39). Later, while describing the Mauritshuis museum in the Hague, the narrator explains how he must spend time recovering from the affliction inspired by viewing Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, "in front of Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*" (Sebald, *Rings*, 83). At this point, the narrator describes the latter painting thus:

> The flatland stretching out towards Haarlem is seen from above, from a vantage point generally identified as the dunes, though the sense of a bird's-eye view is so strong that the dunes would have to be

> veritable hills or even modest mountains. The truth is of course that Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above the earth. Only in this way could he see it all together: the vast cloudscape that occupies two thirds of the picture; the town, which is little more than a fraying of the horizon except for St. Bavo's cathedral…; the dark bosks and bushes; the farm in the foreground; and the bright field where the sheets of white linen have been laid out to bleach and where, by my count, seven or eight people no taller than a quarter of an inch, are going about their work (Sebald, *Rings*, 83).

After the claustrophobic, ground-level closeness of the encounter with the famous Rembrandt piece (oft-discussed by scholars), it seems that the narrator must retreat to the comforting illusion of an 'imaginary' bird's-eye view offered by Jacob van Ruisdael, one that recalls the painkiller-induced illusion of floating described at the moment of the narrator's stay in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. That this is precisely the kind of "falsification of perspective" offered by the panorama at Waterloo is obvious – this is a point to which I will return – but the painting's totalizing, near-aerial perspective, as described by the narrator, is one that frequently creeps into the narratives of both texts.

Further examples abound in his later work, *Austerlitz*, in much the same manner as they do in *The Rings of Saturn*. To briefly name but a few, the eponymous protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, describes how, as a child, he pictured the world as "an ideal landscape"– a single peninsula of the world in miniature, which he describes as a "single panorama" (85); he notes how, at school, his history teacher captivatingly described the Napoleonic wars in a manner akin to "surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye" (98); he recalls happy times spent at the home of a childhood friend in dream-like terms, including the notion that, from the window of his bedroom at that house, he "looked down from above on the treetops" (134); at Greenwich, with the narrator, Austerlitz takes photographs of the "panorama of the city to the north and north-west on the far side of the park," (141) while the narrator later describes similar scenes painted by various artists (145); Austerlitz describes the sense of freedom engendered by his school-friend Gerald's love of flying, noting that "he had been able to fly over the whole wretched place [their school and its surrounding area] in a Chipmunk and get right away from it once a week. The further you can rise above the earth, the better, he [Gerald] said" (157), and the narrator later describes a memorable flight taken with this same friend, noting how "the Thames emerged as if out of nothing, a dragon's tail, black as cart-grease" (162); finally, to provide one additional example, Austerlitz later describes the area around Liverpool Street Station, with particular reference to the "engineers' plans [which] looked like muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas," an observation bolstered by a reproduction of these plans, which is included without comment in typical Sebaldian fashion (186-187). Such overhead, or aerial, viewpoints, then, form a key feature of Sebald's narrative method within these two works, and we often find them expressed in terms of their dream-like or unreal quality.

In this light, however, Weston suggests that there is a tendency to portray the "elevated, panoptic (and for the Ruisdael painting, fictional) perspective" in decidedly "negative terms," as we have similarly observed in the case of the panorama at Waterloo (180). This is, suggests Weston, owing to the fact that "the situation of perspective is emphasized as crucially important in the formation of meaning, and…of a historical narrative" (180). In the case of the Ruisdael painting, for instance, this piece offers the narrator respite from the horror he encounters when viewing the Rembrandt painting shortly beforehand, but the

comfort it offers is illusory owing to the impossible vantage point it describes. Weston is referring specifically to *The Rings of Saturn* in his observation, and while I agree that this novel (and indeed, *Austerlitz*) does emphasize the importance of questions of perspective in the formation of meaning (after the manner of Walter Benjamin), it is in the notion of a "*falsification* of perspective," as expressed by the narrator at Waterloo, that is crucial here; I do not accept that overhead or bird's-eye views in Sebald's texts are treated, as a rule, with suspicion or contempt (although this is doubtless the case in some instances). *Genuine* (rather than falsified) overhead views appear to offer clarity, in some cases. In *Austerlitz*, for example, as we have seen from some of the moments listed above, flight and panoramas sometimes offer a sense of relief and freedom and, as in the case of Liverpool Street Station, they can greatly aid the reader's comprehension of what his characters describe (in this case, the sinuous structure of the railway lines around Bishopsgate). Indeed, as the narrator notes of the viewpoint afforded by Ruisdael's view of Haarlem, "[only] in this way could he see it all together" (Sebald, *Rings*, 83). It is rather, as Weston rightly suggests, the question of perspective that is crucial, yet he does not seem to differentiate between varying types of overhead (or heightened) vantage points. Weston, in his article, appears to posit that a specific type of (ground-level) viewpoint is valorized by Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*, but often, the altitudinal vantage points put forth by Sebald differ significantly from that proposed by the panorama at Waterloo, and of which his narrator is so skeptical; rather, Sebald's aerial viewpoints sometimes function in a manner that is scarcely different to his narrative method elsewhere, drawing in all manner of associations, and mutating and changing as we, the readers, gaze at them. While the bird's-eye view or raised panorama may, at times, offer the falsely-secure, historicized vantage point of the victor (a position of which Sebald and his characters are deeply skeptical), the same perspective, at other times, allows the reader and the novels' protagonists to escape the complex morass of history at ground-level.

In all, the multitude of specific, real-world locations that form one of the fundamental building blocks of both texts, in tandem with frequent forays into overhead vantage points, allow for a reading of *The Rings of Saturn* as map-like in character. In this particular, *specific* combination of features we might read this cartographic quality as being somewhat distinct from more general descriptions of space and setting; as will become clear as this article progresses, the network-like connections between the spaces described in the text also serves to heighten this impression. This simple combination of factors, however, does not afford the reader the (apparently) secure vantage point provided by conventional cartography; the novel does not merely recount countryside ambles, roving from place to place between the towns and villages signposted on an Ordnance Survey map. Rather, the fluidity of Sebald's mnemonic journeys fundamentally destabilizes any straightforward reading of the texts as simply cartographic, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

Fluid Cartography in *The Rings of Saturn*: A Centrifugal Walking Tour

In *The Rings of Saturn*, at the moment – referred to above – in which Sebald's narrator[5] finds himself experiencing a strange and profound affinity with Kafka's Gregor Samsa, we are privy, as readers, to a moment of total alienation. Here, even the intimately familiar landscapes of Charlottenstraße (for Samsa) and Norwich (for the narrator) become "grey wasteland" and an "utterly alien place" respectively (Sebald, *Rings*, 5). With reference to moments of estrangement and incomprehension such as these within the text, Bianca Theisen notes that "Sebald finds a precedent in Kafka for the ill-fated course of a *natural history of destruction* leaving only little hope for escape that will come to characterize his own project, particularly in *The Rings of Saturn*" (574).[6] With regard to this notion of a

"natural history of destruction," Theisen proposes that Sebald portrays a "spherical system of association and encyclopedic links" (569) and characterizes the author's method in the following manner:

> In his attempt to likewise eclipse the bleak light that rationalism has cast on reality, dissecting the anatomy of a world reduced to the schema and the grid, and to tone down the narrative of progress embraced by those who believed they left the age of darkness for enlightened analysis, Sebald reexamines the baroque awareness of human infirmity and transience in a world changing according to unknown designs and rediscovers allegorical indirection as perhaps the more appropriate, if also more fantastic and more fallible approach to the labyrinthine truths of reality (563).

