“At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied”:
The Prose Fictional Metaphysics of W. G. Sebald

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signature of Tom Lee
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Abstract

This thesis examines writing as a means of persuasion through which one might explore the grounds and scope of perception. Its primary focus is W. G. Sebald’s four works of prose fiction, *Vertigo*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*. I interpret Sebald as unique among contemporary writers of fiction in his sustained interest in the metaphysics of perception, in particular the role played by suggestive connections, and the kind of thinking that takes place *in* writing, *as* writing, *while* one writes. For Sebald, writing (both as material and as a representational device) and reading are crucial parts of perceptual experience, not simply from the perspective of a knowing, human subject, but in terms of the various kinds of agencies distributed throughout the world. I argue that Sebald’s prose fiction accounts for a wide range of perceptual experiences, including perspectives of the human and non-human, living and non-living, remembered, documented, dreamt and imagined. In his work we witness how these generically different experiences continually affect and participate in the nature of each other.

Sebald’s attention to the complexity of perceptual experience, along with his stylistic elegance and formal innovativeness, means that his work offers valuable insight into the question that haunts any literary enterprise: what is the world like from another perspective? And to what extent is a perspective informed by the multiple perspectives it necessarily obscures? Sebald provides the reader with an account whereby specific perceptual detail and impersonal history at once interweave and retain their distinctness.

I read Sebald alongside the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and recent critics and thinkers who have taken an interest in Whitehead’s work. For me, Whitehead offers a conceptual scaffold adequate to the richness, variability, obscurity and continual novelty of perceptual experience. In addition to Whitehead’s work, I recruit other contemporary thinkers and writers who, like Sebald, are preoccupied with imaginatively accounting for the various *genres of thing* that compose our world and instance worlds unto themselves. This predisposition methodologically and stylistically manifests in readings of modernity that emphasise poetic affect and poetic
thinking as ways of accounting for experience and which are not limited by disciplinary exclusivity.

Among the perhaps more implicit, though no less productive, propositions of this reading is a reassessment of the division between non-conscious and conscious perception. Invoking Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism”, I argue for a conception of consciousness that exemplifies aspects of non-conscious perceptual and cognitive processes, and, in an inverse but complementary fashion, for a more inclusive conception of the non-human world regarding its perceptual capacity. Sebald’s prose is the test case that serves as a limitation and medium, and which plays an active role in the tracing and establishment of these propositions.

This thesis practises a kind of literary criticism that treats objects as implicated in the pervasive aspects of our experience. It proposes an interpretation of Sebald’s texts and, more generally, a reading methodology or theory that seeks to exemplify rather than judge the hypothetical worlds his texts establish.
A Note on Referencing

The following titles have been abbreviated throughout the thesis:

- The Rings of Saturn → Rings
- Science and The Modern World → SMW
- Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology → Process
- Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect → Symbolism
- Adventures of Ideas → Adventures

In other instances, where I refer to multiple works by the one author, I distinguish these works by date, e.g. (Meyer, 2001: 7) and (Meyer, 2005: 6), except in the case of online documents, where I refer to the title of the work, e.g. In his essay on dust, Steven Connor writes, “Dust is…” (“Dust”).

All relevant bibliographic information is contained in the List of Works Cited at the end of the thesis.
Potted Glossary

*Suggestive relations*: I frequently use the words “suggest” and “suggestive”. The idea encapsulated in this expression is that experience is composed of things that both *are what they are* and refer to other things. In using the word “suggests” I am appealing to the Whiteheadian idea (though one could hardly attribute the idea to Whitehead alone) that perception is creative and that we constantly employ our creative memories and our imagination in order to form clear and distinct impressions of the real. Steven Meyer contrasts “suggestion” with “association”, and recommends that suggestion is primary in perceptual experience and not limited to human mentality (2005). We can associate things in increasingly abstract and apparently unrelated ways, he argues, because our brains make use of the forms of things in which our embodied thinking participates.

*Constitutive disposition*: This expression refers to the internal consistency of a character and the way certain things and events persist as organising and organised trace presences within other things and events. “Constitutive” suggests that wholes are made of parts, and that the coming together of parts is essential. “Disposition” also refers to the way something is arranged and the essential nature of this arrangement. It emphasises that *what something is* depends on its relationship to other things. It is synonymous with words such as “inclination”, “tendency” and “propensity”, which also recur throughout this thesis. The expression is partially tautological for reasons of emphasis. Appropriately, perhaps, “constitutive” is suggestive of “disposition”, and vice versa.

*Compositional moment, or now moment of writing*: This expression accounts for the fact that writing is an activity that induces, allows for, and aggravates a certain kind of thinking and a way of relating to the world. While I don’t think writing is exceptional in this regard (one might concentrate in comparable ways while driving, acting, dancing, playing sport, tinkering, grooming, taking photographs or cooking), it does have the potential to exemplify or patently disclose certain complex thinking operations. Much of what is comprehended as meaningful in prose or poetry relates to
implicit organisational structures that exhibit a *suggestive relationship* with thinking. Sebald’s prose exhibits a particularly attuned sense of this. The narrative demands of his storytelling work are concomitant with the metaphysical demands of creating hypothetical organisational structures that aim to include every and any kind of experience.

*Conceit*: A purpose that is obscure or manifest, temporary or lasting. My use of this word appeals to a broader semantic field than what it means in storytelling terms. A “conceit” is the reason that something creates in order to be what it is or do what it’s doing. Animals and even salt crystals have conceits. The writing of fiction participates in this broader definition, and fiction is, perhaps, a particularly concentrated exercise in the creation and handling of conceits.

*Object, Thing, Event*: I do not distinguish between things, objects and events. An event is a time-filled thing or object, a thing or object defined as perpetually arriving and departing. The expression “doing its thing” is a nice way of recognising, through common speech, that things are also kinds of activities. The *conceit* of something is, in this sense, its *thing*. 
Introduction
In an interview with Arthur Lubow, W. G. Sebald recalled an encounter with some files that arrived by trolley while working in the Munich War Archive:

You have a visual sense of how much something weighs [...] You try to pick this up, and you can barely lift it. It’s as if the specific weight of the paper they used is higher than the paper we use. Or it’s as if the dust has gotten in there and insinuated itself, so they have become like a rock. If you have any imagination, you can’t help but wonder about it. These are questions a historian is not permitted to ask, because they are of a metaphysical nature. And if one thing interests me, it is metaphysics. (cited in Schwartz, 165)

Here Sebald identifies his preoccupation with “questions a historian is not permitted to ask” and suggests that these questions are proper to the discipline of metaphysics. His invocation of this most generic discipline of thinking could be interpreted in many ways. According to a slightly crude characterisation, one suspects that the historian Sebald had in mind would wish simply to get at the names, dates and information contained within files, thus discarding the other aspects of the encounter that permit the historical metaphysician to wonder and continue wondering. What I take to be crucial in Sebald’s proposition is that our capacity to account for one thing requires reference to other things that, in varying degrees of vagueness and clarity, are formatively part of its and our world.

Sebald’s trip to the archive is notable due to the fact that it is an event in formation. It is difficult to determine, to abstract, exactly what is at stake here. Like Sebald’s prose fiction, the above quote is dense with analogies (there are two “as if”’s and one “like”), and he makes use of the multimodal apprehension of an object in attributing weight to one’s visual sense of something. This recommends that the experience of specific objects, such as paper files, is first and foremost one in which perception is informed by a dynamic cross-referencing. This cross-referencing takes place among events of differing variety, and is more or less available to our conscious selves—depending on the extent to which we choose or are trained to attend to it. What is also evidenced above is that differing modes of sensory engagement produce differing and always evolving conclusions about what something is. A haptic engagement with the files results in a different set of conclusions to the visual engagement, but both contribute to the specificity of Sebald’s account.

The question as to what constitutes a historical perspective—what one “goes in for” when writing a history—is thereby broadened to include those elements of
interest which arrive in the process of going out to check, or following things up. The imperative thus becomes: How does one adequately account for the history of a fact, a file, a document, according to the complexities not only of the context in which it is situated but, additionally, of the context that it, in part, solicits or creates? The perspective of the historical metaphysician is represented by an effort to account for the creation of documents, not only the ostensibly static and stable information contained within files that one discovers, but also the sense by which one partially becomes the documents one encounters.

My reading of Sebald’s prose is an attempt to situate his work in relation to thinkers and writers who have addressed—some implicitly, some explicitly—the sense by which metaphysical assumptions permit and exclude certain possibilities and directions for thinking. I subsequently argue that there is always room to think in a more various and surprising fashion about the entities we encounter in our experiences. To allow for a broader and more puzzling range of stimuli and to have similarly diverse and puzzling conception of what stimuli might do. My criticism will, in this sense, be a performance of what I take to be of value in the different authors, principally Sebald, that are the topic of this thesis. I attempt to take seriously the sense of wonderment that reading and writing about prose such as Sebald’s affords. On my own trips to the archive, my experience of Sebald’s books has been informed by a mode of questioning that always looks to the novel relationships between and within his works, as well as between his works and the philosophical and critical exemplars with which I have chosen to pair them.

This metaphysical interest in the way differing perceptual events interrelate is the productive, formal and stylistic background to a host of other traits that are perhaps more obvious in reading Sebald’s work. His four works of prose fiction, Vertigo, The Rings of Saturn, The Emigrants and Austerlitz, each feature a narrator that is suggestive of Sebald, who was born in provincial Germany in 1944 and moved to England at around the age of twenty to teach German literature. This narrator is always a writer who sets out on a journey with a vague sense of purpose. He tends to be exceedingly sensitive to his environment and to the dim but insistent presence of memory, which often manifests in experiences of physical overcoming. The narrator typically begins his narrative by drawing attention to some inexplicable illness. He views the world through the nebulousness of an intervening medium, sometimes a vague disturbance within his body, sometimes something identifiable in the world,
such as hazy atmospheric conditions or a photograph. Each of these books is set in the ruins of European modernity. The cities the narrator wanders through are crumbling, colonial achievements are regarded as stupefying and horrific, and the events of World War II, in particular the regrettable role played by the narrator’s homeland, are prominent contributors to the often grim atmosphere. Sebald’s characterisations of the catastrophic events that marked the period prior to his birth are notable for their allusiveness. He recruits and deploys differing perspectives, in the form of documents, accounts from interlocutors, and his own empirical investigations, such that the incomprehensible presence of a certain catastrophe becomes all the more emphatic.

What this thesis takes as its focus is Sebald’s curiosity (his interest and care) in thinking through the limitations of the human perspective in accounting for the complex and ever-evolving reality we inhabit. The historically catastrophic event is a paradigmatic instance that makes these limitations apparent, but it isn’t only such exceptional events that should strike us as historically interesting or lastingly odd. Each happening, in its singularity, suggests a variety of other happenings which bear the trace of its presence, and each perspective, as the writer of a piece of prose fiction might understand from acquaintance, is a world unto itself.

