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Ruin, Allegory, Melancholy. On the Critical Aesthetics of W.G. Sebald's The Emigrants and The Rings of Saturn

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Abstract:

While ruins have been a popular object for nostalgic yearnings of a better past, they also harbour an ambivalent potential for moral and historical critique. This article unpacks the variety of meanings ruins embody in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*. I do so in three steps. First, I demonstrate how his sensory appreciation of buildings and objects is closely entwined with two moral-historical critiques that were formulated most poignantly by authors of the Frankfurt School: the dialectics of progress and regress, and the remembrance of the repressed. Second, I describe in more detail the style figures through which Sebald puts these critical aesthetics to practice: Walter Benjamin's notions of the storyteller and allegory. Third, I critically reflect upon the melancholy effect these critiques and style figures produce, and the possibilities they provide for both dialogical critique and contemplative resignation.

Keywords: W.G. Sebald; Walter Benjamin; ruins; allegory; aesthetics.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald describes a quaint form of "Belgian ugliness" (*Rings* 123): "it's ever more bombastic buildings" (122) are not particularly repugnant in terms of their appearance, yet if one brings into account the obliterated colonial violence needed to raise them to their feet, they degrade into "sepulchral monument[s] erected over a hecatomb of black bodies" (122). Sebald notes that "the very definition of Belgian ugliness, in my eyes, has been the lion monument and the so-called historical memorial site of the battle of Waterloo" [1] (123). He ponders how

[t]he night after the battle, the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. Whatever became of the corpses and moral remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point (125)?

The reverse seems true for Somerleyton Hall, once a palace of incomparable splendour, which has turned into a pile of disintegrating bricks resembling "a country house in Suffolk or some kind of non-man's-land, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean or in the heart of the dark continent" (36). Yet it was precisely its demise that made it so appealing: "[a]nd how fine a place the house seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion". At first sight, this indulgence in the "pleasure of ruins" seems to continue an old tradition of nostalgic yearning for times and places that have long been lost (Fuchs, *Ein Auffallend*). On closer examination, however, Sebald's aesthetic appreciation of ruins appears to be rooted in a more complete reversal of common-sensical aesthetic appraisals, which is based strongly in a moral and historical critique. In his writings, beauty requires more than mere appearance: to savour it, one needs to delve deeply into the remnants of the building one beholds.

This essay unpacks the aesthetics of ruins in Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn* in three steps. First, I demonstrate how this aesthetics – understood here as the sensory appreciation of physical objects – is closely entwined with two moral-historical critiques that were formulated most poignantly by authors of the Frankfurt School. Second, I describe in more detail the style figures through which Sebald puts these critical aesthetics to practice. More precisely, he draws upon Walter Benjamin's descriptions of the storyteller and allegory. Third, I critically reflect upon the melancholy effect of these critiques and style figures, and the potential it harbours for both critique and resignation.

1. Critical Aesthetics and the Frankfurt School

As the vast body of secondary work on Sebald has shown, his writings are strongly tied up with Frankfurt School authors, including Theodore W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin (Hutchinson, *Die dialektische Imagination* and *The Shadow of Resistance*). To grasp the aesthetics of the ruin in Sebald's work, it is particularly relevant to take into account two moral-historical critiques formulated by Adorno and Benjamin: the dialectics of progress and regress, and the remembrance of the repressed.

Dialectics of progress and regress

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin noted that “[t]here is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” (248) [2] The highest and noblest of cultural achievements are precisely what gives rise to violence in its purest form. The key point is that most of what we usually appreciate as the summit of a civilisation, reproduces the narrative of the powerful and mystifies both the violence it relied upon, and the experiences of those who were conquered: “We, the survivors, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was” (Sebald, *Rings* 125).