In short, according to Theisen, "[l]ike Walter Benjamin, Sebald traces history as a process of decay" (578). Indeed, as we have seen, Sebald himself, in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, writes of the "dark…abysm of time," in which "[e]verything lies all jumbled up" and which makes those who gaze into it "dizzy and afraid" (74). Theisen's portrayal of the text (and Sebald's wider project) as a "natural history of destruction" is highly fitting, and this is a characteristic of the novel that is entwined with its recording of a specific journey; it is precisely this "natural history" that Sebald's narrator maps out as he meanders through the vast, stark landscapes of the Suffolk coastline. As he walks, he ponders a number of place-specific histories of this nature: the natural history of the herring (and its over-fishing off the Suffolk coast), the often-inexorable decline of country estates, the gradual collapse of the once-great port town of Dunwich into the North Sea, and the ruin brought to particular fishing towns in Suffolk after shifts in the migratory routes of herring shoals are all examples (among many others) of waypoints that signify a *localized* "natural history of destruction" that permeates the narrator's journey. Whilst temporally removed from the excursion taken in the novel, these histories of place are nonetheless geographically immediate. Such spatial markers, however, provide the starting points for a number of other – sometimes more abstracted – "natural histories of destruction," some of which include reference to the Holocaust, and which will form my concern over the next few pages; in this regard, it is worth pointing out that my primary purpose here is to trace the *fluid cartography* inherent to *The Rings of Saturn*, and not to outline the kinds of (cartographic) features described above – nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that such features are in evidence throughout the text. Indeed, in most cases, Sebald begins with a close spatially- and temporally-anchored starting point, from which the narrative spins centrifugally outwards, increasing its temporal or spatial distance (or both) from the narrative present. But how would one begin to define such a landscape, and the journey Sebald's narrator takes through it?

In his preface to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault introduces his notion of the heterotopia in the following terms:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, *because they shatter or tangle common names*, *because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax that causes words and things…to 'hold together'*…Heterotopias (such as those so often to be found in Borges) desiccate speech, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; *they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences* (xviii)[7]

Elsewhere, in an article titled “Of Other Spaces,” he outlines this notion (and its relationship to utopian space) in more minute detail, describing how a heterotopia is a space that is simultaneously real and unreal; heterotopias are connected to the outside world within which they sit in a multitude of ways, yet they act as “counter-sites” that are “outside of all places” (24). They are a “kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, Spaces, 24).[8] Foucault provides a number of examples, including prisons, colonies, brothels, psychiatric hospitals, and cemeteries, but it is his description of heterotopias as “most often linked to slices of time” that is perhaps of most relevance to the works of Sebald (Spaces, 26). He notes that museums and libraries are such spaces in which “time never stops building up and topping its own summit” (Foucault, Spaces, 26), and I would suggest that this description is apt for *The Rings of Saturn* (and *Austerlitz*, too – we might recall here Silke Arnold-de Simine’s assertion that *Austerlitz* represents a kind of “museum text,” and that Sebald himself conceived of the work as an “alternative Holocaust museum”) (19).

Beyond the material novel itself, the specific spaces portrayed within it, too – situated in Suffolk, in this case – might also be interpreted as heterotopic on the basis of Sebald’s depiction of them; they deliberately destabilize the established (un)relationality of particular times and spaces, they represent (and contest, and invert) a multitude of real sites, and, collectively, they appear to dispel myths regarding (particularly) a linear conception of history. Indeed, Foucault begins “Of Other Spaces” with the observation that “[t]he great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past,” and goes on to suggest that “[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” – an era of networks, of the “side-by-side,” the “dispersed,” and of juxtaposition (22). A multitude of spaces, networks and juxtapositions form the narrative fabric of Sebald’s works, as we will see. Naturally, journeying through this extended heterotopic landscape demands tools of navigation that can accommodate the uncanny strangeness with which it relates to the “real.”

In *The Rings of Saturn*, straightforward cartography is insufficient to the task of wayfinding, and topography is incapable of effectively charting the lie of the land. As such, in conjunction with the cartographical features of Sebald’s prose described in the introduction to this section, in this novel we are presented with a fluid cartography that appears to guide the narrator’s journey, and charts the intersection of different times and spaces, displacements and connections at permeable boundaries (Gil and Duarte, 3). In ranging across such spaces, the text accords closely to Astrid Erll’s argument for an engagement with “*les voyages* or *les mouvements de mémoire*,” in contradistinction to the comparatively fixed and stable “*lieux de memoire*” foregrounded by theorists such as Pierre Nora; memory here appears changeable and ever-shifting (11). Likewise, such a landscape offers an ideal backdrop for “the productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialization of time [that are] central to the work of memory” (4), and allows Sebald to “overlay meaning in intertextual space and blur the frontiers between the conscious and the unconscious, the present and the past, and the personal and the collective” (29) in the manner described by Max Silverman in his work *Palimpsestic Memory*; we are privy to a kaleidoscopic image of history that weaves together a multitude of diverse times, sites, and events, and which mutates into novel configurations before our eyes. Across the following pages, I will outline the manner in which the Holocaust comes to figure in multiple ways within this shifting landscape.

Herring

In the third chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator arrives at a location "three or four miles south of Lowestoft" (51). Here, he explains how, on many trips to this area, he has found a group of fishermen on the beach – the "last stragglers of some nomadic people" who have been dispersed to "the outermost limit of the earth" (51-52). He goes on to explain the solitary nature of these individuals, who seldom communicate with one another in this strange, isolated space, from which point his attention turns to the sea itself:

> Every year the rivers bear thousands of tons of mercury, cadmium and lead, and mountains of fertilizer and pesticides, out into the North Sea. A substantial proportion of the heavy metals and other toxic substances sink into the waters of the Dogger Bank, where a third of the fish are now born with strange deformities and excrescences (Sebald, *Rings*, 53).