With regard to influences that are perhaps not proper to Sebald’s literary-biographical history but more to the suggestiveness of his prose fiction, my reading of his work has been influenced most markedly by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, who equips the reader of his work with the requisite conceptual framework to appreciate the layered interweaving of a perspective along with its internal and external reality. In what follows I outline exactly why Whitehead’s philosophy lends itself to an analysis of literary texts such as Sebald’s.

Whitehead was a mathematician, physicist, philosopher, perhaps most famous for his work with Bertrand Russell on the Principia Mathematica, but who, in the twilight of his career, after losing his son in World War I and moving from England to teach philosophy at Harvard, departed from the key concerns of his previous logical and mathematical investigations, and began writing an expansive brand of philosophical

1 In an interview with Gordon Turner, Sebald notes that the period prior to his birth plays a central role in his historical metaphysics: “…I think in most of my texts it becomes at least obliquely obvious that the dark centre behind it all is the German past between 1925 and 1950 which I came out of.” (cited in Denham and McCulloh, 27)
speculation, attempting to weave together the findings of modern physics, including the theory of relativity, with a more general account of how perception worked. As he wrote in a letter to his son North, his aim was “to evolve one way of speaking that applies equally to physics, physiology, and to our aesthetic experiences” (Whitehead, cited in Meyer, 2001: 188). This stage of Whitehead’s philosophy is best known by the names “philosophy of organism” and “process philosophy”, and it outlines an alternate trajectory to the disciplinary and professional exclusivity that characterises the way nature was investigated in modernity.

After some time in the shadows, Whitehead’s work is now emerging as a point of interest for those in the fields of science studies and literature alike. Scholars such as Steven Meyer, whose primary preoccupation is with American Modernist poetry, are reconsidering what writing can be as a form of scientific-poetic acquaintance with the unseen but not necessarily unimaginable processes of the brain, and Whitehead’s philosophy is key in mapping out and providing theoretical substance to this way of thinking about writing.

The disciplinary inclusiveness of Whitehead’s philosophy is at once its appeal and its weakness. As Whitehead remarks in Science and The Modern World, “It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious” (5). In reading his work we can appreciate the sense by which he is invoking the aspects of our experience that are pervasive, and yet neglected in the quest for relatable, disciplinary specificity. Whitehead’s philosophy, in particular his metaphysics, is motivated by an effort to find expressions and concepts for what, prior to the moment of writing, remains undisclosed. His sentiments appeal to the romance of an imaginative adventure, similarly constitutive for the writer of poetry or fiction.

In Science and The Modern World, Whitehead criticises the limitations of “scientific materialism” and the schools of philosophy that either wholeheartedly accept or unthinkingly reject this mentality (22). Whitehead’s adjustment to the

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2 Here I do not mean to suggest that Whitehead’s turn to speculative metaphysics is reducible to the above biographical details.

3 Meyer discusses the complications of nomenclature with regard to Whitehead’s philosophy in his article “Systematizing Emerson, Supplementing Whitehead: Reading Whitehead with Stengers”. Meyer settles on William James’ banner of “radical empiricism” to identify his own interests in the philosophy of Whitehead, Emerson and James, and elsewhere, in the poetry of Stein and Wordsworth, among others (2008; 2001).

4 For an account of the correspondence between Whitehead’s appeal to conceptual novelty, his efforts to “redesign language” (Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology, 11), and the poetry of Wallace Stevens, see Joan Richardson’s article, “Recombinant ANW: Appetites of Words”.

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modern scientific outlook relates to the difference between a mechanistic metaphysics that takes the fundamental components of reality to be “passive matter operated on externally by forces”, and a process-based metaphysics or philosophy of organism that grants perceptual agency to the non-human world (53; 98-99). In place of matter Whitehead proposes that we interpret our reality according to a framework that posits “events” as the constituents of experience (91; 116). What a reality composed of “events” draws attention to is the sense by which different perceptual events mirror, within themselves, aspects of other perceptual events in their surrounds and their histories. Thus, things exist according to their implication in other things that they are at once similar to and different from. Humans know this in their conscious experience by responding to the suggestiveness of what they encounter. Recalling Sebald’s trip to the archive, the reality of his experience is determined by what the paper suggests about itself through reference to other things. The paper’s heaviness becomes part of Sebald’s perspective as he attempts to come to grips with and explicate what takes place in the documents. As I will endeavour to demonstrate, Sebald’s prose fiction at once mobilises and ornaments with narrative specificity the more generic account of perceptual experience conceived by Whitehead.

Another entry point into Whitehead’s philosophy is his critique of David Hume’s account of causation, which makes apparent the nearness of his sentiments to those expressed in Sebald’s prose. In A Treatise on Human Nature, Hume advances the thesis that ideas in the imagination are first derived from sense impressions. Although the imagination can form complex ideas that involve things and places that have never before been encountered empirically, he proposes that these complex ideas are dependent on simple ideas, which in turn come from simple impressions or sense-data. The counterexample Whitehead puts forward, taken from Hume’s Treatise, involves the graded colours on a colour wheel with one missing shade, making the point that even if we don’t see the missing colour, that is, perceive it as an impression, we are still somehow aware of its presence (Process, 86-87). Pierfrancesco Basile, in his book Leibniz, Whitehead and the Metaphysics of Causation, nicely sums up the consequences:

5 Whitehead quotes the following: “That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.” (Hume, cited in Process, 86)

6 Different and perhaps more interesting examples could be multiplied. We continually perceive, remember and respond to things that do not take the form of impressions or sense-data as characterised by Hume and the limited model of empiricism derived from his philosophy.
The fact that we can form an idea of the missing shade by reference to the other shades would then indicate that the different shades are not entirely detached but form a systematic whole, that is, that they are internally related one to another. It is possible to acquire knowledge of a not experienced part on the basis of our knowledge of an experienced part only if the relations between them are constitutive of their natures. (70)

In addition to seeing each colour, the hypothesised percipient in this instance perceives the way the colours are implicitly distributed through each other. In the words of Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau, “we judge colours by the company that they keep” (149). In perceiving a colour, we not only make use of the other colours that it is internally connected to—something the abstractions of a colour wheel make apparent— but also of other non-colour colour-intensifying influences, such as those of texture and density, as well as countless feelings, associations and historical trajectories for which colours provide reference.

What Hume takes to be an exception Whitehead treats as exemplary, and constructs his philosophy of organism based on the idea that we feel the connectedness of the world because we are physically, constitutively connected to it through our imagination, our memories, our desires and our bodies. Our perceptual capacity is composed of the ideas of things. When we perceive a supposedly discrete patch of colour, our perception is informed by emotional and appetitive elements that are indistinguishable from our experience of the colour: “red is felt with the emotional enjoyment of its sheer redness” (Process, 315). Primarily we feel the redness within our gaze not simply as a spatially distinguishable region, but as testament to the unfolding of an event in which we participate and which exceeds us. “It is nonsense to ask if the colour red is real. The colour red is an ingredient in the process of realisation. The realities of nature are prehensions in nature, that is to say the events in nature” (SMW, 90). Whether we speak of a patch of colour, the location of a sound, or of a distinguished smell, our perceptual experience is a fusion of different happenings, each with their own reality. Whitehead’s philosophy of organism recommends that we account for those emotional, appetitive elements that facilitate in

Footnote 7: In Science and The Modern World, the concepts of “prehension” and “event” are synonymous. A prehension is a perceptual event that may or may not involve cognition (86); it relates to the temporary togetherness or unification of things in the singularity of an event (80). In Whitehead’s later book, Process and Reality, which features a more fully developed metaphysical scheme, the word “prehension” is used to describe the way “actual entities” “involve” each other (20).
the location of a sense percept. That the stories told about “the obvious” include what
certain abstractions might train us to mask.

In an interview with Sebald, Michael Silverblatt compares his prose style to the
English essayist Thomas de Quincey, and offers a very helpful observation in this
context when he comments on “the need, in a sense, to almost sleepwalk,
somnambulate from one center of attention to another, and a feeling in the reader that
one has hallucinated the connection between the parts” (cited in
Schwartz, 2007: 78). Silverblatt remarks on how, at the beginning of Austerlitz, the
concentration camp plays the role of an “invisible referent”, toward which the
narrative continuously gestures as it moves from “the zoo to the train station, from the
train station to the fortress, from the fortress to the jail, to the insane asylum” (79).
What Silverblatt has identified here is a paradigmatic instance of Sebald using
suggestively arranged particulars to provoke in the reader a sense of perceiving the
imperceptible. This happens to varying degrees at different levels of his
narratives. Take, for instance, the following passage from Vertigo when, after days of distressed
wandering through Vienna, the narrator, undressing in his hotel, recalls a scene from
earlier in the day:

    The windows of the Jewish community centre, on the first floor of the building which also houses
    the synagogue and a kosher restaurant, were wide open, it being an unusually fine, indeed summery
    autumn day, and there were children within singing, unaccountably, “Jingle Bells” and “Silent
    Night” in English. The voices of the singing children, and now in front of me my tattered and, as it
    seemed, ownerless shoes. Heaps of shoes and snow piled high—with these words in my head I lay
down. (37)

Here we expect that the meaning will dawn on us due to the weightiness of such
historical detail, but Sebald prefers to gather and arrange these items in an almost list-
like fashion: Jewish building, Christian hymns, children, heaps of shoes. There is a
certain lack of self-reflexivity here that is perhaps familiar to us from dreams. What
the narrator perceives or remembers he can’t quite come to grips with, but Sebald has
no doubt deliberately arranged things in such a way as to make the experience a more
memorable one for the reader. All narratives work with suggestively present aspects
invoked by certain descriptions. My reading of Sebald argues for his exemplarity
concerning the way this nebulous background is systematically and cleverly activated.
Both these examples represent more obvious, or at least discernable, instances of Sebald’s suggestiveness. What I return to frequently over the course of this thesis are the more nuanced, poetically inflected occasions where the point Sebald is alluding to remains far less clear, something that might be identified by the unhelpfully but necessarily vague notions, like reality, experience, consciousness and the time of writing.

In his essay on Nabokov, “Dream Textures”, Sebald makes note of a technique used regularly by Nabokov to “introduce, through barely perceptible nuances and shifts of perspective an invisible observer—an observer that seems to have a better view not only than the characters in the narrative but than the narrator and author who guides the narrator’s pen” (Campo Santo, 150). This “better view” is not the perspective of a transcendent God, an abstract, idealised view from above, but rather a view from within that attends to the often unaccounted for “nuances and shifts” which compose our experience. Part of this is to do with how one not so much escapes from their perspective but comes to the realisation that perspectives necessarily refer to other perspectives. Sebald’s books are geared to realising this defining but typically recessive characteristic of first-person narration. We often account for this realisation retrospectively or belatedly in narrative terms: “Why was it that I continuously returned to such and such a location over a period of twenty years?” As one begins to compile a record of one’s experiences over such periods, they might begin to attend to layers of greater and greater complexity that were informing their experience. Importantly, in Sebald’s prose, the fine lines traced in the retrospective narration do not lead to a position of greater self-knowledge, nor to a singular, conclusive happening through which one might read everything else.