This dialectical process of progress and regress appears in every nook and cranny of Sebald's oeuvre. In *The Emigrants* for example, Sebald comments on the famous Rembrandt painting *The Anatomy Lesson*, in which the corpse of a hanged thief is being dissected:

even (and indeed more particularly) “enlightened” civilisations have not abandoned that most drastic form of penalty which consists of cutting up and disembowelling the human body, thus literally making detritus of it. The fact that it is done for some other reason, for instance in the service of medical science, makes little difference to the process itself. (“The Remorse,” 180-81)

As a result, every ruin of a previously monumental building representing success, power and wealth can be considered an emblem of the dialectic of progress and regress. This is at least partly why Belgium's “bombastic buildings” (*Rings* 122) and its massive Waterloo monument become such an unbearable sight: not only do they conceal the natural transiency of their progressive success, they also blot out the regressive back side. As the obliteration of this violent other side of history is morally unjust, these glorious monuments and buildings are, to Sebald, aesthetically compromised as well. His appraisal of the beauty of things springs forth from a preoccupation with the deeper, more self-reflective truth of inevitable regress simultaneous with progression. Aesthetic judgments are informed by the criterion of taking into account this other side of the aesthetic object. Monumental buildings, for example, cannot be considered beautiful unless they indicate either their inevitable demise, or the suffering needed to erect them.[3]

Importantly, this dialectical process also undermines the functioning of history and memory as such. This implies that any of Sebald's storytellers must become, to some extent, self-reflective with respect to their own reliability. In general, memories appear to be more detailed when they are less reliable, or removed further from the original experience across time or through mediating persons. As a key illustration, one might recall Ambros Adelwarth's story, who is said never to have uttered a word on his past, until he reached a considerable age and started telling stories in such extraordinary detail that his cousin started suspecting him of the so-called “Korsakov-syndrome,” in which lost memories are replaced by mere fantasy (*Emigrants* 102-3).

Remembrance of the repressed and forgotten.

A second moral-historical critique Sebald builds upon, concentrates not so much on the victors of history

but rather on the objects and subjects that have been repressed by them. For Walter Benjamin, this critique on the nature of history feeds into a concern for remembering and re-presenting precisely these that have been buried in the past. Presumably the most famous image of this critical task is provided by his description of an *Angel of History* :

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. (249)

The Angel of History wants to intervene, but the storm “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.” The fact that he cannot change the recent past, however, does not mean that those following his liking have no more critical task to fulfil. Telling the stories of the forgotten has a “weak messianic power,” which means that doing so encloses the possibility of surmounting the harm done to them, even though it can never be compensated as such (“Theses” 246). Besides a matter of justice in itself, Benjamin suggests that retrieving these experiences from beneath the historical dust provides us with a “spark of hope in the past” (247), because it shows that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.” In other words, it is precisely the *act* of telling these unfortunate stories destined for oblivion which holds the promise for ultimately turning history around.

To Sebald, a specific concern in this critical remembrance is Germany’s collective memory after the Second World War. In a famous series of lectures given in Zurich in 1999, Sebald (“Air War and Literature”) accuses post-war German literature of not helping to remember and mourn the allied air-raids destroying most of Germany’s cities at the end of the war. Whereas the debate as to whether this attack was morally justified - as well as militarily, for it was aimed at Germany’s “morale,” rather than its war industry or logistics – it slipped silently past German public debate, and was, according to Sebald, not adequately dealt with by its national writers. In an interview, Sebald brings to mind the spatial features of this “collective amnesia”:

The result is depressing. All German cities are the same, one cannot orient anything anymore. Oldenburg, Braunschweig, Paderborn - everything the same. Desolate. The past is continuously eliminated. Indeed, after 1945, Germany was rebuilt not only once, but probably five or six times. (Löffler 136)

This illustrates why Sebald ascribes such central a place to ruins: without them, Germany threatens to lose its awareness of the past, both as a victim and perpetrator of suffering - as indeed he does not hesitate to stress that “we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived” (“Air War” 104). The semantic potential of past experiences is pushed to the verge of oblivion. Even though Sebald’s stories rarely refer directly to the air-raids that turned the German cities to ashes,^[4] a substantial part of his prose is constructed to communicate human and natural suffering specifically to German culture. In this regard, especially *The Emigrants* seems written to communicate the suffering of the forgotten parts of German history, as it tracks the lives of those who fled their homeland in one way or another. As David Kaufmann remarks, an implicit goal of Sebald’s prose is to make “Germans understand what had happened and what it actually meant” (106).