While we remain anchored to the beach just south of Lowestoft, it is, finally, from the specific, submerged location of "Dogger Bank" that the narrator embarks upon a lengthy meditation on the history of herring fishing in the maritime area to the east of East Anglia; so begins a fluid network of connection between a multitude of specific geographical locations, which collectively form a kind of fluid cartography of the herring fisheries of the North Sea alongside a multitude of other historical events and phenomena. It is, as such, a typical example of Weston's observation that "the walks [*The Rings of Saturn*] reports upon provide the underpinning foundations for the construction of a narrative of mental departures. The common themes that these departures converge upon are drawn from characteristics read in the spaces that the text traverses" (178). Embedded within this particular description is – in my view – a coded account of the Holocaust; it is worth repeating, at this juncture, Sebald's belief that, to write the Holocaust, one must "approach it from an angle, and*…[intimate] to the reader that these subjects are constant company*; *their presence shades every inflection of every sentence one writes*" (Jaggi, para.13). As such – and as fragile as such a reading may initially seem – it is firmly my belief that an interpretation of the narrator's musings as Holocaust-inflected does not necessarily entail an example of "paranoid reading" after the manner described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; rather, in seeking out faint echoes of the Holocaust in passages such as the one described over the following paragraphs, it is possible to trace the intent signaled by Sebald himself in the interview quoted above.[9] Moreover, some of the subsequent (more explicitly Holocaust-focused) discussion, and particularly the images included by the author within the text, likewise appear to support such a reading. As Sebald's narrator describes the history of herring fishing in the North Sea, it is possible to discern – in the midst of descriptions of fishing methods and the peculiar luminosity of the herring – echoes of racial stereotypes and racist propaganda, images of piles of corpses, and even the haunting presence of medical experiments performed on victims of the Holocaust. His descriptions create "the territory as an emerging surface where charting is equated with inscribing and translating, where different identities, times and locations come together" – the spaces and times mapped out at this moment in the text remain *fluid* in their relations to one another (Gil and Duarte, 3). It is important to briefly note here, too, that the possible intimations toward Holocaust history discussed below have been forced into sharp relief for the purpose of analysis; in the text itself, they are not so blunt in their attempt to suggest a history of genocide – this is a point to which I will return shortly.

It will be necessary to sketch out in some detail here the various allusions as, individually, they would likely each appear relatively innocuous. Close to the beginning of the account, for instance, the herring are described as "restless wanderer[s] of the seas," which undergo a process of transportation upon being caught: "[t]he railway goods wagons take in this

restless wanderer of the seas and transport it to those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled" (Sebald, *Rings*, 54). Here, the notion of a "restless wanderer" brings to mind the mythical anti-Semitic figure of the wandering Jew, while the notion of "goods wagons" transporting the mass of fish to locations where "its fate…will at last be fulfilled" suggests the transportation of victims of the Holocaust to camps, particularly given the barbaric use of cattle cars for this purpose; here it is "goods wagons" that naturally fill the role of the utilitarian transport vessel. This description is accompanied by an uncaptioned black and white photograph of an enormous pile of dead herring, surrounded by onlookers, and marked as being located in "Lowestoft" – again, this is a point to which I will return shortly, but for now it will suffice to highlight the visual echo of post-liberation images and films taken within concentration camps, given the silver-toned, high-contrast image of this pile of expired piscine bodies (Sebald, *Rings*, 54). A few paragraphs later, Sebald's narrator describes the mating process of herring, noting how the fish rise from the "lightless depths" to "lie on top of one another in layers" – here, a similar echo to that associated with the photograph can be detected (*Rings*, 55).

The narrator also makes explicit mention of a "natural history of the North Sea published in Vienna in 1857," from which springs the above recollection of the "untold millions of herring" that 'rise from the lightless depths' to mate (Sebald, *Rings*, 55). It would perhaps be a stretch to suggest that this specific marker of place bears any particular significance in the context of either the herring fishing industry – Vienna is, after all, landlocked – or the history of the Holocaust in this specific instance, were it not for the following observation derived from this same text:

> [A] statement ending with an exclamation mark informs us that each female herring lays seventy thousand eggs, which, according to Buffon's calculation, would shortly produce a volume of fish twenty times the size of the earth, if they were all to develop unhindered. Indeed, the records note years in which the entire herring fisheries threatened to go under, beneath a truly catastrophic glut of herring (Sebald, *Rings*, 55).

Here, the exclamation mark added by the author of the North Sea history indicates a sense of alarm,[10] which operates in tandem with an ostensibly scientific description that carries unsettling echoes of racist ideology; the notion of being overwhelmed by an apparently undesirable *other* (and an implicit signaling of the need to prevent such a course of events through the destruction of this other) is quite clear in the passage above. In this light, it is difficult not to read further, too, into the place of the book's publication – Vienna – the history of anti-Semitism associated with that city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the fact that Adolf Hitler was, famously, briefly resident there (as well as, of course, an Austrian himself). Shortly after this, the narrator returns to the notion of herring death, rather than new herring life, when he describes the abundance of rotting corpses caused by this surfeit of fish (*Rings*, 55). He likewise describes how "those who go in pursuit of herring have always relied on their traditional knowledge, which draws upon legend," once again recalling, we might infer, a certain affinity with racist ideologies, which tend to be based less on fact than on myth and perception (Sebald, *Rings*, 55). Within this traditional maritime knowledge, the narrator notes, "[o]ne dependable sign that herring are present is said to be myriads of scales floating on the surface of the water," which at dusk "[resemble] *ashes* or snow"; the connection of *ashes* to the Holocaust is readily apparent (Sebald, *Rings*, 56, emphasis added). Further, we are told of the activities of one Noel de Marinière, the "inspector of the Rouen fish market," who was so fascinated by the "fishes' capacity to survive," that he decided to investigate the phenomenon in more detail, chiefly by "cutting off their fins and

mutilating them in other ways" (Sebald, *Rings*, 57). Once again, it might be a significant stretch to attempt to link this observation to the Holocaust, were it not for a further comment from the narrator: "[t]his process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster" (Sebald, *Rings*, 57). Here, the notion of mutilations – or cruel experimentations, in other words – undertaken in a spirit of scientific endeavor recalls the grotesque experiments performed by Josef Mengele and others upon camp inmates; if we are to accept this line of reasoning, Marinière and Mengele appear, peculiarly, almost as kindred spirits here. The description of a "species always threatened by disaster," too, may carry echoes of the notion of centuries of Jewish suffering. Finally, toward the close of his description, Sebald's narrator notes that, by 1770, "the number of herring caught annually is estimated to have been *sixty billion*" (*Rings*, 57, emphasis added). Given the preceding (albeit, in their individual appearances in the passage, barely-discernible) shadows of Holocaust history, it is difficult not to read the figure of *six million* within the sixty billion described. In light of this enormous figure, the narrator notes how natural historians "sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction wrought in the cycle of life," and the notion that "the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes" (Sebald, *Rings*, 57). Here, questions of responsibility and wrangling over figures recall debates around the historicisation of the Holocaust, while explicit reference to the death of "higher animals" might well subtly bring to mind human deaths at this late stage in the narrator's description. "[T]he truth is," notes Sebald's narrator, "that we do not know what the herring feels," just as we cannot now, looking back, know with any certainty the reality of what it meant to experience the Holocaust (*Rings*, 57).