8 Here an analogy springs to mind between the “invisible observer” created in the event of writing so named by Sebald and Nabokov, and what Joseph Dumit, interviewing Michael Phelps—“one of the fathers of positron emission tomography”—names as “an ideal participant observer” (2-3). Dumit is offering a characterisation of the molecule injected, in trace amounts, into bodies of subjects who undergo PET scans. As expanded upon below, Meyer’s study of Stein’s poetry interprets her work as offering a perspective by which some of the abstractions made in experiments using PET scans might be reformulated so as to arrive at a more concrete, and more complex, context for understanding brain activity during reading and writing. This isn’t, of course, to reduce the activity of writing to a form of scientific experimentation, but to argue for a different context by which to consider the implication of writing and thinking. Meyer puts it well in the following remark: “Instead of being modelled on scientific experimentation, [Stein’s] writing turns out to be a form of experimental science itself. It is not just that her ideas about writing were influenced by science; she reconfigured science as writing and performed scientific experiments in writing” (xxi). I discuss the relevance of Meyer’s interpretation of Stein’s work in greater detail over the course of this thesis.
Meyer’s critical inroads into the reinterpretation of poetry as a relevant form for investigating the unity of body, mind, nature and history, and his use of Whitehead’s philosophy to do so, play a formative role in my analysis of Sebald. At the conclusion of his book *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and The Correlations of Writing and Science*, Meyer provocatively considers Stein’s writing as a response to the question posed by Nobel Prize-winning neurophysiologist Gerald Edelman: “is [it] possible to construct a conscious artifact?” (Meyer, 2001: 325). Meyer suggests that “Stein beat [Edelman] to the punch, providing an alternative manner of visualizing the brain’s reentrant signalling with the vibrating lines and portmanteau sentences of her equally ‘impossible’ project” (325). Meyer interprets Stein’s writing as exemplary, with regard to the way it functions as a medium for thought—that is, writing, rather than conversation or metaphor represented in writing. In this regard she is both different from and similar to Sebald, whose prose, despite the privilege it gives to the opacity of the graphic aspect of writing, is structured in the form of a densely metaphorical conversation, hardly marked by the erratics and deliberate impenetrability that often characterise Stein’s thinking-in-writing pieces. However, this idea of writers creating conscious artefacts is one that has stuck with me in my analysis of Sebald. With neuroscientists having developed various image-making technologies to record the unseen activity of the brain, the idea provokes me to wonder about the extent to which writing might also be read as the traces of an “invisible brain”, to adopt a phrase used by Meyer (2005: 17). Or that it might be both a modern and archaic means of coming up with a particular expression of what the inside of something might look or feel like.

As I repeatedly note throughout this thesis, Sebald explicitly and implicitly confronts the question of what consciousness or thinking might look like, and how it might be experienced outside oneself, in the form of an event, thing or organising force. We might consider, for instance, the comparison of the apparent completeness of a lucid mind to a piece of glass in the second chapter of *Vertigo*, or the narrator’s remark in *The Rings of Saturn*, when, after traversing the labyrinthine Dunwich Heath in a dream, he realises the tracks he travelled were in fact a patterned “cross-section of [his] brain” (56; 163). The characteristics of consciousness, its seeming completeness and its peculiar, pellucid density, are shared or suggested by other things and events. Sebald continually invokes what consciousness is by referring to autonomous events that metonymically and metaphorically capture its aspects, or that
display a comparable internal complexity. Dreams, for instance, perhaps mark the first departure from consciousness that enables us to speak of it. A dream is a different kind of consciousness precariously recorded without the volition of a subject. All documents or things as documents might in some sense carry on in this departure. Sebald’s prose bears witness to the imperative of approaching each thing as though it were a dream of itself, or is itself dreaming. This isn’t so much to say that everything is conscious, but that everything has writing going on inside it.

The degree to which Sebald saw his prose metaphysics as conditioned by the imperative to reconcile the perspective of the thinking, feeling subject and the objects investigated or encountered by that subject is made evident in the interview with Michael Silverblatt, to which I have already referred. Silverblatt poses a question regarding Henry David Thoreau and his eye for curious specimens: “It was necessary for a writer to develop an eye. And it seems to my ear that the rhythms here have to do with the writing of entomologists and naturalists” (Silverblatt, cited in Schwartz, 2007: 81). Sebald responds:

Yes, the study of nature in all its forms. The walker’s approach to viewing nature is a phenomenological one and the scientist’s approach is a much more incisive one, but they all belong together. And in my view, even today it is true that scientists very frequently write better than novelists. So I tend to read scientists by preference almost, I’ve always found them a great source of inspiration. (cited in Schwartz, 2007: 81)

The “eye” that Silverblatt names as essential for the writer or scientist to develop relates to a view of the physical world as conditioned by a liveliness and complexity comparable to one’s own internal experience. In Science and The Modern World, Whitehead equates this mode of understanding with “the poetic view of nature” (116): “We have only to transfer to the very texture of realisation itself that value which we recognise so readily in terms of human life” (116). In Whitehead’s view, the British Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, in particular Wordsworth, expressed an

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9 In using the expression “liveliness” here I do not mean “lifelikeness”. In making this distinction I am following Meyer, who argues that Stein’s thinking in writing pieces are instances of writing as “liveliness” as opposed to the “lifelikeness” attributed to a William Blake poem analysed by the philosopher and student of Whitehead Susanne Langer (2001: 192). Meyer’s preference for “liveliness”, rather than “lifelikeness”, signals his commitment to the idea that, “the heterogeneous dialectic at the heart of his philosophy of organism was no less implicated in the life of certain concatenations of words than it was in the lives of their authors” (191). This stance is key to my interpretation of Sebald’s work.
engagement with the natural world that accorded “value” to what scientists tend to account for simply as “matters of fact” (118). However, in light of Sebald’s above quotation and Whitehead’s own sentiments, it is important to remember that this alternate view does not discard utterly the “incisive” approach of the scientist, but aims to temper it with a differing, more inclusive approach to abstraction.

Both Sebald and Whitehead sought to reconsider reality from a perspective that at certain points diverges from the modernist doctrines of scientific materialism and the philosophical mechanism by which they are underpinned. Crucial among these points of divergence is an understanding of the living and the dead, of spirit and matter, as contrasting rather than oppositional categories. As Whitehead remarks in *Science and The Modern World*:

...in order to understand the difficulties of modern scientific thought and also its reactions on the modern world, we should have in our minds some conception of a wider field of abstraction, a more concrete analysis, which shall stand nearer to the complete concreteness of our intuitive experience. Such an analysis would find in itself a niche for the concepts of matter and spirit, as abstractions in terms of which much of our physical experience can be interpreted. (83)

The abstractions of life and death, matter and spirit, are ways of understanding different kinds of experience, but they do not account for the concrete way in which the living and the dead exist as forms of togetherness. Concerning Sebald’s prose, this togetherness is evidenced in the way his narrator relates to the unseen but expressive world of feelings and compulsions, and to the suggestive presence of the past instanced in various non-living forms. Throughout this thesis I note the extent to which Sebald’s interest in crystalline forms, in combustion, and in materials such as silk represents an effort to gain an insight into the sense by which things entertain their energy and compel a wider field of forces among which humans are included. While Sebald’s prose exhibits a sustained concern with human expressions of order, his work seems not to prioritise the sharp distinction between human and non-human, the living and the dead, spirit and matter. More accurately, there are lots of different kinds of things that implicate aspects of other things, some we might wish to classify as living, some as dead. But this is a further move of abstraction.

In a related manner, mourning, for Sebald, is a way of speaking, an imperative to consult the dead on matters of importance. His regular invocation of spirit forms
suggests a nearness to archaic or non-modern conceptions of death. His work points to the persistence of questions concerning active immaterial forces in differing epochs and cultures. As Eric Santner’s conception of “undeadness” demonstrates, Sebald’s metaphysical perspective starts out from a position that considers the living and the dead as implicated in the same reality (xx; 81). Undeadness might variously refer to the presence of the past in the form of ghosts or uneasy feelings, and to a conception of matter that emphasises its energetic composition. In my own reading of Sebald’s work, I wonder about how a category such as undeadness might have significant, though difficult to articulate, consequences concerning the work of a writer and the thing writing is. How, for example, one might understand and express the overlap between writing as an energised (undead) document and thinking as the traces of physiological events of which one is more or less aware.

There is a recent trend in the humanities for thinkers to tackle topics which are usually the reserve of the sciences. Rather than focus on epistemological questions, writers of literary criticism and theory, such as Steven Connor and Daniel Tiffany, whose work I refer to throughout this thesis, have sought to produce their own poetic histories concerned with the ever-increasing number of “quasi-objects” that populate our realities. As a writer of prose fiction, Sebald might not immediately appear as belonging to this lineage. Nonetheless, his work exhibits a sustained concern with what Marina Warner, in the title of the lecture she gave on Sebald at the 2007 Times Literary Supplement Translation Prizes, called “The Lost Lives of Things”. Sebald’s acquaintance with things, as Warner’s title suggests, is touched by a melancholy that is absent from the work of Connor and Tiffany, whose interest in things, such as electricity and the technological devices it implicates, is centred less on memory and the writing of past lives.

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10 In the work of Bruno Latour, who adopts this term from Michel Serres, quasi-objects (and the quasi-subjects that they necessarily engender) describe scientific and technological objects that exemplify the confusion of natural and cultural realms (Latour, 1993). However, as John Frow points out in his article “A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole”, the idea of a quasi-object is also a metaphysical understanding of reality: “But may it not be true that in some sense all objects belong to this class?” (278). This is in line with Whitehead’s contention, contra Kant, that the subject, rather than being necessarily human and unaffected by objects, in fact emerges from or is produced by the objects it incorporates, and is not limited to the human subject: “For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world” (Process, 88). See Steven Shaviro’s Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics, for an insight into the divergences and convergences of Whitehead and Kant.
Borrowing the term “affordances” from J. J. Gibson, Connor, in the descriptively titled Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things, writes of teacups, shoes, tables, chairs and brandy glasses. “Such objects seem to have us, or certain parts of us, imagined in them. The affordances of objects means that they are not externally loaded with associations and connotations, but that we find ourselves implicated in, or apprehended by, them” (3). In other words, we are written or coded into the material forms such objects take. In this sense they can be said to speak to or suggest things of us. A teacup, to use one of Connor’s examples, “asks to be picked up by the handle” (3).

But it isn’t these objects which interest Connor the most; his concern is more with “magical objects” that “offer richer and more indeterminate kinds of affordance, making them seem in various ways excessive to their ordinary or assigned uses” (3). Included in Connor’s genealogy are bags, batteries, buttons, cards, glasses, handkerchiefs, keys, knots, newspaper, pills, pins, pipes, plugs, rubber bands, sticky tape, sweets and wires. Each item fills a chapter of his book. What they all have in common is the exhibition of their mutability when it comes to uses, things that captivate us according to the different possibilities they incorporate, or might yet incorporate.