2. Storytellers and Allegories

Sebald puts these moral-historical critiques to practice by means of two style figures, both of which are described elaborately by Walter Benjamin: the storyteller and allegory. Consider, firstly, Benjamin’s instructive notes on what an ideal Storyteller ought to do, and bear in mind that Sebald heavily marked this essay (Hutchinson, *Die dialektische Imagination* 35):

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even

the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier. ("The Storyteller" 100-01)

Any reader of Sebald's prose may recognise that this moving "up and down the rungs of experience" could have been an exact description of most of his narrators; tying together a variety of stories across time and place is what gives Sebald's books their strange unity. Even though such a "montage" construction requires a nearly documentary precision, the narrated experiences are explicitly framed as stories, rather than as purely objective, bare facts. In this sense Sebald once likened fiction writers to tailors, creating books by cutting and sewing the clothe material of genuine experiences (Löffler 137).

To deepen our understanding of the storyteller, it is useful to note that Benjamin closely associates it with the figure of the chronicler, whom he contrasts with factual historians in the same way as he contrasts the storyteller to the realist novelist. Both the factual historian and the realist novelist are "bound to explain in one way or another the happenings" ("The Storyteller" 94-5) they deal with, whereas chroniclers and storyteller display these experiences "as models of the course of the world." [5] Put differently, to Benjamin, historians novelists tend to over-determine the events they express. The task of the storyteller, by contrast, consists less of explaining than of *communicating* genuine experiences across time and place. Sebald's prose seems designed precisely to fulfil these requisites: historical experiences are woven into each other without explaining neither their precise connection nor their actual meaning. As Martin Swales remarks, Sebald tells his stories in a voice which "bears witness without explaining" (86). They express, more than they explain.

Characteristic of a number of Frankfurt School related authors is their relentless focus on objects as a locus for investigating broader socio-cultural processes.[6] In his unfinished *Arcades Project*, for example, Benjamin aimed to analyse the rise of commodity culture through Paris, changing spatial configuration. This implies that individual stories can also be told in and through objects. As Ben Hutchinson remarks, nearly all the stories in Sebald's *The Emigrants* display a close connection between the protagonist and the buildings he or she lives in (*Die dialektische Imagination* 77).[7] They bloom and wilt together. Similar correspondences appear in *The Rings of Saturn*, where the Ashbury's, a previously quite wealthy family, declines together with their house (*Rings* 208ff), or where Thomas Abrams suddenly regains social credibility by building a replica of Jerusalem's Solomon temple, destroyed by the Persians a long time ago (*Rings* 241ff).

It should therefore not come as a surprise that ruins are given a special place in Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Here, as in Sebald's prose, ruins do not appear as a repulsive pile of rubble. Declined buildings lose their superficial splendour, but acquire a deeper one instead: they become the last remnants of long-gone historical experiences. As Gay Hawkins remarks, in both Sebald and Benjamin, "abandoned things have the power to reveal the reality of vanished lives, hence their overwhelming significance" (168).[8] In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin furthermore claims that "[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (177). This connection between allegory and ruin can most easily be explained through allegory's contrast with symbols. Whereas allegories are characterised by transience, symbols are assumed to be eternally valid. While symbols, such as the Christian cross, seem inextricably fixed to their signifier or "emblem" – the symbol would disintegrate if it had to change its signifier – allegories are in need of continuous change, their meaning incessantly consumes new signifiers, outdating the older. Ruins share this fundamental transiency: the cultural or personal meaning ascribed to a specific building, in principle, does not last like symbols are supposed to do. However, by referring to the inevitable decay of objects and words, ruins dialectically reach out to an eternal law, described as a "natural history of transiency" (177). As in Adorno, the inevitable decline so central to both ruin and allegory thus embodies "the deepest point where history and nature converge" (*The Idea of Natural History* 262).