All of the above has been woven from a vantage point upon the sands of a beach "three or four miles south of Lowestoft" (Sebald, *Rings*, 51). But what is the purpose of this highly oblique (and perhaps deeply controversial) connection (if indeed it exists), and what does it have to do with the route around Suffolk mapped throughout the novel? The connection appears quickly, yet the purpose remains veiled. After this extended mental journey, the narrator resumes his walk, leaving the fishermen on the beach behind him and reaching "Benacre Broad, a lake of brackish water beyond a bank of shingle halfway between Lowestoft and Southwold" (Sebald, *Rings*, 59). Here, the narrator rests, pointedly noting (given the focus upon history within the novel) that "as I sat on the tranquil shore, it was possible to believe that one was gazing into eternity" (Sebald, *Rings*, 59). It is here that he recalls "an article…clipped from the *Eastern Daily Press* several months before," which concerns one "Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake" (Sebald, *Rings*, 59). So far, so local; the specific spatial markers in evidence here once more situate both reader and narrator firmly in the immediate surrounds of the Suffolk coastland, in a kind of grounding move after the preceding mental departure that took great swoops over the North Sea and beyond. We are quickly removed from this relatively stable, comfortable point of rest, however, when the narrator describes how Major Le Strange "served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945" (Sebald, *Rings*, 59). In the English translation of the work, the word "1945" is the last on the page; upon turning, we are confronted by a full, double-page image of masses of corpses, piled up in woodland, which is left uncaptioned and unremarked upon in typical Sebaldian fashion (*Rings*, 60-61). The flow of the narrative – here, specifically, the narrator's train of thought concerning the article on Major Le Strange – suffers significant disruption by the intrusion of this outsized piece of photographic evidence, which is substantially larger than any of the other images introduced by Sebald throughout the text. Given the preceding comment on the war-work of Major Le Strange, we are left to

assume that this image is of a concentration camp – possibly Bergen Belsen – post-liberation (and this is, in fact, the case – the image is one of a series taken by George Rodger at Belsen upon its liberation).[11]

Here, the inclusion of the black and white image contains pictoral echoes of the photograph of the dead herring we saw shortly beforehand (or vice versa); the silvery, spectral presence of death, the lack of total clarity, the trees which stand amidst the piles of corpses and frame the scene in much the same manner as the onlookers in the Lowestoft photograph – each suggests a kind of visual accord between the two images. Thus at this point we have, as readers, once more been lifted by both text and image beyond the immediate surrounds in which the narrator finds himself, and transported through time and space – in this instance, to the liberation of Bergen Belsen. This is a mental departure that is cut short as quickly as it is introduced, however; following the double-page image the narrator immediately resumes his musings on Le Strange, which predominantly concern the increasing eccentricity of the man over time, and his relationship with his housekeeper. The narratological reference to Bergen Belsen is introduced in the manner of an off-hand comment – it is the photograph that provides the most clear, radical disruption to the text.

Taken together, the brief reference to, and image of, Bergen Belsen appear to tie the preceding history of the herring fisheries to the topic of the Holocaust, via their connection to the revenants of the Third Reich that seem to haunt the passages of seafaring discussion. In this, we see a situation in which two distinct histories and a multitude of times and spaces coalesce into a kaleidoscopic multi-temporal and multi-spatial construction; this accords strongly with the notion of fluid cartography expressed by Gil and Duarte. The narrator weaves outward from the anchoring point of the beach at Lowestoft and the shore of Benacre Broad to encompass a vast swathe of (particularly European) history. As such, the typical demarcations that are placed between such histories and spaces dissolve; we are able to read "the limits that mark territory" – and here, too, temporality – "not as borders but as borderlands," taking as our starting points the beach, the shore of the broad, and the submerged site of Dogger Bank (Gil and Duarte, 3). Particularly, a new hybrid mnemonic *surface* emerges – we may recall Gil and Duarte's observation that "[a] fluid cartography…perceives the territory as an emerging surface where charting is equated with inscribing and translating, where different identities, times and locations come together" (3). Here, Sebald – via the figure of his narrator – obliquely *charts* a series of new connections, drawing attention to the destructive tendencies of humankind in the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate events. Moreover, allusions to the Holocaust become *inscribed* upon (or perhaps, *translated into*) the little-known history of herring fishing in the North Sea, allowing Sebald to simultaneously rescue that relatively obscure history from the oblivion of forgetting while at the same time allowing him to "approach…from an angle" the subject of the Nazi genocide of the Jews – a fact that appears to be particularly confirmed in the visual symmetry between the images of Lowestoft and Belsen that quietly disrupt the flow of the narrative and seem to hint at an affinity of some kind between the two histories (Jaggi, para.13).

The notion of inscribing these histories upon one another (or perhaps translating one *into* the other) clearly recalls Silverman's notion of "palimpsestic memory." Silverman's metaphorical use of the palimpsest, he notes, "captures most completely…the productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialization of time [that are] central to the work of memory" (4). Yet, in this instance, to (seemingly) equate the history of a species of fish to the history of the Holocaust might be interpreted, on first reckoning, to be a grossly offensive gesture – precisely the kind of "[t]actless [lapse]" that Sebald insists that he is keen to avoid (Jaggi, para.14). As I have noted, however, time and space become permeable boundaries within