In the present context, what is important to note about these objects, and Connor’s way of reading them, is the relationship between the material specificity of the given object, and complementary consideration of that object according to its lyrical aspects—and here I am appealing to Tiffany’s work, which I will discuss in brief shortly. We might also hear echoes of Whitehead’s correction to Hume in Connor’s specification that it is not so much the “externally loaded […] associations and connotations” of the object, but rather its “implication” in, that is to say, its internal connectedness to, the very patterns and capacities of our feeling and thinking.

Despite the aforementioned differences, a concern with the affordances of things remains very much part of Sebald’s prose fiction. This is stated explicitly in his essay on the Dutch artist Jan Peter Tripp:

What matters in Tripp’s still lifes is not that the painter applies his skill and mastery to a more or less fortuitous assemblage of objects but the autonomous existence of things to which, like blindly furious working animals, we stand in a subordinate and dependent relationship. Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the
Here Sebald provocatively, and somewhat romantically, construes humanity as existing in a subordinate or equivalent position to things regarding self-knowledge. Appealing to the “autonomous existence of things”, does not mean that things are necessarily vital or alive in the same sense as humans. But in their difference from humans, in their capacity not to die or to remain dead, for example, things enable us to extend and transform what we mean by a human perspective or the idea of a perspective more broadly. That things are not alive does not mean our relations with them, and their relations with each other, are any less intricate or perplexing. Despite what we may believe about the uniqueness of humanity, metaphysically speaking, our own perspectives conform to the same requirements as animals and books, which is to say, all perspectives are the embodiment of limitations that determine their specific consistency. To say that things “carry the experiences they have had with us inside them” is to suggest that experience is not unique to humans, and that human experience is composed of the relationships it bears with things that are not human. The relationship here is not one of passivity, but is evolving and generative; the kind of things determines what we are able to know of our reality and, more interestingly perhaps, how this reality is expressed. This is emphatically so if we consider the technological objects required to obtain the scientific facts on which, like William Carlos Williams’ red wheelbarrow, so much seems to depend.11

Approaching this from another, complementary angle, Connor begins by thinking about what kind of thing thinking is—rather than what kinds of things are like thinking—which is his way of getting to its processual, material and physiological aspects. For example, in his lecture “Thinking Things”, Connor, with reference to the psychoanalytic work of W. R. Bion, names “containment” as a definitive aspect of thinking—as in, thinking is a container for thoughts12—and subsequently of bubbles

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11 In Frow’s article, cited above, he refers to William Carlos Williams’ poem, noting, in a vaguely tautological fashion: “If so much depends on the red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the chickens, is this not above all because there is something to say about it—namely, that so much depends upon it?” (278)

12 In Connor’s appeal to Bion’s work—in particular the idea that thoughts are epistemologically prior to thinking or a thinker—there are also echoes of Whitehead’s correction to Descartes: “Descartes in his own philosophy conceives the thinker as creative of the occasional thought. The philosophy of organism inverts the order, and conceives the thought as a constituent operation in the creation of the occasional thinker. The thinker is the final end whereby there is thought” (Process, 151).
and balloons as ideal thinking things:

The bubble is an appropriate quasi-object for thought because bubbles have all the qualities of air—lightness, mutability, ungovernability, levity—while no longer being quite, or only air. A bubble is air arrested: air limned, embodied, given a shape, given surface tension, an epidermis, which is to say internal relation. It is the uncontained container chambered, the great outdoors interned, the flux of phenomena held up, held back from itself. (30)

A bubble is the air inscribed. Air made to exhibit what is particular to it. Connor’s evocation of the object that he ponders is itself a stylistically involved, highly lyrical bit of writing, and in this sense falls into the tradition of riddle-making and poetics with which Tiffany is also preoccupied: “the ‘constitutive fiction’ that the material artifact possess a ‘soul’” (Tiffany, 2001: 25). Connor draws out the lyrical figurations of meaning nested within exemplary objects. His practice suggests that the kind of lyrical thinking writing affords can itself be considered a viable experimental or speculative technique for producing events that give us an insight into the way experiences inhabit matter.

Connor even points to the immaterial body of writing as analogous to thought. “Speech and more particularly writing,” he notes, “while depending on and coinciding with its material embodiment, can never be identical with it” (“Thinking Things”, 31). Thus, “Writing and thought are bound together, not just for the powerful but ultimately banal reason that words are the medium of thought, but because writing is the same kind of substantial no-thing as a thinking thing” (32).

Tiffany is another critic concerned with the relationship between matter and the imagination, and poetic writing as an intersection between the two. His two recent books, Toy Medium: Materialism and The Modern Lyric and Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance (2000; 2009), like Meyer’s work, display a happy disregard for the categorical exclusivity of poetry, metaphysics and the sciences. In Toy Medium, Tiffany’s thesis hinges on the idea that, in the words of Bertrand Russell, “The word matter is, in philosophy, the name of a problem” (cited in Tiffany, 2000: 31). Tiffany argues for the role of poetry and criticism in speculatively proposing things about the nature of this problem. In this, a particular kind of poetry or poetic affect interests Tiffany. He is concerned with poetic obscurity not simply in the events which poetry depicts or represents, such as the marionettes of Henrich von Kleist or the weather
systems of Wallace Stevens, but in the historical correspondences between our conceptions of what matter is and the representational forms that facilitate these conceptions. According to Tiffany, “literary criticism has failed to address—though it is ideally suited to do so—the intrinsic role of pictures and elaborate analogies in shaping our knowledge of material substance, starting with the classical notion of the atom” (4-5). Thus Tiffany proposes a new vocation for literary criticism in which poetic thinking is seen to be part of the history of science—a proposition that obviously has significant consequences regarding the kinds of activity history includes.

What interests Tiffany, in the thinking of Gottfried Leibniz especially, and in the perverse aspects of materialistic philosophical and scientific doctrines generally, is the idea of a system of signs that directly represents the entity it depicts (2009: 117). In relation to Leibniz’s work, this is often referred to as the “universal characteristic”, an alphabet of human thought in which symbols function in a manner similar to the way arithmetical signs stand for numbers.13 Or, similarly, according to a certain seventeenth-century idealisation of ideogrammatic writing, whereby the relationship between written script and thing represented is characterised by a dynamic mingling. Tiffany’s reading of history, according to the intersections of poetry, metaphysics and science, makes it seem as though the fantastic project of Leibniz (and others) is continuously and partially realised in poetic events that instance a confusion of image and thing, or in the related terms of Latour, “representing Mind and the represented World” (cited in Tiffany, 2000: 4).

Throughout this thesis I point to the way in which Sebald acknowledges the middle ground between a natural world that possesses an imitative function and cultural processes (science among them) implicated in technical evolution of matter. The two natural-cultural things to which Tiffany devotes the most attention (automata and meteoric bodies) appear frequently, if not always explicitly, in Sebald’s prose. What’s more, the conception of the empirical method—so crucial to Sebald’s fictive investigations of place and what persists there—is informed by the thingness of signs and the writtenness things to which Tiffany’s interest in poetic obscurity similarly attests.

13 In The Emergence of Probability, Ian Hacking points out that the term “universal characteristic” is not peculiar to the thinking of Leibniz (80).
In reading Sebald I have not attempted to situate the author in a historical context from which his work might have sprung. I have not focused on the provincial Austrian, Swiss and German authors said to have influenced Sebald, perhaps with the exception of Kafka. Nor have I considered the German originals and how the German idiom may have affected the English translations. I have not looked to Sebald’s primary, or at least most obvious, theoretical reference points in the Frankfurt School—the work of Walter Benjamin in particular, Theodor Adorno to a lesser extent. These all represent areas of research that are worthy of the critical attention they have been given in the Sebald scholarship from which the present study partially draws. Instead, this thesis is preoccupied with creating a context in which Sebald’s writing specifically, and literary and poetics texts generally, might function differently for the reader. I focus on useful analogies and novel perspectives rather than the describing the conditions that made Sebald’s work possible. Perhaps I take the risky step of putting too much stress on links formed between the works of authors that might seem only externally related (principally, Sebald and Whitehead). In this sense, the historico-empirical context to which this thesis refers is an instance of speculative fiction. Its value is not so much as a work of critical judgement, but—with a nod to the sentiments of Whitehead and William James—in its capacity to elicit and sustain interest. Although the prose represented here is stylistically critical, the argument for a large part depends on those faculties of the imagination involved in the writing of fiction, poetry, and as Whitehead also emphasises, in speculative metaphysics. While I have not bracketed Sebald’s prose from its historical context

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14 Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Robert Walser and Thomas Bernhard are principal among these authors to whom Sebald’s style owes much debt. I refer the reader to the excellent bibliography of “Secondary Works on Sebald”, in J. J. Long’s Image, Archive Modernity, for suggestions as to where one might find more extensive argumentation regarding these inheritances.

15 I am here reminded of a remark made by the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, in an essay entitled “Thinking with Deleuze and Whitehead: a Double Test”, in which she refers to an insight offered by Gilles Deleuze: “Artaud and Lewis Carroll do not meet; it is the commentator who has them meeting, and only by a thought operation, freely changing dimensions, that is crossing with impunity what cannot be connected. And this, Deleuze adds, is the commentator’s, or the philosopher’s, weakness, the sign that he inhabits none of these dimensions, that he is thinking by proxy” (2009: 31).

16 In Process and Reality, Whitehead writes: “it is more important that a proposition be interesting than it be true” (259). Meyer suggests that Whitehead ‘may well have derived his fondness for the term ‘interest’ from William James, who observes, for instance, in ‘The Stream of Thought’ chapter in Principles of Psychology, that consciousness is ‘always interested more in one part of its object than in another, and welcomes and rejects, or chooses, all the while it thinks” (cited in Meyer, 2005: 9, fn. 29).

17 With reference to the rigid method of induction, championed by Francis Bacon, Whitehead remarks: “What Bacon omitted was the play of free imagination, controlled by the requirements of coherence and logic. The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of
entirely (as though this were possible), my emphasis is instead on what the suggestiveness of his poetics enables me to think through or think with: the new context I am endeavouring to create with Sebald’s prose, Whitehead’s philosophy, and the work of the other aforementioned writers, as the key ingredients in my experience. I have not shirked at the task of generalisation, which is hopefully completed in the right key, so that I might point to resonances between Sebald’s work and other examples that are perhaps not obviously accommodating.

At times my reading of Sebald’s work may seem wilfully ignorant of the extent to which his work is a critique of Western modernity. I’m interested Sebald’s prose as a positive mythology in which humans are shown to be fragile and often misguided creatures, heavily dependent on things like diaries, gravestones, silkworms, rucksacks, alarm clocks and cloudbanks for orienting and expressing themselves in the world. Sebald’s tone is sometimes wary, sometimes ironic, sometimes reticently anarchic, concerning the things and ideas common to post-industrial Europe. His narrator is an outsider and this seems crucial to the way he reads and accounts for his world. He undoubtedly exhibits a commitment to the voices of those forgotten by history and those cruelled, either directly or indirectly, by power. However, I want to avoid construing the relationship between perception and power as synonymous with oppression and human agency. I’m interested in the lumpy and ambiguous manifestations of power that differ according to the participants of each situation. Each event inherits and entertains its power according to specific contingencies. I have first of all attempted to understand that sense by which the agencies of events (events which are also things) are distributed among each other in dynamic and complex fashion. How Sebald’s work exemplifies that sense of something becoming increasingly detailed and intense the more one becomes preoccupied with it, and that this is important regarding the way we conceive perceptual relations more generally.