One can find these ideas resonating throughout Sebald's stories.[9] *The Emigrants* begins with the ominous words "At the end" (3), [10] reinforced by the picture of a massive tree towering high above an old graveyard. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Thomas Browne is practically introduced by the remnants of his skull (20). His observation that the quincunx, a mathematical pattern, can be found "everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter," appears to have been anticipated by the appearance of the quincunx on *The Rings of Saturn's* second page, as the imprisoning net outside of Sebald's hospital window. Lastly, perhaps one of the most provocative images of death connecting natural and human history, consists of

the swift thematic change from the industrial massacre of herrings to the execution of Jewish prisoners in Bergen Belsen, separated from each other by less than a page (58-9).[11]

For Benjamin, the natural laws of transiency imply that any storyteller's authority is "borrowed" from death and decay: "The greater the [historical] significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and [historical] significance" (*Origins* 166).[12] In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin describes one of Hebel's narratives, in which a bridegroom dies in a mine only a few days in advance to his marriage, his undamaged body to be found many years later, when the then elderly bride recognises her bridegroom and finally finds peace in death (94-5). Benjamin is stunned more specifically by Hebel's summarisation of death-inflicted historical events that took place between the deaths of the bridegroom and his bride: "The city of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Years' War came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished, and Poland was partitioned, and Empress Maria Theresa died, and Struensee was executed." As Ben Hutchinson points out, Sebald alludes to this story in *The Emigrants* in which Henry Selwyn's Swiss friend dies in the mountains just before the start of World War I, his body to be found in good shape no sooner than 1991 (*Die dialektische Imagination* 23).

In Sebald, however, what happened in the meantime, is not summarised but silenced – or rather, circumvented. For indeed, the historical context of death and decline in Sebald's prose requires exactly the mediating capabilities allegorical storytelling supplies.[13] The unrepresentability of the Holocaust and its aftermath results in "the fact that memory can hardly be endured"[14] ("Against the Irreversible" 153). Sebald's stories are mediated both by time and individuals retelling the stories, thus resulting in a series of layers filtering catastrophe to the point of communicability. Similar to the rings circling around Saturn, allegory and ruin are strategies to communicate something which is in itself, as Swales puts it, "neither aesthetically nor morally endurable" (86). Or, as Sebald once remarked, echoing Benjamin's forceful instructions:

What historical monographs cannot achieve is a metaphor or allegory of a collective history. But only in the transformation to metaphor does history become emphatically accessible. (Löffler 137)

This is illustrated in terms of ruin quite explicitly in *The Emigrants*, where a decayed Jewish graveyard - for years unvisited as all the village's Jewish inhabitants have either been deported, bullied away, or committed suicide - instigates an emphatic identification with one of the victims: "... and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure" (224-5). In other words, the aesthetics of allegory and ruin are so prominent in Sebald's narratives, not merely, as some commentators have suggested, because of its "nostalgic" potential to retrieve a lost "homeland" (Fuchs, *Ein Auffallend*, and Morgan). Rather, ruin and allegory prove to be critical instruments to make the pains of other individuals' forgotten past emphatically accessible without actually having to confront such horrors in their unbearable atrociousness.

However, such mediation also implies that allegory and ruin transform the original. They mark both the death and the afterlife of the original meaning. In this context, an illuminating insight can be drawn from Benjamin's reflections on the interaction between translations and original texts ("The Task of the Translator"). The original texts' translation is a "maturing process," to which the translator serves as a "guardian" (73). Translation hands over the original to eternity. This bestows the act of translation, as well as storytelling, with an enormous task. For indeed, both are said to be the last guardians passing on historical experience across time and place. For Benjamin, genuine storytelling thus contains a highly critical element in conserving history's other side: those experiences history neglects in favour of the victor's narrative. Storytellers are thus bound to communicate exactly those experiences threatened "to disappear irretrievably" ("Theses" 247). It is the palimpsest backside of each civilised document which needs to be rewritten and read. See how Benjamin slides from literary remembrance to redemption:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past - which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.