The Rings of Saturn; it is because of this that Sebald is able to portray – in heterotopic fashion – a juxtaposition of these disparate histories. The fluid cartography of the novel allows for the interweaving of such peculiar bedfellows, which, in turn, allows for a reading of the text as a "natural history of destruction," such as that described by Theisen (574). Throughout *The Rings of Saturn* (and indeed, most other works by Sebald) both the author and his narrator are concerned with demonstrating (at a range of scales, from the personal to the global) the capacity of humans to destroy their environment, other species, other people, and themselves, while situating such meditations, too, within the broader context of inexorable destruction perpetrated by nature (take, for instance, the narrator's description of the town of Dunwich, which collapses into the sea over time owing to coastal erosion) (155). The multiple reappearances of the Holocaust within the text (and indeed, the fact that it remains "constant company…shading every inflection of every sentence," according to the author (Jaggi, para.14)) would seem to suggest that, within such a "natural history of destruction," the Nazi genocide of the Jews holds a particularly significant place, yet it cannot be considered in isolation. Owing to the novel's fluid mapping of time and space and its construction of this multifaceted "natural history," Sebald is able to demonstrate how – in the words of Gillian Rose – the Holocaust remains "human, all too human," thereby avoiding the "[mystification of] *something we dare not understand*" by way of its juxtaposition (43, original emphasis). Further, as we move forward with the narrator along the route of his journey, finding ourselves at yet another specific location within the Suffolk countryside (Benacre Broad), we are confronted with a reference and an image that, in their symmetry with much of what precedes them, would seem to invite us to look back over the account of the herring again with a more suspicious eye, thereby encouraging an active, critical attitude on the part of the reader. This mirrors Theisen's assertion that the text is concerned not with linear history and progress, but rather shadowy "unknown designs" and "allegorical indirection," offering a potentially "more appropriate, if also more fantastic and more fallible approach to the labyrinthine truths of reality" (563). Sebald is not inviting a direct comparison between dead Jews and dead herring; rather, it is a certain capacity for destruction that is revealed by the intermingling of these two histories, a tendency which pervades the text more broadly and which reveals the Holocaust to be inseparable from – and indeed crucial to – such a natural history of destruction, rather than hermetically sealed-off from the greater mass of history by virtue of its apparent uniqueness. That being said, it remains important to emphasize that this is a troubling, uncomfortable comparison upon which to draw, and I do not think that it is possible to wholly avoid the dehumanizing effects it carries, which remain problematic. It should again be noted, too, that the description of the herring fisheries is significantly subtler in its original form; placing the potential moments of Holocaust-inflected description side-by-side here is necessary for the purpose of illumination, but has the unfortunate side effect of making Sebald's writing seem somewhat crass and bludgeoning in its directness. This is not the case in the text itself; it is important to reemphasize that the narrator's account of the North Sea fisheries offers a quiet, *hidden* history, one that is easily missed when moving forward through the novel. As such, even the structural backbone of the narrative – the headlong march of the narrator's route through the Suffolk countryside – is not immune to distortion and reversal. Here, the map-like features of Sebald's prose, as described in the introduction to this section, converge with a more fluid cartographic expression of memory, which incorporates unconnected histories within a malleable, fluid depiction of space.

To conclude this discussion of Sebald's herring, I would also like to point out (particularly in relation to the immediately preceding paragraphs) that, shortly following the description of both the fishing industry and the biography of Major Le Strange, a sense of pronounced unease begins to creep its way into the text. The narrator finds himself "[a] quarter of an

hour's walk south of Benacre Broad, where the beach narrows and a stretch of sheer coastline begins," close to the "Covehithe Cliffs" and "Covehithe Church" (Sebald, *Rings*, 64-66). After encountering a group of pigs in a nearby field, the narrator rests on the clifftop, and finds himself contemplating the biblical story of the Gadarenes, in which Jesus drives "unclean spirits" from the body of a madman (Legion), and into a herd of swine (Sebald, *Rings*, 67). On the topic of Sebald's inclusion of this tale from the pages of the New Testament, Martin Blumenthal-Barby notes (as does Sebald) that it is preceded by the more familiar narrative of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. He describes the inclusion of these biblical tales within *The Rings of Saturn*, and the juxtaposition between them, thus:

> According to the Gospel of Mark, the demons cast out by Jesus reside both in man himself (Legion) and in nature (the lake and the wind). The implication of this juxtaposition seems to be one according to which Jesus finds *destructive forces not only in man (the maniac Legion) but also in nature (the Sea of Galilee)*. And *it is this contiguity that constitutes the tacit epicentre of The Rings of Saturn*. "[T]he history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark"…What emerges in this and the many corresponding passages is a notion of history that already figures in Sebald's early prose poem *After Nature* and indeed imbues his oeuvre (550).

Clearly, Blumenthal-Barby subscribes to Theisen's notion that, "[l]ike Walter Benjamin, Sebald traces history as a process of decay" (578). This perspective, then, is the basis of the narrator's contemplation at the top of the Covehithe cliffs; in the all-pervasive nature of the destruction that he perceives, he is here focusing on the *human* dimension of this biblical juxtaposition – the tale of the Gadarenes. This follows neatly from his discussion of the herring, and, tacitly, from the embedded fragments of the Holocaust within that description, thereby recalling Theisen's notion of the text as a "system of association and encyclopedic links" – her "natural history of destruction," in which rationality, progress, and schema are called into question through allusion and indirection (569).

Tellingly, it is atop the Covehithe cliffs, too, that the narrator spots the sand martins with which this article opened, anxiously noting that he is perched upon "perforated ground" (Sebald, *Rings*, 68). After dizzying himself by "laying [his] head back as far as [he] could," the narrator is seized by "a sudden panic" upon spotting a couple on the beach below; lying one on top of the other, to him they appear grotesquely as a "great mollusc," a "single being," a "great many-headed monster" (Sebald, *Rings*, 68). It is at this point that the narrator leaves the clifftop, which "seemed fearsome to [him] now," and resumes his journey, noting that he "could no longer have said whether [he] had really seen the pale sea monster at the foot of the Covehithe cliffs or whether [he] had imagined it" (Sebald, *Rings*, 68-69). This sequence describes the final actions and movements of the narrator within the novel's third chapter – the remaining few paragraphs are devoted to a discussion of *uncertainty* that centers on Borges's allegorical tale *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (Sebald, *Rings*, 69-71).[12] This is also the first moment in *The Rings of Saturn* in which the narrator is overcome with a certain acute panic, or "paralysing horror" (3) – as we know from the novel's opening, the outcome of the walk is, ultimately (a year later), his hospitalization owing to "almost total immobility" (3). Is it mere coincidence that the first such moment of sharp dread occurs shortly after the text's first reference to the events of the Holocaust, and the apparent encoding of this event within an unrelated history? Moreover, when we look back over the

history of the herring are we not, as readers, left feeling rather like the narrator, attempting to recall the sea monster at the bottom of the cliff – have we merely imagined the possible fragments of genocidal history embedded within? We might recall at this point John Banville's assertion that, when it comes to the tragedies of the twentieth century, "[w]here others shout, Sebald murmurs" (para.2). Despite the tangible, *mappable* solidity of the novel's geographical references, the permeable, shifting boundaries of the text's fluid cartography leave us exposed to the horrors of a natural history of destruction. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the narrator atop the hollowed-out Covehithe Cliffs.

Ustaše, UN, universe – the travels of Kurt Waldheim

"For some time I had been feeling a sense of eternal peace when, leafing through the *Independent on Sunday*, I came across an article that was related to the Balkan pictures I had seen in the Reading Room the previous evening" (Sebald, *Rings*, 96). The fracturing of this "sense of eternal peace" occurs in the Crown Hotel, situated in the town of Southwold, where the narrator finds himself two days after his contemplations on the beach at Lowestoft and the shore of Benacre Broad (Sebald, *Rings*, 96). In the quiet of this homely bar-restaurant, the narrator confronts the reader with *The Rings of Saturn*'s only *direct* scrutiny of the actual events of the Holocaust (barring the aforementioned photograph of Bergen-Belsen). Overlooked by a "grandfather clock" – here, usefully reminding us of the inexorable onward march of time, even as we feel that time may well be standing still – the narrator describes the article in question, which looks back over "the so-called cleansing operations carried out fifty years ago in Bosnia, by the Croats together with the Austrians and the Germans," and which begins with a description of two images:

> …a photograph taken as a souvenir by men of the Croatian Ustasha [*sic*], in which fellow militiamen in the best of spirits, some of them making heroic poses, are sawing off the head of a Serb named Branco Jungic. A second snap shows the severed head with a cigarette between lips still parted in a last cry of pain. This happened at Jasenovac camp on the Sava. Seven hundred thousand men, women and children were killed there alone in ways that made even the hair of the Reich's experts stand on end, as some of them are said to have admitted when they were amongst themselves (Sebald, *Rings*, 96-97).