Having said all this, the Sebald with whom I am acquainted is a writer. He wrote books that contained stories and images. And it’s important to recognise that his exemplarity relates to the way he used the limitations of the book, the pages, print and graphics it contains, to create something that’s interesting to writers of fiction, poetry and visual communicators alike—and who knows who else. His works exhibits a highly nuanced awareness of the greater context in which a well composed page...
might be comprehended, hunched over, or seen. How reading and writing always implicate questions to do with truth and its documentation; with inscriptions, stamps, notations, letters, signatures, calculations and scribbles, which are all vaguely present, though not always attended to, as we pour our eyes over the pages of a book.
1. 

*VERTIGO:*

Truth and the Document
In reading *Vertigo* we can immediately appreciate Sebald’s preoccupation with inexplicable, unpredictable and important events. These might be historically significant events that the narrator experiences through the indirect transmission of documents, or personally significant events in the narrator’s own memory. However, it would be misleading to set up a distinction between the public experience of mediated information and the unmediated, private experience of one’s memories or emotions. As Sebald demonstrates, our phenomenological, or first-person, subjective experience is always to some extent constituted by mediation. Paradigmatically, our experience of mediation relates to the way in which we experience the present through the re-presentation of our immediate past. Likewise, the things in our reality conventionally considered to be documents, newspaper articles, photographs, pages from books, writing and so on are instances or events in which the energies of the past persist in autonomous and contextually specific ways.

Sebald’s grip on history, evidenced in *Vertigo*, exhibits an ease of movement between what we might call the subjective viewpoint of his narrator and the factual, or objective, world of documented historical detail. He does not emphasise either of these perspectives at the expense of the other, but seeks to elicit their confusion in a manner that appeals to our concrete experience.

The deeper one digs in a text of Sebald’s the more motivation one finds at work in what might at first seem haphazard details. This is part of the reason they are so re-readable. One is left feeling that there is something more to the text, something they may have missed, and no detail is without reference to some other aspect manifest elsewhere. In this sense his books are designed to account for the unprecedented, inexplicable events to which they bear witness. No amount of evidence or connecting of the pieces will leave us with a feeling of completeness, there is always a fuzzy edge demanding to be more properly integrated.

*Vertigo* was Sebald’s first work of prose fiction and I can only speculate as to how long each of its four discrete, resonant chapters took to complete: how long was the period of incubation for the micro-biography of Stendhal, emphasising not his great literary works but his sense of being inhabited by compulsive urges, ever at odds with the period into which he was born? Did the book come out as a whole, or did it for some time exist in its individual chapters? The reason one is provoked to ask such questions is due to the structural contrasts in *Vertigo*: we begin with the aforementioned micro-biography, ostensibly from the perspective of Sebald as the
author of an essay. In the second chapter we are introduced to the writing narrator, the Sebald figure familiar to us in all Sebald’s works, who presumably we are to interpret as the writer of the previous chapter. This figure is attempting to disentangle himself from an inexplicable disturbance. He travels through Austria and northern Italy, allusively referring to his writing and research, making insightful though oblique observations about artworks, and tending to think of himself as pursued by someone or something. As I will come to argue in this thesis, this sense of being pursued constitutes his relationship with the past, in terms of the way it affects both his memory and his immediate perception. For somewhat hazy reasons, the narrator flees Verona, only to make a return journey there seven years later, retracing his steps and attempting, unsuccessfully it would seem, to get to the bottom of what so terrified him during his first trip. Again he is working on a piece of writing to which he allusively refers, a kind of crime fiction involving the gruesome murders of a vigilante group that took place in northern Italy during the time of his first visit.

The third chapter deals with the travels and ailments of Dr K., who, like Beyle in the first chapter, is the avatar of a canonical literary figure, this time Franz Kafka. Dr K.’s life is defined by unrealised potential, a kind of ontological misfortune to which he seems resigned. This chapter differs slightly from the first concerning the presence of the narrating “I”. There, as I have said, the narrative voice is entirely obscured (and, of course, paradoxically manifest) within the life and times of Beyle. But thrice in chapter III the narrating “I” makes an appearance (148; 150). It’s difficult to know what to make of these inconspicuous narrative intrusions. Are they haphazard or purposeful? I’m tempted to interpret them as evidence that the distinction between narrative and essay isn’t a meaningful one for Sebald.

In the final chapter the narrator returns to his hometown of W. in the Bavarian Alps, for the first time since his childhood. Like the other chapters, this return is touched by a pervasive sense of things not being as they should be, of something inadequately accounted for still persisting, suggestively, in a variety of documented and perceived forms. The chapter and the book finish in England, with the narrator leaving London on a train, presumably headed home to the northeast.

What I wish to advance in my reading of *Vertigo* is that Sebald simultaneously manipulates three different genres of fiction: the love story, crime fiction and the travelogue. Why his work appears to be so different to conventional exemplifications of these genres is because he shifts focus from dramatic action (which still, of course,
plays a part) to the relationship between truth and its documentation. These are deeply philosophical questions that Sebald addresses right across his works of prose fiction. The love story in *Vertigo*, for example, is not about a character that falls in love with a particular personage and sings their praises, while we, the readers, are engaged to the extent of this character’s failure or success—at least, not quite.\(^{18}\) Instead, Sebald focuses on the nature or the consistency of the proofs we create such that our love may be deemed genuine. His narrator reasons about love through the lens of case studies or examples. In this sense his love story seems a peculiarly modern one.

With this in mind, I will presently turn to the first chapter, “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet” (“Beyle”), and consider the character of Mme Gherardi. Mme Gherardi, so we are told, is a character that “reappears a number of times on the periphery of Beyle’s later work” (21). She is a figure who accompanies him on his travels and through his speculations concerning the question of love (Stendhal wrote a metaphysical treatise called *On Love* to which Sebald refers—it is a most unusual work that I will have more to say about). Sebald remarks:

> There is reason to suspect that Beyle used her name as a cipher for various lovers such as Adèle Rebuffel, Angéline Bereyter and not least for Métlde Dembowski, and that Mme Gherardi, whose life would easily furnish a whole novel, as Beyle writes at one point, never really existed, despite all the documentary evidence, and was merely a phantom, albeit one to whom Beyle remained true to for decades. (21-22)

Mme Gherardi is referred to as appearing “a number of times”, therefore repeatedly, on the “periphery” of Beyle’s work. In this recurring over time she acquires trace credibility, not unlike Beyle’s syphilitic outbreaks, which also “recurred”, and which he examines “over and over again” (14). And yet she is emphasised as being “peripheral”, “mysterious” and “unearthly”, subject to Beyle’s “claims” and such that the author “suspects” she mightn’t be entirely credible. Mme Gherardi is characteristically equivocal, a “phantom” whose existence is hazy “despite all the documentary evidence”.

What Mme Gherardi does is enable Beyle to inhabit a reality in which his conversations about love might take place. We read of their travels to the Hallein salt mines, where Beyle invokes a salt crystal to once again express not the peculiarity of

\(^{18}\) As Sebald recommends in an interview with Maya Jaggi, *Vertigo* is about “the problem of love, but not in a standard way” (Sebald, cited in Jaggi, 2007).
the loved object, but the process or the journey by which one falls in love: “The protracted crystallisation process, which had transformed the dead twig into a truly miraculous object, appeared to Beyle, by his own account, as an allegory for the growth of love in the salt mines of the soul” (26). In some sense the salt twig and the cipher (Mme Gherardi) perform the same function. Both facilitate a conversation. One is allegorical and one is metonymic. Sebald is interested in the things to which we appeal in order to mediate and sustain our conversations about love. He does not present a romantic tale, but rather the inside story of the event experienced by the lover such that they might seek expressions to foster its continuation. The love story thus becomes a scaffold with which to consider the relationship between experiencing something and the compulsion to provide evidence for that experience.

If we look to Stendhal’s treatise, On Love, it is possible to mark the departure of Sebald’s concern with the question of love from that of its author. In the chapter titled “Beauty Dethroned by Love”, Stendhal tells the story of Alberic, who encounters a woman “more beautiful than his mistress”, and yet Alberic still finds his mistress more attractive (44). The beloved’s imperfections are prized as a result of an intimate history:

Even the minor defects of her face, a pockmark, for instance, affect the man who is in love and take his thoughts back to her when he sees them in another woman; what must it be then, when he sees them in his mistress herself? He has experienced so many emotions in the presence of that pockmark, emotions for the most part exquisite and of the most absorbing interest, that whatever his emotions may have been they are renewed with incredible vividness at the sight of this sign, even observed on the face of another woman. (44)

Here Stendhal equates perception with both inscription and reading. The sign becomes a mark of truth that refers to a specific history. What I find striking about Sebald, in light of this citation, is the absence of heterosexual romantic love in all his narratives. It’s as though love, understood according to this tradition, has been watchfully avoided. And yet Sebald preserves the crucial feature of Stendhal’s observation, maintaining an interest in the way history (natural and cultural, personal and public) documents itself, is perceived as document. Sebald is less concerned with the perspective of the lover as truthful in themselves—as though the compulsion to speak of one’s love were synonymous with the compulsion to speak the truth—than with the techniques devised in order to make that truth heard. His literary project
patently serves to generalise Stendhal’s theory of love. The process by which Alberic experiences “so many emotions in the presence of that pockmark” is, for Sebald, a proposition that is relevant to all occasions. What Sebald traces instead of a romantic history is the history of that pockmark. This is a modernist inclination toward the materiality of signs as much as a romantic inclination toward expression—a distinction on which I will elaborate shortly.

I will discuss the character of Beyle in greater detail in a later section of this chapter. For the moment I wish to consider, briefly, how *Vertigo* and its approach to the question of truth and its documentation relates to the genre of crime fiction. In an interview with Gordon Turner, Sebald notes the similarity between his method of composition and that of crime fiction, particularly concerning the use of suggestive details: “It’s exactly the same mechanism that you get in crime fiction at the end everything is explained and everything falls into place when Miss Marple comes into the library and sits everybody down and tells everybody what the footprint in the begonia bed meant” (Sebald, cited in Denham and McCulloh, 26). Here the proverbial footprint is the piece of evidence that proves a certain set of happenings took place. It is, as Sebald notes, retrospectively significant in view of the detective who illuminates certain details and obscures others in order to make a case. In such works we are on a fast track to the solving of a crime, an endgame in which previous ambiguities coalesce into a meaningful arrangement. As with the love story genre, Sebald’s book works within and disturbs these conventions. Here I am talking principally about the second chapter, “All’estero”, which, as mentioned previously, is loosely based around the narrator being implicated in a series of crimes and his efforts to account for these crimes through the writing of fiction. The generic elements are present: a gruesome series of murders; a solitary traveller who feels pursued; the sense of there being some mystery that it is necessary to understand in greater detail, if not solve. Such traits are present, but Sebald is not interested in them as the logical unfolding of events concerning a happening, the conceit of which the author has, from beginning to end, been able to view. Rather, Sebald seems more concerned with the transmission of events through documents and the role that documents, as mediums, play in shaping what we take to be the truth. This is explicit if we consider the range of graphic devices used in this chapter: photographs, a typed poem, a handwritten note, a diary entry with a scribble, an “ex libris” stamp, the cover of a map, a ticket, passport documentation, a restaurant bill with lettering circled, newspaper advertisements,
images from paintings, a page from a book, signatures; not to mention the embedded remarks made in Italian, the regularity with which names and dates appear, and the intertextual density of the narrative itself. This evidence is compiled and composed not in order to prove a case after the event, but to create a new context in which documents establish their own reality through suggestive relations.