Each moment it has lived becomes a citation ≠ l'ordre du jour - and that day is Judgment Day. ("Thesis" 247)

3. The melancholy affect: between critique and contemplation

Even though Sebald's aesthetics are heavily imbued with a twofold moral-historical critique, they have also received considerable critique, perhaps more negatively from German than from Anglo-American commentators. Anne Fuchs, for example, suggests that Sebald's aesthetics of ruin is altogether less of a critical response, and more of a reinforcing extension of Sebald's pessimist metaphysics of a natural history of destruction ("Heimatsdiskurs"99). As an example, she mentions Ambros Adelwarth's description of Jerusalem in *The Emigrants*, whose ruins are the only ones in Sebald's prose not to be aestheticised in terms of their demise. For Fuchs, Jerusalem therefore radicalises a tendency inherent in all of Sebald's ruins: by describing one of the holiest cities in the world in terms of a post-apocalyptic landscape, such ruins generate an experience of "devitalised emptiness, in which any sublimation through aesthetics completely fails" (102). Even in contrast to, for example, the post-human atmosphere of Orfordness,^[15] there seem to be absolutely no hints left of a redeeming promise or critical remembrance in Jerusalem: all Adelwarth perceives is "decay, nothing but decay, marasmus and emptiness," resulting in "a continuous feeling of oppressiveness and misery" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 137-8). Even God, it seems, has abandoned human kind. Note also how, as Johanssen remarks, Sebald's distinctively long, allegorical sentences are transformed into short, uncannily realist cries of horror:

Large quantities of filth in the streets. On marche sur des merdes!!! Pulverized limestone ankle-deep in places. The few plants which have survived the drought that has lasted since May are covered in this powdery meal as if by a blight. Une malediction semble planer sur la ville. (388-9)

Nevertheless, Fuchs seems to neglect the summarisation of the more than fifty religious and philanthropical buildings in Adelwarth's Jerusalem description. As in Orfordness, such sites of decay are delicately re-endowed with a religious, sacral element. In Orfordness, for example, Sebald remarks that:

My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembles temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations. (*Rings* 236)

Contrary to Orfordness, however, Jerusalem is not ascribed any semblance of sacredness in terms of its ruined appearance, but merely has its churches summarised, as if copied from a list in an archive far removed from Jerusalem. Rather than answering, Sebald seems to raise the question as to whether religious faith has become desperately hopeless, or whether sacredness represents an element of dialectical hope, even amidst the most disenchanting ruins.

For Benjamin, the aesthetics of ruin and allegory provide a glimpse of hope, precisely by evoking the afterlife of declined buildings or disenchanting ideas (*Origin* 178). The task of those rewriting history is to recognise "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" ("Theses" 254). By re-telling these forgotten stories, no matter how depressing and sorrowful they may be, "the present" in which they are told becomes "shot through which chips of Messianic time" (255). From these perspectives, the question of Sebald's stance toward a messianic hope seems already answered: his prose inflicts even the darkest of sceneries with a vague perfume of sacral liberation.

A number of Sebald's commentators, however, have pointed out that his writings are distinctively less messianic compared to Benjamin's (Hawkins 171-2; Johanssen 383; Pakendorf 102), and even more have denounced his atrabilious defeatism (McCulloh 144; Huyssen 100). Exemplifying claims, uttered by Sebald's characters, are indeed not hard to find: Thomas Browne describes creation's high flight as "an orbit, which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark" (*Rings* 24), while a Chinese empress attains wisdom by realising that history "consists of nothing but misfortune" (*Rings* 153). In his non-fictional works, Sebald appears to be more "agnostic" (Pakendorf 102). On the one hand, he admires and hails the grain of hope in works from authors like Jean Améry or Peter Weiss, despite their relentless witness of inhuman cruelty ("Against the Irreversible" 159-60 and "The Remorse" 194-5);