It is natural that the narrator's "sense of peace" should be shattered by such an extraordinarily gruesome article. In the matter of mere sentences, and with the intensity of a traumatic flashback, we have been dragged from the homely Crown Hotel in Southwold, with its "rattle of crockery" and "grandfather clock," into the absolute horror of the atrocities committed on the banks of the Sava, courtesy of a chance reading of a newspaper article. But how did we get here? Clearly, the article in the *Independent on Sunday* is the source of this description, but the narrator has already signaled a contiguity with his wanderings of the previous day; how has the narrative once more embarked upon a discussion of the Holocaust, which is here substantially less oblique? To find the answer, we must turn once more to the route traced through the Suffolk coastlands.

The "reading room" referred to by the narrator is in fact the "Sailor's Reading Room," elsewhere in the town of Southwold, which "nowadays, sailors being a dying breed, serves principally as a kind of maritime museum" (Sebald, *Rings*, 92). As is typical of the narrative, this – like the Crown Hotel – is yet another *real*, geographically-specific location within the Suffolk landscape. Indeed, the website for the Reading Room – in poetic, somewhat

Sebaldian fashion – characterizes the building as being "one part stillness, two parts time" (Southwold Sailor's Reading Room, n.pag), and describes to its visitors a recent "W. G. Sebald Writing Workshop" that was hosted on-site to mark what would have been Sebald's 75th birthday, courtesy of the University of East Anglia, the author's former employer (Bright, n.pag). From here, much like his meditations on herring fishing, the narrator spins a web of connections outward, beginning from a specific vantage point; he commences with a discussion of the sailors who frequent the room, moving on to contemplate the "log of the Southwold, a patrol ship that was anchored off the pier from the autumn of 1914," before moving on further to discuss the sinking of a multitude of ships during the first world war, the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and the fate of the Archduke's assassin, Gavrilo Princip, a Serb who was eventually imprisoned in the "casemates" of Terezín as a consequence of "[lighting] the Fuse [*sic*]" on the First World War (Sebald, *Rings*, 92-96). It is at this point that we suddenly find ourselves transported to the "following day," in the "bar restaurant of the Crown Hotel," where the narrator has spent his time – which appears here to readers as a kind of lost day – "[sitting] alone till tea time" (Sebald, *Rings*, 96).

This abrupt disjunction of time – from one day to the next – heightens the interlinkage of the events contemplated by the narrator across the two locations. The temporal distance between these moments has been excised from the narrative, while their geographical distinction has likewise been erased; the narrator has gone – as if instantaneously – from sitting alone in one quiet room (the reading room), to sitting alone in another quiet room a little further away (the hotel). Barring a small buffer-zone of silence – the narrator's soon-to-be-shattered sense of "eternal peace" – it is as if his contemplations between these two locations blur into a long, virtually uninterrupted chain of thought. Within this erasure we can see the fluid cartography of the novel at play once again: here, unlike the narrator's discussion of the herring, temporality is rendered as *multiply* fluid, both in terms of the examples ranged across by the text (the First World War and events leading up to it, the Second World War and, later, further examples that enter the post-war period, as we will see shortly), but also in relation to the narrator's journey itself. In this moment, the 'emerging surface' of the territory mapped by the novel does not just amalgamate a range of different historical moments (although it certainly does this, too), but it also melds together two discrete moments in the travels of the narrator as if they were one and the same, as per the notion of fluid cartography outlined by Gil and Duarte (3). Once more, we are privy to a "borderland" between multiple times and spaces, yet here there is a clearer sense of a contingent fragmentation with respect to the journey at the novel's core, too – we are left to wonder at what may have happened in the intervening lost hours between the reading room and the hotel bar (Gil and Duarte, 3). Likewise, in spatial terms the narrative similarly introduces the enmeshing of multiple "contact zones," creating a further "borderland" (or *borderlands*), between the multiple times and places described (Southwold, Sarajevo, and Jasenovac, among others) and the discrete locations occupied by the narrator (Gil and Duarte, 3). Here, Foucauldian "slices of time" (and space) appear to merge and overlap, once more offering the reader a patchwork of juxtaposed historical moments while establishing a contiguity of – and therein destabilizing the distinction between – specific locations on the route taken by the narrator (Foucault, Spaces, 26).

As with the discussion of herring fisheries, such juxtaposition maps out an abstracted natural history of destruction, such as that described by Theisen, in which the Holocaust once more appears to occupy a particularly crucial space. As an example of an "awareness of human transience and infirmity," the marriage of these interconnected events – in their relentless focus on death and devastation – constitutes a paradigmatic example of the text as a 'natural history' of this kind; destruction reigns supreme once more (Theisen, 563). Here, the

examples provided by the narrator – including the two world wars and post-war institutions such as the UN – are less distant from one another in time, space, and (in some regards) socio-historical character than, say, herring fisheries and murders at Auschwitz; they are, in a sense, events that carry a kind of familial similarity, in that they are concerned with war, the twentieth century, and a (relatively contained) geographical area. It is perhaps for this reason that there is far less reluctance to interlink them more clearly in a kind of chain of connection. The First World War, after all, is widely recognized as a kind of precursor (in some senses) to the Second, and there is a clear spatial continuity between examples here too, as the narrator makes explicit in noting the association between the *Independent on Sunday* article on Bosnia and "the Balkan pictures [he] had seen in the reading room the previous evening" (Sebald, *Rings*, 96). As a result of this, the "natural history of destruction" described by the text's fluid cartography at this moment appears to take on a peculiar, mirroring aspect, as both the narrator's journey and the examples he provides appear to take similar skips forward in time. Both are (relatively speaking) short leaps – a day in the case of the narrator's journey, and some thirty or so years in the case of the Balkan examples – and both lead us to somewhat similar scenes; in the narrator's case, we find him reading alone in two separate spaces, while his descriptions of Gavrilo Princip's fate and Jasenovac end and begin respectively with images of prison camps in wartime. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that these specific events are *directly* comparable; instead I am highlighting the potential, exploited here by Sebald, for drawing connections between them by virtue of a certain continuity of *place.* Here, the compression of the time of the narrator's journey, in tandem with the descriptions he provides at the two condensed waypoints, suggests an allusive affinity (in this case, particularly in spatial terms, with their focus on the Balkans) between these events. Sebald here quietly draws our attention to the (arguable) longer-term, indirect consequences of the actions of Gavrilo Princip (as synecdoche for the First World War), one brutal high-water-mark of which he chooses to emblematically represent in this instance as the shocking murders committed at Jasenovac.