Something similar could be said concerning the genre of the travelogue. Never is our existence more uncertain than when we travel to a foreign place alone. The well-established ties that enable our homely existence are absent. We must work to make the duration of our passage believable, if not to others then at least to ourselves and the world we inhabit. We must forge acquaintances and gather documents. Travellers compulsively take photographs and keep diaries. We feel new versions of ourselves emerging, shaped by new experiences. In this sense, the experience of travelling mirrors the experience creating a fictional character or a fictional world. Both include a strange mixture of expressiveness and privacy. Both involve a critical period in which new meaning is made.

Sebald’s narrator in *Vertigo* is a particular kind of traveller. His experience of place is paradoxical, in that he feels at once foreign and at home. He is at home in the sense that his surrounds address him in a manner that suggests he is familiar with them, and he is foreign to the extent that he cannot comprehend the exact nature of this familiarity.

In appealing to the genre of the travelogue, Sebald emphasises his narrator’s dependence on ephemera and documents for his sense of identity. This is conspicuously and comically evident at the beginning of chapter II, when the narrator comments on how living in transit has resulted in his adopting some peculiar habits:

The fact that I was living in a hotel was at ever increasing variance with the woeful state I was now in. I began to carry all kinds of useless things around with me in a plastic bag I had brought with me from England, things which I found it increasingly impossible to part with as every day went by. (36)

19 This is attested to in John Zilcosky’s reading of Sebald’s text in his article “Sebald’s Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost”. Zilcosky remarks, “Sebald tells stories in which his subjects can never become sufficiently disoriented, can never really lose their way” (103). The narrator’s inability to get lost, according to this argument, relates to the sense in which he experiences the confusion of memory and perception—I discuss this in greater detail over the course of both this chapter and the thesis as a whole.
The narrator’s unsettled disposition is here equated with the presence of non-human travelling companions that are, on the one hand, “useless”, but on the other, “impossible to part with”. Things become meaningful for the narrator due to the mere fact that they accompany him, they express a relation. This is also the case when the narrator’s passport goes missing later in the chapter, which results in a series of detours that significantly alter the course of the narrative (98-115). Sebald characteristically includes an image of this passport, in which his photograph features a black bar obscuring his face and, therefore, his autobiographical identity. As with the genres of crime fiction and the love story, Sebald’s travelogue instances a shift in emphasis from a suspense-based realisation of its generic traits, to a realisation of these traits that appeals to a more inclusive range of experiences, including: the extent to which we are always pursued by emotionally resonant past experiences and the feeling of needing to stabilise our nebulous existence through documentation.

As mentioned above, Sebald’s concerns are a combination of modernist and romantic sensibilities: the sense by which he investigates the relationship between an expressive observer and their surrounds might be described as romantic, and the crucial role the medium, or mediums, play in this expression might be described as modernist. This chapter is structured to emphasise these overlapping aspects of Sebald’s work. In the first section I focus on “All’estero” and the contrast, evident in all of Sebald’s prose works, between two differing kinds of perspective or modes of perception: that of the remembering, perceiving body embedded in a context, feeling overwhelmed by vague and intense feelings; and that of an observer who views things, unaffectedly, from a distance. I then introduce Whitehead’s theory of perception, “Symbolic Reference”, as a theoretical framework through which to read Sebald’s text. In the second section, which focuses on “Beyle”, I continue to cull examples from the first and second chapters of Vertigo that exhibit particularly striking instances of the modes of perception distinguished above. I also consider Sebald’s treatment of the question: what is writing? What is the relationship between consciousness and the mediums that provide us with an insight into this obscure, private experience, and how is consciousness constituted by the objects of expression,
The third and final section of this chapter features a close reading of the book’s conclusion. Here I discuss the way Sebald digresses through differing layers of reality in which his narrator remains a trace presence, thus moving the focus from an exclusive first-person narrator to one that depends on the capacity of documented realities that partially, and suggestively, include him. Throughout my reading I return to the idea that *Vertigo* both exemplifies and reforges aspects of existing fictional genres in order to foreground the relationship between truth and document.

Despite this focus on the book’s conclusion, my discussion of the rest of the final chapter, “Il ritorno in patria”, is relatively bare. As I have already mentioned, in this chapter the narrator returns to his hometown, W.—presumably based on the small Bavarian town of Wertach im Allgäu where Sebald grew up. This journey no doubt serves a significant structural purpose with regard to the abroad-and-return conceit that informs the book (“Il ritorno in patria” means “the return home” in Italian, while “All’estero” translates as “abroad”). It also reminds us of the narrator-writer’s German origins and the significant, if understated, presence of the atrocities and traumas of World War II in the longer history gestured to in each of the book’s four chapters. In a sense, we can read the narrator’s personal or individual efforts to belatedly come to grips with a crime in the second chapter as structurally similar to the narrator’s efforts to gauge the implications of the historical crimes committed in his homeland before his birth. However, “Il ritorno in patria” offers little compelling material concerning my interpretation, nor is it anomalous enough to constitute a point of difference that is essential to discuss.

**Section I: Feelings of Disquiet and the Overdeveloped Gaze**

Vague and impersonal forces and feelings often pursue the narrators and protagonists of Sebald’s prose fiction. We might use the word “memory” to designate the range of these imperceptible but emotionally important activities. It is rare for Sebald’s

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20 Here I am borrowing an expression of Steven Connor’s regarding his discussion of thinking things: “This is perhaps why it is the role of certain thinking things to embody, not thinking itself, but thinking’s exceeding of every thing, including the things it takes for itself, takes itself for” (“Thinking Things”). In my own interpretation, writing and graphics are construed as thinking things in a comparable sense to Connor’s characterisation of bubbles, screens, riddles and so on. As mentioned in my introduction, his work is a reference point throughout this thesis.
narrators or protagonists to derive a sense of comfort or stability from their experience of the past. They do not view the past with a detached and comfortable sense of resignation. Instead, the past manifests in the surrounding environment, often taking malevolent and unsettling forms.

The narrator’s urban wanderings are marked by his repeatedly feeling implicated in some vague mystery. This unease is as much constitutive of the narrator’s disposition from the beginning of “All’estero” as it is inherited during his journey: “In October 1980 I travelled from England, where I had then been living for nearly twenty-five years in a country which was almost always under grey skies, to Vienna, hoping that a change of place would help me get over a particularly difficult period in my life” (33). The nature of this “particularly difficult period” is never revealed, and as the narrator’s vacation begins, we intimate that an escape or overcoming of this unnamed disturbance is unlikely.

Massimo Leone has noted the “coexistence of vagueness and precision” as a characteristics of all Sebald’s beginnings, and that the beginning of “All’estero” is paradigmatic in this sense (96). According to Leone, the hidden motives and unspecified reasons for distress are in contrast to the programmatic setting forth of dates and place, something James Chandler also draws our attention to regarding the beginning of the first chapter, which he describes as “delivered in a kind of vacuum, writing degree zero” (245).

Everywhere the narrator goes he is accompanied by a “vague apprehension” (35), which either manifests as sensory revision (as is the case with his bouts of vertigo), or as a more subtle feeling of somehow being involved in something untoward, as being recognisably foreign or insane, as suspect, as somehow wanted or connected to what remains undisclosed.

In a reading of Vertigo that draws from both physiology and semiotics, Leone notes: “equilibrium, such as we would associate with the average human body, cannot and must not be perceived. This means that sensing one’s own equilibrium only ever happens negatively, as an absence, as a lost property of the body” (92). He goes on to suggest that this has two significant consequences. Firstly, that “what is called equilibrium is nothing but a zero degree awareness of the body in a given space”, and secondly, that vertigo might thereby be considered something actively sought, “an occasion (or voluntary strategy) through which the human body seeks to develop a full awareness of itself” (92). One seeks to experience vertigo in order to “destroy—
even if only for a single instant—the stability of perception” (93). While vertigo might destroy the stability of perception, this doesn’t mean that perception itself is absent. What Leone’s remark perhaps doesn’t account for adequately is that minor and often-imperceptible disturbances in fact make up the perceptual states we consider to be stable. Our eyes, for example, continually jerk and jitter to ‘artificially’ create the movement we need to obtain a stable spatial awareness (Massumi, 95). For the narrator of chapter II, vertigo and aimless wandering (the not knowing where to turn induced by walking for walking’s sake) are mutually constitutive activities. That is to say, vertigo leads to walking, and walking to vertigo. The narrator also notes that such experiences of vertigo are equated with “focus dissolv[ing]”, and the dimming of vision (36-37).

The narrator belatedly discloses that he has travelled to the city of Verona in order to study the Italian Renaissance painter Pisanello. “It is many years now,” he remarks, “since the paintings of Pisanello instilled in me the desire to forfeit everything except my sense of vision” (72-73). This is an odd remark. As is evident from Beyle’s voyeuristic tendencies in the first chapter, about which I will have more to say, the human perspectives treated in Vertigo are, to some extent, defined by the pleasure they derive from looking. How are the pleasures of looking different to those of touching or smelling? Can we think of looking as a singular type of sensory perception, or are there different kinds of looking that implicate other modes of sensory engagement? Can looking be tactile? And if so, what does this multimodal understanding of visual perception say about perception more generally?

In a sense, Sebald is addressing the question as to whether or not we can look into the past. And when we look, to what extent do we look with a past that we do not experience as a visual percept? As the remark on Pisanello indicates, Vertigo is composed as an investigation into the contrast between the peculiarity of visual perception and the emotional, vaguely discerned elements that inform our visual sense.