on the other, he also criticises other writers for doing exactly the same: clinging on to the prospect that humanity is able to learn from its mistakes and one day build a better world for all (“Air War” 61). Sebald’s main argument seems to me that, despite their “ephemeral wish for redemption” (“The Remorse” 195), these authors know, in the darkest depths of their subconscious, that “our species is unable to learn from its mistakes” (194). For example, “even Kluge, that most enlightened of writers,” who pleads to prevent future catastrophe through knowledge obtained by the social sciences, “suspects that we are unable to learn from the misfortunes we bring on ourselves, that we are incorrigible and will continue along the beaten tracks that bear some slight relation to the old road network” (“Air War” 67-8). All hope for regressionless progression, it seems, is inflicted by the betrayal of a harsher truth.

At the very end of his Zurich lectures, Sebald quotes at length Benjamin’s famous description of the Angel of History. As Kaufmann demonstrates (111), Sebald misreads Benjamin along the lines of Adorno and Horkheimer. Whereas for Benjamin the Angel of History resembles the objectionable position of social-democratic politics in the face of Fascism by clinging on to an ideal of endless, incremental progress considered inevitable, Sebald reads the Angel’s condition as representative for a factual state of the world, pointing at the inescapably regressive, other side of progression. Whereas Sebald quotes Benjamin’s description of the Angel for illustrating the inexorability of hopeless disaster, Benjamin continues his description by pleading for “messianic time” as opposed to the “homogeneous, empty time” of regressive progression (“Theses” 252). For him, any critique of progress “cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. In Benjamin, the Angel mirrors the passive complicity of the social-democratic establishment with an “uncontrollable apparatus” (250) resulting in Fascism, and, ultimately, in Auschwitz. From this perspective, the key critical problem in Sebald’s prose appears to be its demonstration of inescapable passivity. His critical stance is one of emphatically remembering history’s reverse side, rather than pleading for any action to prevent future catastrophe. As Fuchs remarks, “Sebald’s weary Angel of History is borne not backwards into the future, but forwards into the past” (*Die Schmerzensspuren* 19); Sebald seeks to recollect the piles of debris in front of him, while not turning around to prevent any future catastrophe.

Such passive attitudes appear manifold in *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*. The Conrad epigraph in *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, reduces the passer-by’s heroism to standing at the side of the murdered victims, perhaps waiting until the battle is over to bury the deceased. In *The Emigrants*, Adelwarth’s former psychiatrist, Dr Ambramsky, appears to have closed down the hospital where for many years thousands of innocent souls were tortured, only to dedicate himself to gardening, locking the “so-called real world” out of his life. He tells the reader that “I hope all this misfortune will gradually melt away now as it falls apart... [n]owadays I place all my hopes in the mice, and in the woodworm and death-watch beetles about its collapse. I have a recurring dream of that collapse” (*The Emigrants* 110-1). Melancholic contemplation grows rampant over subjective action.[16] Dr Ambramsky’s resistance lies in contemplative withdrawal, waiting until the horror decays by natural force. At most, he quits his own practice: he does not transpose his insights and resistance to others. It should therefore not come as a surprise, that Benjamin relates the baroque aesthetics of ruin and allegory closely to a distinctive political apathy in favour of melancholic contemplation (*Origin* 141-2). On one hand, Benjamin hails the critical potential of melancholy. On the other, however, he distrusts melancholy’s regressive potential, and counters it by focusing on the revolutionary transformation of the original, whether the original is a literary text, a work of art or genuine historical experience.[17] Sebald, in contrast, seems to find peace with the inherently ambiguous nature of melancholy aesthetics, pinning insightful resistance down to insurmountable passivity.