The relative "closeness" of these events may account, likewise, for the willingness of Sebald, through his narrator, to expound at much greater length upon the horror and brutality of the Jasenovac camp network. Unlike the brief reference to the liberation of Bergen Belsen earlier in the text, the narrator here explains in some detail the various methods of execution at the camp, for instance, preferred of which were:

> …saws and sabres, axes and hammers, and leather cuff-bands with fixed blades that were fastened on the lower arm and were made especially in Solingen for the purpose of cutting throats, as well as a rudimentary cross-bar gallows on which Serbs, Jews and Bosnians, once rounded up, were hanged in rows like crows or magpies (Sebald, *Rings*, 97).

Intruding abruptly into the midst of the above paragraph, too, is another piece of uncaptioned photographic evidence, this time (we are left to assume) of the "cross-bar gallows" mentioned above. The narrator goes on to note, also, the nearby sequence of satellite camps, in which "the Croatian militia, its hand strengthened by the Wehrmacht and its spirit by the Catholic church, performed one day's work after another in similar manner" (Sebald, *Rings*, 97). This is, somewhat unusually for Sebald, a *direct* confrontation with the violence of the Nazi era, albeit with reference to Nazi proxies in the Balkans.

Beyond the above descriptions of violence, however, we see the author in this instance begin to push the liquid cartographical reach of the text as far as it is possible to go – namely, beyond the earth's atmosphere. The launch-pad for this particular departure is, in

this case, precisely the geographically-specific network of sites of violence referred to above: Jasenovac, and its satellite camps Prijedor, Stara Gradiska, and Banja Luko (Sebald, *Rings*, 97). The narrator highlights the volume of recorded material relating to the described atrocities – some "fifty thousand documents abandoned by the Germans and the Croats in 1945" – which are housed today in an archive situated in "what was once an Austro-Hungarian barracks," a building which "[served] in 1942 as the headquarters of the Heeresgruppe E intelligence division" (Sebald, *Rings*, 97-98). The narrator notes that, "[w]ithout a doubt those who were stationed there knew what was going on in the Ustasha [*sic*] camps," and he proceeds to describe a range of other atrocities perpetrated by the Croatian allies of the Third Reich (Sebald, *Rings*, 98). From here, he singles out one particular figure, noting that "one of the Heeresgruppe E intelligence officers at that time was a young Viennese lawyer whose chief task was to draw up memoranda relating to…resettlements, described as imperative for humanitarian reasons" (Sebald, *Rings*, 98-99). This figure would later be awarded "the silver medal of the crown of King Zvonomir" by the Croatian state for his "commendable paperwork," and would later still "[occupy] various high offices, among them that of Secretary General of the United Nations" (Sebald, *Rings*, 99).[13] The narrator continues:

> And reportedly it was in this last capacity that he spoke on tape, for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II (Sebald, *Rings*, 99).

So ends the novel's fourth chapter. This unnamed administrator is, of course, Kurt Waldheim; a *New York Times* obituary following his death in 2007 identifies him as the "former United Nations secretary general and president of Austria" with "hidden ties to war crimes," specifically in the Balkans as a "lieutenant in army intelligence attached to German military units that executed thousands of Yugoslav partisans and civilians and deported thousands of Greek Jews to death camps between 1942 and 1944" (Kandell, n.pag).

Paradigmatic of Sebald's method in the chain of events outlined above is the spatial figure of the "Austro-Hungarian barracks" that was used as the headquarters of Heerengruppe E during the Second World War (*Rings*, 98). This specific space acts as a kind of malleable borderland between each of the different times described by Sebald's narrator across the novel's fourth chapter; indeed, it anchors the multiplicity of times and spaces described (including the Sailor's Reading Room) and becomes the point around which the description of these spaces revolves – it melds together a range of spatial images that recall the cartographic narrative method described in the introduction to this section. Its direct connection to the Austro-Hungarian Empire clearly recalls the preceding discussion of the First World War and Gavrilo Princip; its role in the Second World War is abundantly clear; its post-war function as the "Bosanske Kranjine Archive in Banja Luka" (the site of a Jasenovac satellite camp), propels us forward toward the controversies around the post-war roles of Kurt Waldheim. It is worth mentioning, at this juncture, that this collection of histories – particularly through the figure of the barracks – comes perhaps closest to the letter of Silverman's notion of palimpsestic memory; the barracks itself is here a kind of palimpsestic space within the text, inside the walls of which the interaction of multiple times becomes evident. Here, "the present is shown to be shadowed or haunted by the past," and "different temporal traces…constitute a sort of composite structure, like a palimpsest" (3). I would contend that this layering extends further, however, than the histories described by the narrator.

It is at the moment that the narrator mentions the archive at Banja Luka that we are reminded of the fact that he himself is recounting what he is reading in a newspaper – it is "according to the author of the 1992 article" that the fifty thousand abandoned Nazi and Ustaše documents can be found at the Bosanske Kranjine Archive (Sebald, *Rings*, 98). We are, briefly, abruptly returned to the immediate surroundings of the Crown Hotel at Southwold, and by extension the previous day spent at the Sailor's Reading Room. Here, space appears as a shifting surface once more, as the intimate surroundings of the reading room and the quiet solitude of the hotel are brought into contact with the (similarly quiet, studious) environment of the archive at Banja Luka, which is itself an emblematic compression of the historical route traced by the narrator over the course of this chapter. Despite the mirroring of these small-scale, quiet spaces, Sebald is quick to remind us of the all-pervasive nature of the natural history of destruction that permeates *The Rings of Saturn*, as he ends the chapter by taking the reader on an expedition to the "outer limits of our solar system" with the spectral voice of Kurt Waldheim, preserved aboard Voyager II (99). Certainly, this is one item of "memorabilia of mankind" that is burdened with a troubled, destructive history (Sebald, *Rings*, 99). In Michael Rothberg's terms, this multitude of times and events would appear to accord with the notion of historical memories as "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative"; Sebald here offers the reader a collage of somewhat-related historical moments without comment, avoiding the replication of a "zero-sum struggle for preeminence," and allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions (if any) from the juxtaposition of these varied fragments of history (3).

In the Borderlands of History

Across the narrator's discussions of herring fisheries, Bergen Belsen, the First World War, and the actions of the Nazis and their Ustaše allies in Croatia, Sebald has stitched together a tapestry that reveals a network of (more or less) interconnected events in which destruction and decay figure heavily. Whether allusive and indirect (herring) or apparently networked across time and space (the Balkans), the events outlined here correspond to Theisen's notion of a "spherical system of association and encyclopedic links" (569), wherein history is portrayed as a "process of decay." In order to accommodate this constellation of seemingly unconnected (or at least, tangentially-connected) historical moments, Sebald creates a malleable, shifting fluid cartography. Typically, specific geographical markers in the countryside around the Suffolk coastline act as real-world anchors, from which the narrator spins centrifugally outward in both time and space, crafting complex patchworks of connection and juxtaposition.