The narrator notes of Pisanello’s painting:

What appealed to me was not only the highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting a depth of dimension, upon an essentially flat surface, in which every feature, principles and extras
alike, the birds in the sky, the green forest and every single leaf of it, are all granted equal and undiminished right to exist. (73)

This is a very different kind of perceptual experience to what the narrator accounts for in his distressed wandering around the streets of the cities he visits. There is no suggestive depth to the relationships between the features of the painting. It emphasises the immediate presentation of distinguished particulars. Time is frozen and spatialised. The things depicted within the painting would seem to share the same temporal perspective. They are contemporaries. This contrasts with the appraisal Sebald offers of Jan Peter Tripp’s etchings in his collaboration with the artist in the book Unrecounted. There Sebald describes his experience of Tripp’s etchings as follows: “The longer I look at the pictures of Jan Peter Tripp, the better I understand that behind the illusions of the surface a dread-inspiring depth is concealed. It is the metaphysical lining of reality, so to speak” (86-88). And so we now have two paradigms by which to consider visual perception and perception generally: one to do with surface and spatial implication; the other to do with background and temporal implication. Both are, of course, experienced in, and happen as, a dynamic togetherness. However, some organisational strategies (among which artworks are included) might exemplify one paradigm to a greater or lesser extent.

Sebald also wishes that the reader consider the degree to which perception, taking vision here as paradigmatic, is constructed or organised by supplements, techniques and artefacts that are themselves subject to historical contingencies—the extent to which an image or panorama is made up of the historicity of the things it obscures but which are, paradoxically perhaps, manifest within it. The organisational strategies that are chiefly critiqued are those which recommend that the visual field is a clearly perceivable, geometric space, a space in which different things might inhabit the same spatial field but not the same recent past.21

21 “Energy” and “activity” are two suggestive synonyms that add conceptual depth to what is meant here by recent past. The recent past might of course be at once distant and recent in terms of a calendrical chronology. My use of the word “recent” here perhaps has more in common with “intensity” than with what is experienced as chronologically recent: something that happened is recent according to whether it is experienced as more or less intense. In suggesting this vocabulary I am attempting to account for what Whitehead means when he describes how we come to re-experience ourselves as what we were just a few moments ago, or the way our experience is a fusion of imperceptible memories from the immediate past and the presentation of sense data (Adventures, 180-181). Euclidian geometric space is a form of abstraction that usefully (for certain purposes) forgets these kinds of relations. I attend to Whitehead’s theory of perception in the coming pages.
Turning to an example from the first chapter, the image of Beyle’s eyes on page eleven and a charcoal sketch overlayed with a drawing grid on the page following invite us to consider a particular mode of relation with regard to visual space. The text in which the cropped image of the eyes is embedded reads: “Even his eyes, set somewhat far apart, on account of which, to his chagrin, he had often been called Le Chinois, suddenly seemed bolder, more focused on some imaginary midpoint” (11). In the brief account that follows, Beyle is characterised as compulsively motivated by base physical urges, namely to lose his virginity. He possesses no visual information of his first sexual experience due to the fact that “The overpowering sensation […] blotted out the memory entirely” (11). Sebald thereby establishes a contrasting though implicated relation between visual representation and physical, libidinous feelings—feelings we are possessed by as much as we possess—that lack definite visual detail.

Vision, and the spatialised perception with which it is often synonymous, is again suggestively emphasised in the sketch of Angela Pietragrua—one of Beyle’s objects of affection, a lady he insistently pursued despite her indifference to him.

J. J. Long notes that the presence of the grid overlaying the sketch, like Pisanello’s painting, demonstrates the longer history from which photography emerged. Of the drawing grid, Long remarks, “It is a process that relies on a highly abstract apprehension of space, a dismantling of the object into equivalent segments, and the construction of the totality through the replication of each atomised square” (95).

Richard T. Gray is another critic who has identified the grid and the vanishing point as two abstract ways of structuring the visual field that recur throughout Sebald’s prose. Although Gray focuses on The Rings of Saturn, his thesis is appropriate with regard to Sebald’s use of these two images here, and his reference to Beyle imagining a “midpoint”. Gray notes:

Sebald displays a peculiar take on the critique of Enlightenment, which manifests itself primarily as a critical examination of the two most prominent organizational strategies introduced into the visual arts in the modern age: the grid as a mechanism for dividing up, parceling out, and transmitting visual space to a graphic medium; and graphic perspective, based on the organizing focus of the vanishing point, as a tool for creating the illusion of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional canvas. (2009: 295)

According to Gray, this critique ties in with a broader argument that recurs throughout Sebald’s prose, regarding his interest in different models of epistemological and
perceptual organisation. What both Gray and Long recommend in their interpretations is that Sebald wishes to characterise Beyle’s perception as being a product of certain practices, technologies and artefacts that are peculiar to European modernity and its longer inheritance in Enlightenment thinking. The thread I take up here is the way this specific characterisation of visual perception is deployed to elicit a contrast with impersonal, often perverse, affect-based ways of relating. I do not mean to suggest that vision is inherently more limiting than other modes of sensory engagement. The issue is not with vision itself but with the kinds of abstraction one is compelled to make if vision is regarded as fundamental.

Critic Russell Kilbourn identifies the shift between the kind of looking instanced in the narrator’s experience of Pisanello, and the frequent if allusive references to feelings of unease, as a defining feature of Sebald’s prose: “Like a lens shifting in and out of focus, the narrative point of view in Sebald oscillates continuously between affective immersion or embeddedness and distanced visual mastery” (2007: 155). Nowhere is this oscillation more pronounced than in Vertigo, the conceit of which seems built from an apprehension of these contrasting varieties of perception.

One example from “All’estero” characterises in particular the integrated opposition Kilbourn names. The narrator, who suffers bouts of vertigo throughout, is in a hotel in Limone, a town in northern Italy, engaged in the act of writerly composition. “I sat at a table near the open terrace door, my papers and notes spread out around me, drawing connections between events that lay far apart but which seemed to me to be of the same order” (94). While the narrator writes he is distracted by the presence of the hotel proprietress, Luciana Michelotti, with whom he exchanges suggestive glances:

More and more frequently I felt impelled to look over towards her, and whenever our eyes met she laughed as if at some silly inadvertence. On the wall behind the bar, between the colourful, shiny rows of spirits bottles, there was a large mirror, so I was able to watch both Luciana and her reflection, which gave me a curious satisfaction. (95)

One could come up with a number of perceptual maps in order to make sense of the relations established in this encounter. There is the sense that the narrator and Luciana are held apart by their glances and the reflective surfaces that mirror these glances. However, amid the tensely orchestrated theatre of looking the reticent urges of the
narrator and Luciana suggest an obscure, yet to be actualised, intimacy. Perhaps the narrator’s reference to his writing task holds a clue? Events of differing orders or dimensions persist within a particular encounter. Which events are registered as meaningfully related will to some extent depend on the techniques we have derived to describe them.

Two pages later, Luciana still lingers, and the narrator continues to work on his story. The narrator thinks that he feels “her hand on [his] shoulder” and remarks:

It occurred to me how few and far between in my life were the moments when I had been touched in this way by a woman with whom I was barely acquainted, and thinking back, it seemed to me that about such unwonted gestures there had always been something disembodied and ghoulish, something that went quite through me! (97)

This hypersensitivity to touch, characterised by ghostly feelings, both “disembodied” and felt deep within the body (as the expression “went quite through me” suggests), is in contrast to the appreciative looking earlier in the episode, which, as I have already mentioned, is determined by the spatial arrangement in which the percipient is situated—the illuminated distance that vision can measure and entertain. As soon as he is reminded of the nearness of his body he loses his grip on the situation, as though he can’t quite make sense of the reality suggested by this kind of experience.

As is typical of Sebald, this episode is followed by another in which an analogous experience is recounted. This time the narrator describes his visit to “the darkened consulting room of a Manchester optometrist”: “gazing through the lenses inserted into those strange eye-test frames at the letters in the illuminated box, which were clear in focus one moment, completely blurred the next” (97). The narrator’s vision or, more broadly, point of view, is once again defined by an alteration in focus from the distinct to the hazy. He notes the presence of the Chinese optician Susi Ahoi:

Time and time again she adjusted the heavy frame, and once touched my temples, which as so often were throbbing with pain, with her fingertips, for rather longer than was necessary, I thought, though it was probably only in order to position my head better. Luciana's hand, which surely rested on my shoulder unintentionally if it did so at all, as she leaned to take the espresso cup and the ashtray from the table, had a similar effect on me, and as on that distant occasion in Manchester I now suddenly saw everything out of focus, as if through lenses not made for my eyes. (97-8)
There seems a very deliberate emphasis here on the contrast between the narrator’s optical capacity and the unseen “throbbing[s]” of the body. What’s more, vision itself is both subject to the body’s fluctuations, and is situated outside the body, implicated in various devices designed to determine, and to insist upon, its worth as a measure of clarity. The “unwonted” touches of Luciana and Susi result in the narrator perceiving things more dimly, perceiving things, we might say, through the body’s felt awareness, which isn’t so apt to determine the distance between things as a matter of spatial remove.

The sense of bodily dispossession the narrator feels as he realises the nearness of what often seems to him to be a distant, outside world, is elaborated further in a variety of uneasy feelings which he confronts throughout the chapter. The cities the narrator travels through, Venice in particular, are implicated in what he describes as “an air of conspiracy…into which one is drawn against one’s will” (52). As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the somewhat displaced reason for the narrator’s anxiety—in addition to his habitual uncertainty—is his proximity to a series of crimes committed by the vigilante group “Organizzazione Ludwig”. My argument is that the chapter can be read according to the way it addresses the question of how the narrator experiences the presence of the past. The various conceits and threads of suspense that loosely bind the narrative are exemplars through which we can understand the confused relationship between bodily experience and what is perceived as being outside the body and part of the surrounding environment.

For example, we might consider the presence of the two shadowy figures that the narrator refers to throughout the chapter. During his first tour, while having a cappuccino at Santa Lucia station, the narrator compares the people standing around him at the buffet, whose bodies are evidently obscured, to “a circle of severed heads” (68). Amid this macabre and hallucinatory atmosphere, the narrator notices the presence of two men:

A prey to unpleasant observations and far-fetched notions of this sort, I suddenly had a feeling that, amid this circle of spectres consuming their colazione, I had attracted somebody’s attention. And indeed it transpired that the eyes of two young men were on me. They were leaning on the bar across from me, the one with his chin propped in his right hand, the other in his left. Just as the shadow of a cloud passes across a field, so the fear passed across my mind that these two men who were looking at me now had already crossed my path more than once since my arrival in Venice. They had also been in the bar on the Riva where I had met Malachio. (68-69)
Sebald’s language here confuses the extent to which his narrator is passive or active in these observations. While on the one hand he is “prey to unpleasant observations and far-fetched notions [italics added]”, and feels as though he is subject to the gaze of the two men, on the other hand he is creative in his speculations and hallucinations, indulging himself by following the trains of his thought and by responding to perceptual cues in the specific manner that he does. Sebald is not interested in creating a context in which something can be regarded as true or false, i.e. that the men really are following the narrator, that the circle of diners really is a circle of severed heads. He is instead engaged in the effort of expressing a scene in which the narrating subject is shown to be creating events that detain, compel and provoke him to act as though they had their own autonomous existence. His narrator inhabits that region of his being where passing thoughts and notions might begin to form more established trajectories.