Unlike a number of Sebald’s critics, however, I am not entirely convinced of the claim that Sebald dismisses every trace of hope. In the last instance, even his Zurich lectures can be perceived to be a fierce provocation to incite a lively debate on German history – which it eventually did. To conclude this essay, it may therefore be worth analysing Sebald’s provocative ending for *The Emigrants* more closely, where he describes a picture taken in a Polish labour camp at the beginning of World War II:

everywhere there were faces, countless faces, who looked up from their work (and were permitted to do so) purposely and solely for the fraction of a second that it took to take the

photograph. Work is our only course, they said. – Behind the perpendicular frame of a loom sit three young women, perhaps aged twenty. The irregular geometrical patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee in our living room at home. Who the young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera. The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were – Roza, Luisa, and Lea, or Nona, Decuma, and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread. (236-7)

This passage shows allegory at work: by giving these weavers the mythical names of the Parcae – the threefold personification of destiny – their historical experiences are annihilated exactly by staging them onto an aesthetic platform. Simon Ward has countered this critique by claiming that the passage itself can be read as a critique of historical representation, that is, merely by providing invented names for these women, they are simultaneously reified into detached fictional characters (“Responsible Ruins” 194-5). In other words, the act of giving them only seemingly neutral, plausible names (Roza, Luisa, and Lea), is critically equated by connecting them with fixed, mythical meanings (Nona, Decuma, Morta). This passage, then, makes use of allegory – and aesthetic representation altogether – as much as it critiques it.

Sebald also more explicitly reevaluates the use of such a critical aesthetics of melancholy in his literary criticism. In his book on Austrian literature, Sebald dismisses such a blackened writing style's most common critique of moral-political defeatism:

Melancholy, the pondering on misfortune as it takes place, nevertheless has nothing in common with a death drive. It is a form of resistance. And at the level of art its function is everything else but reactive or reactionary as well. When one reflects once more, gaze fixed, how it has been possible to come to this, then this indicates that the mechanisms of gloom and that of insight are identical. The description of misfortune encloses in itself the possibility of its overcoming. (*Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* 12)

A great responsibility is thus passed on to the reader: the critical force of Sebald's melancholy lies in the reader's capacity to recognise the misfortune appearing in front of him, as well as developing emotions of resistance upon that misfortune. This sounds easier than it is. A good example can be found in the story of Roger Casement (*Rings* 127). This British consul was one of the first to bring the excessive colonial violence in Belgian Congo to public attention. After subsequently staying in South-America and his native Ireland, his ability to recognise and accuse inhuman policy anywhere he came, eventually lead him to be locked away in the tower of London, and hanged afterwards. Casement's story of desperate isolation is a silent witness of violent subjugation. Other stories such as the one of the Ashbury family and their declining home, as well as the woods burned worldwide for the rise of human civilisation (*Rings* 208 and 169) equally suggest the recognition of a wronged loss, culminating into an emotional response. Melancholy works in silence: the reader is not explained or told how he should react, he is left to his own imagination.

However, by handing over such great responsibility to the reader's ability to recognise and resist such aesthetical critiques, it is not altogether evident that they should interpret such passages in a similar vein – especially not when the mythical names refer directly to destiny. Even if Sebald aims to use such allegorical fatalism merely as a provoking form of self-critique, some of his readers may be inclined to read Sebald in exactly the opposite way. In this respect, Ruth Franklin's reaction is symptomatic for the contra-critical effect *The Emigrants'* ending evokes. Inspired by her grandmother, who worked as a weaver in potentially the same camp Sebald describes, Franklin claims that this type of passage “merely substitutes an artistic image for a blank space. The blankness, however, is closer to the truth. When it seeks to do the work of memory, art may be a source of illusion” (“Rings of Smoke”). In other words, interpretations like these – which are, even for advanced critics, much more plausible at first sight – demonstrate the self-annulling tendency in Sebald's critical strategies. Sebald's ethics of remembrance which, for him, requires a skilled authors' allegory to obtain emphatic accessibility, is pulled out of the

hands of its last guardian, and replaced by a blank space – oblivion's mirror image. Sebald's forceful critique of progress turns into futile floundering: his Angel of History does not even attempt to turn around and prevent further ruination; he merely continues, somewhat saddened, but nevertheless convinced that his destiny lies in a contemplative paradise, stacked with marvellous ruins. Ruin, allegory and melancholy can only succeed as critical aesthetics if they incite destiny's resistance in the reader. Any other effect renders the author an accomplice to atrocity.