Throughout *The Rings of Saturn*, we see a fluid cartography at play in Sebald's literary mapping of Suffolk towns, countryside, and coastland. From the variety of physical waypoints passed on the journey, the narrator spins a transnational, trans*temporal* tapestry that incorporates a vast array of times, events, and geographical locations, some of which I have outlined above. The narrator's route combines a multitude of sites that act as *borderlands*, staging posts for mental departures that "[perceive] the territory as an emerging surface where charting is equated with inscribing and translating, where different identities, times and locations come together"; from the flat marshlands of Suffolk emerge Chinese dynasties, multiple biographies of figures of note, the First and Second World Wars, great historical naval battles, the Irish republican movement in the early twentieth century, and the Temple of Jerusalem, among many other topics (Gil and Duarte, 3). The Holocaust is part of this fabric, too, but in its multiple reappearances we might view it as a particularly significant thread that is woven throughout, perhaps most notably in the examples discussed here.

In collaging such disparate histories and charting an apparent natural history of destruction, it is possible that Sebald has left himself open to accusations of levelling the difference between discrete, often unrelated events – a particularly inappropriate move, in the eyes of many, when one is tackling the topic of the Holocaust. I do not believe this to be the case in Sebald's work, however. In placing moments such as those discussed here under the spotlight, condensing them for the purpose of comparison and analysis, the faint traces of the Holocaust that may be discerned within them are artificially forced into sharp relief; it is important to remember, as Banville notes, that when it comes to the catastrophes of the twentieth century, "[w]here others shout, Sebald murmurs" (para.2). At no point does he invite, for instance, a direct comparison between the Holocaust and the processes of herring fishery or, say, sericulture; rather, it is through allusion and "allegorical indirection" that Sebald invites the reader to draw their own conclusions on the possible affinities (if any) between the events, objects, places, and people he describes (Theisen, 563). This is the method of his "spherical system of association and encyclopedic links," which forms the backbone to the natural history of destruction traced in the novel (Theisen, 569). *The Rings of Saturn* is, ultimately, a multifaceted meditation on transience, decay, and destruction of all kinds; to omit the Holocaust – perhaps the twentieth century's most potent and poignant illustration of the potential for human destructiveness and cruelty – would be remiss. This, too, is where Sebald's fluid cartography shares its closest affinity with the works of scholars such as Silverman and Rothberg; rather than treating the Holocaust in isolation, Sebald – particularly through his frequent inclusion of documents, photographs, and other intertextual items – performs an "[overlaying of] meaning in intertextual space and [blurring of] the frontiers between…the present and the past, and the personal and collective" (Silverman, 29). In so doing, the conditions are set for the emergence of illuminating connections, even if it is left to the reader to undertake the task of joining the dots, thereby discerning what lies beneath the surface of the idiosyncratic descriptions housed within the novel. "Our history," writes the narrator, as the novel comes to a close, "is but a long account of calamities" (Sebald, *Rings*, 295).

Notes

[1] Here, I refer specifically to *The Rings of Saturn*, but I believe that this character applies – in varying degrees – to all his prose works.

[2] Indeed, Barbara Hui undertook just such a project as part of her comparative literature PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her work included a geotagged digital map that charts a vast array of geographical references from *The Rings of Saturn*. On her map, the walking route followed by the narrator around East Anglia is highlighted by a red circuit, while his meditations on different times and spaces are connected to the various points of his journey in white and orange. Hui's project, then, amply illustrates the 'potential for connection to other times and spaces' that Weston reads into the Suffolk landscape in *The Rings of Saturn*. See: Barbara Hui, 'Litmap,' *Barbara Hui* [online] <http://barbarahui.net/litmap/> [accessed 20 January 2021], and 'About Litmap,' <http://barbarahui.net/about-litmap.html> [accessed 13 March 2021].

[3] In his novel, Sebald describes the old premises of the Norfolk and Norwich hospital. At this time, the hospital was a tall multi-storey building in the center of the city; it was closed in January 2003 and demolished that same year to make way for flats and houses. See: BBC News online, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/norfolk/3249070.stm> [accessed 26 August 2020].

[4] *Vertigo* also being the title of another of Sebald's prose works.

[5] It is worth pointing out here an oft-repeated observation to be found in much scholarship on Sebald's writings; namely, that the author and narrator of his works are generally, if not one and the same person, so closely related as to be virtually indistinguishable (barring the obvious fact that one exists within the pages of the text). The same holds true for *Austerlitz*, as well as the author's other prose works. Naomi Stead describes Sebald's narrator in the following terms: 'a self-effacing figure present in each of Sebald's books, one who shares many characteristics with the author, but who reveals very little of himself, instead taking the role of bearing witness: faithfully recounting the stories "told" to him by the book's characters.' (Stead, 42).

[6] It should be noted, too, that Theisen is borrowing this phrase from the title of the English translation of an essay collection written by Sebald, mentioned elsewhere here – *On the Natural History of Destruction* – which concerns the memory of, and (non-)response within literary works to, Allied bombing campaigns in Germany. Banville, in his *Guardian* review of the English edition (referred to elsewhere in this article), describes the work as a 'quietly spoken but fierce protest at the mendacity and moral evasiveness of our time' (Banville, para.2).

[7] It is worth noting, too, that Borges features as an important intertext in *The Rings of Saturn*, particularly in the form of his short story, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940) which is a work heavily concerned with subjective idealism – broadly, the notion that only minds and mental contents exist.

[8] Here, Foucault defines utopias as 'sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces' (24).

[9] See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp.123-151.

[10] A sense that is pointedly not reproduced by Sebald, it should be noted, given his matter-of-fact description of the text: '[A] statement ending with an exclamation mark.'

[11] See: Lily Rothman, 'How Germany Got a Holocaust Memorial Day', *Time Magazine* [online], January 27 2016, < https://time.com/4186765/holocaust-remembrance-day/>(image 3 in embedded slideshow: see caption), [accessed 26 August 2020].

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Declaration of interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Notes on contributor

Michael Holden is a Post-Doctoral Research Associate in the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is currently working as part of the AHRC-funded 'Music, Migration, and Mobility' project, which investigates the contribution to British culture of musicians who fled Nazism on the European continent. He recently completed his PhD in Holocaust Studies in the Department of Theatre, Film, Television, and Interactive Media at the

University of York, supported by the White Rose College of Arts and Humanities. His current research focuses on the mobilities of refugees from Nazism and on the representation of such movement in both cartographical and narrative form. His research interests include memory, the Holocaust and genocide, cartography, and literary representation.

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