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Endnotes

1. In 1815, Napoleon was finally beaten in the battle of Waterloo by British and Prussian armies. After the battle, Napoleon was banned to the isle of Saint-Helena.
2. This idea was radicalised and elaborated by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. I will come back to this influence in Sebald's writings later, because it does have some ramifications for the differential melancholy effect exerted by Benjamin and Adorno's reflections.
3. For a similar argument, see Ward ("Ruins and Poetics" and "Responsible Ruins").
4. The only direct reference, to my knowledge, is to be found in *The Rings of Saturn* (38-40). At some points in *The Emigrants*, the German "collective amnesia" is more indirectly alluded to. For example, when Sebald's narrator returns to Germany after reading Lucy Landau's diary, he claims to have "felt increasingly that the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves" (*Emigrants* 225). See also, in a more allegorical manner, Lucy Landau's ironic recollection of how the morning after slaughtering the geese, everything was cleaned up as if "nothing had ever happened" (*Emigrants* 204-5).
5. In *The Rings of Saturn* (257-9), Sebald uses Chateaubriand as a starting point for a similar reflection on the figure of the chronicler.
6. Again, while I am referring here mainly to Walter Benjamin's work, Adorno's writings are particularly significant here as well. With respect to the importance of objects, see the passages on the cultural Industry in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.
7. To give but two short examples: Dr Selwyn's house and garden decay in full harmony with his retreat from reality (*Emigrants* 1) and Paul Bereyter's flat is emptied right at the time of its owner's suicide (*Emigrants* 60).
8. This wondering on the forgotten stories hidden in lost objects is sometimes explicitly uttered by some of Sebald's characters. For an example, see Thomas Browne in *The Rings of Saturn* (26).
9. This convergence between nature and history through transiency is also uttered, more subtly, through the use of natural metaphors. To give but one example, in *The Emigrants*, Sebald describes

the voice of his dying friend Max Ferber as “an attempt at speech that sounded like the rustle of dry leaves in the wind” (230).

10. The German version even begins with the word “Ende.”
11. Especially this juxtaposition of animal with human suffering has often been subject to criticism. What has often seemed neglected, however, is the full extent of the allegory at work here: “Operation Herring” was the name of the last Allied attack at the end of the Second World War, executed on the German-Italian defence line near the alps. The herrings thus do not simply resemble the Jews, but the Germans as well. Furthermore, the surviving fishermen are in turn becoming both extinct and firmly isolated as well.
12. See also “The Storyteller”: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back” (93-4).
13. As Susan Buck-Morss remarks: the use of allegory flourishes especially in contexts of social suffering, war and material ruin (178). As Benjamin writes in “The Storyteller,” the inexpressibility of such conditions renders people “*poorer in communicable experience*” (84), rather than richer. Hence the need of allegory.
14. See in the same book also his “Air War and Literature: Zurich Lectures” 46 and 89, and “The Remorse of the Heart: On Memory and Cruelty in the Work of Peter Weiss” (179).
15. Orfordness is an abandoned, artificial island near the coast of Orford, previously used as a (classified) military site during, consecutively, the Second World War and the Cold War. It appears in *The Rings of Saturn* (229).
16. Sebald explicitly connects “the other dimension” of melancholy to the “hard and fruitless agricultural labour” one of GYnther Grass’s melancholic characters is drawn to (“Constructs of Mourning” 126).
17. See Benjamin (“Task of the Translator”; *Der Begriff*; “Theses”).

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