The two men reappear soon after in the Piazza Bra in Verona:

At least I thought I was alone, but as time went on I became aware of two figures in the deep shadow of the other side of the arena. They were without doubt the same two young men who had kept their eyes on me that morning at the station in Venice. Like two watchmen they remained motionless at their posts until the sunlight had all but faded. Then they stood up, and I had the impression that they bowed to each other before descending from the tiers and vanishing into the darkness of the exit. (72)

We should not ignore the suggestiveness of this “deep shadow” in its contribution to the atmosphere of uncertainty. It is one of the many examples of Sebald using an event or atmospheric phenomenon of indeterminate variety and source to invoke the middle ground between private, internal experience and its external realisation as part of an environment.

In both the “vague apprehension” that the narrator experiences as a feeling of vertigo, which is actively contributed to by his directionless wandering, and in his being tracked by these strange men, what are emphasised are feelings of implication, and the scarcely perceptible but paradoxically vivid nature of these feelings. When he is seated in Carlo Cadavero’s Pizzeria before he flees Verona, the narrator’s “mounting sense of unease” is synonymous with the feeling of being “surrounded by water” (77), and the “look” (which is always more than simply a look) of the waiter is
described as contemptuous (79). It is as though everything, even the impalpable gestures of strangers, even the air, weighs on the narrator with the gravity of memory, but a memory that doesn’t quite, or doesn’t only, belong to him. Even though this is the narrator’s first trip, one gets the sense of his already retracing his steps, of an atmospheric déjà vu.

These feelings of implication are related to the narrator’s sense that his surrounds are indistinguishable from his imagination and memory. He writes and reads things according to this sensibility. When he reads about the Organizzazione Ludwig in the newspaper and when he notices the name “Cadaverio” on his restaurant bill, he responds to the these details as though they were, in some important way, part of his past. Yet we, as readers, are prevented an easy track back to the events to which these documents might refer. Instead, Sebald’s interest lies in the inherent suggestiveness of the graphic artefacts he incorporates in his story. He invites us inside the experience of a writer through emphasising the way his narrator’s imagination is affected by the story he is writing.

**Section II: Whitehead’s Theory of Symbolic Reference**

Presently I will return my focus to the sense that Sebald’s prose is composed of two alternating tendencies or modes of experience: one in which the narrator experiences his surrounding world as a visual panorama; and the other, his dim feeling of implication according to the persisting energies of his past, and those same energies within the things or events which compose his surrounds. The literary text is a creative abstraction that can make the contrast between these two mixed modes of perception more or less intense. What I will explicate in this section is the extent to which Whitehead’s theory of perception illuminates what is at the crux of Sebald’s literary enterprise.

One of the unique and difficult to grasp aspects of Whitehead’s metaphysics is his account of symbolism, known simply as “Symbolic Reference”, outlined extensively as part of his speculative metaphysical scheme in *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, and in a more condensed fashion in *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*. For Whitehead, Symbolic Reference is the intermixing of two logically distinct modes of perception known as “perception in the mode of Causal Efficacy” and “perception
in the mode of Presentational Immediacy” (*Process*, 168-183). Perception in the mode of Causal Efficacy relates to the transfer of energy from one event to another, experienced by humans as what Whitehead calls “bodily withness” (170). Causal efficacy is common to all organic and even some inorganic entities—whether you’re a human, a plant, a jellyfish or an electron, you entertain energy derived from the immediate past in your own specific way (176-177). For humans, causal efficacy and the transfer of energy with which it is synonymous, relates to perception as a kind of emotion or feeling (162; 177). It is the sense we have of a meaningful relation to the world we move through—after a walk or a run we feel the causal efficacy of the exercise persisting within us. When someone is cruel or kind to us, the causal efficacy of their actions persists within a common history that results in our perceiving them differently.

Perception in the mode of presentational immediacy, on the other hand, relates to what we distinguish as being separate from us. Presentational immediacy is only experienced by organisms with highly evolved sensory apparatuses, such as humans, who have evolved the capacity to perceive things that are potentially irrelevant to bodily functioning. In Steven Meyer’s gloss, presentational immediacy is what “enables you to see me, here, and me to see you, there (supposing us to be in the same room, within eyesight, and not blind). By the same token it prevents me, over here, with all my accoutrements, from somehow being confused with you, over there, with all of yours” (2005: 18).

According to Whitehead, humans always experience the two modes in some kind of mix (*Process*, 168). It is through attending, implicitly or explicitly, to this paradoxical confusion and contrast that poetry and art might disclose what is at the heart of perceptual experience. In crudely romantic terms, one might run to the top of a hill and feel alive when confronted with the contrast of a distant view and the puffing and sweating intimacy of one’s body, and seek to express this in writing. In equally crude modernist terms, we might need to consider the relationship between the experience of writing and Symbolic Reference. How does the feeling of writing and of becoming a writer contribute to the writing that is taking place?

Although he does not use the terms “presentational immediacy” and “causal efficacy” in *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead identifies this duality as the essential “peculiarity of sense perception”:
We look at the scenery, at a picture, or at an approaching car on the road, as an external presentation given for our mental entertainment or mental anxiety. There it is, exposed to view. But on reflection, we elicit the underlying experience that we were seeing with our eyes. Usually this fact is not in explicit consciousness at the moment of perception. The bodily reference is recessive, the visible presentation is dominant. In the other modes of sensation, the body is more prominent.

Whitehead is keen to stress that “the other modes of sensation”, such as touch, give us if not a clearer, then a more intense, or ecstatic sense, of perception in the mode of causal efficacy. The point, of course, isn’t to deride vision as inherently misleading with regard to our perceptual experience, but to point out what visual perception tends to obscure—to point out the potentially constitutive role obscurity might play in experiencing causal efficacy as part of our visions.

Causal efficacy accounts for the fact that human reasoning is, to a large extent, a product of feelings derived from the body and its connectedness to an environment. Whitehead uses an example of hearing a sound to distinguish the way the two modes interact:

The sense-data, required for immediate sense-perception, enter into experience in virtue of the efficacy of the environment. This environment includes the bodily organs. For example, in the case of hearing a sound, the physical waves have entered the ears, and the agitations of the nerves have excited the brain. The sound is then heard as coming from a certain region in the external world. Thus perception in the mode of causal efficacy discloses that the data in the mode of sense-perception [presentational immediacy] are given by it. (Symbolism, 52-53)

One mode of perception relates to internally felt agitations, which tend to be perceived unconsciously through physiological functioning, and the other mode is geared to identifying the sound as “coming from a region in the external world”. The question that thus emerges—a question that should animate the minds of both philosophers and writers of prose fiction—is how to account for experience such that it is not merely reduced to the mode that perceives sense-data as without bodily reference. How is the activity of the body preserved in the abstractions of fully conscious waking experience? How does one write about an experience in a manner that includes the active functioning of the body and mind as part of what we can clearly comprehend or distinguish? What do the conventions of syntax and grammar tend to prevent writers writing about, and what role does the word “about” play here
in determining the nature of the writing that gets done? What happens if instead of writing “about” we write “with” or write “through”?

Concerning the present study, what is so compelling in Whitehead’s theory is the idea that our perceptual experience is constituted by a welter of ill-defined, nebulous feelings. That the clear and distinct visual information prominent in our experience is, in fact, the product of a complex, dynamic synthesis of bodily feelings, imaginings and past emotions. That what we see, and our capacity to reason—which we derive from our metaphorical grip on mental imagery—is inhabited by countless vague, barely perceptible influences from a present that stretches back into the past. Or, to borrow the phrasing of the Old General, with whom Dr K. shares a dinner on a few occasions at a hydropathic clinic in chapter III, “Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva”: “Tiny details imperceptible to us decide everything!” (156). Although it’s unlikely that Sebald was familiar with Whitehead’s doctrine of perception, he would have no doubt appreciated the licence it gave to the “tiny details” and the “complex interdependencies” (157) that are vaguely felt but which constitute the basis of our personal and impersonal perceptual experience.

There is limited literary criticism concerned with the applicability and relevance of Whitehead’s metaphysics. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Steven Meyer is one contemporary literary critic who points to the common ground between Whitehead and poets such as William Wordsworth and Gertrude Stein.22

The following quote, which Meyer contemplates in his study of Stein’s poetry, Irresistible Dictation, is taken from Whitehead’s Science and The Modern World. It relates to what Wordsworth values in nature, as evidenced in his poetry, that isn’t accounted for in the abstractions of modern science: “It is the brooding presence of the hills which haunts him. His theme is nature in solido, that is to say, he dwells on that mysterious presence of surrounding things, which imposes itself on any separate element that we set up as an individual for its own sake” (103). The “brooding” and “mysterious presence of surrounding things” relate to perception in the mode of

22 James Chandler picks up on some of the commonalities between Sebald’s prose and British romanticism, of which Wordsworth was an exemplar, concerning the question of memory. Chandler remarks that he was initially provoked to write about Sebald and romanticism due to the regularity with which the word “haunting” appears in reviews of Sebald’s work (243). Haunting is also one of the key descriptors of perception in the mode of causal efficacy: “One part of our experience is handy, and definite in our consciousness; also it is easy to reproduce at will. The other type of experience, however insistent, is vague, haunting, unmanageable” (Symbolism, 43).
causal efficacy, the sense by which the internal and external world are confused in an apprehensive bodily-environmental event. As Whitehead notes elsewhere:

An inhibition of familiar sensa is very apt to leave us prey to vague terrors respecting a circumambient world of causal operations. In the dark there are vague presences, doubtfully feared; in the silence the irresistible causal efficacy of nature presses itself upon us; in the vagueness of the low hum of insects in an August woodland, the inflow into ourselves of feelings from enveloping nature overwhelms us; in the dim consciousness of half-sleep, the presentations of sense fade away, and we are left with the vague feeling of influences from vague things around us. (Process, 176)

According to Whitehead, the contrast between what we perceive clearly through spatial discrimination, and the feeling of being impressed upon by an externality which is entwined with our physical functioning is “at the root of the pathos which haunts the world” (Symbolism, 190).

The regularity and precision of Sebald’s attention to this “mysterious presence of surrounding things”, and its contrast with what Kilbourn describes as “distanced visual mastery”, is part of what makes his work such a fertile site for analysis. What’s more, his concern with the past, with certain experiences of memory as immediate, imperceptible, grave and overcoming, relates exactly to what Whitehead attributes to our experience of causal efficacy, which is synonymous with “the hand of the settled past in the formation of the present” (50). Causal efficacy describes that process by which the past lives in the present, and the present becomes haunted by the past.

Meyer’s analysis of Wordsworth, and of writing generally, provides something of a precedent for the present interpretation of Sebald’s prose. Referring to the preface of the Lyrical Ballads, Meyer describes Wordsworth’s poetry as a “poetic science” combining “natural history and physiology at the ontogenetic level, that is, at the level of the individual rather than of the species” (36). Sebald’s regular, and often simultaneous, reference to the patterns and rhythms that recur in the natural world, along with the disturbed and similarly compulsive disposition of his narrator, make Meyer’s characterisation here equally apt for considering his work.

Meyer looks to examples from “The Two-Part Prelude”, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and “There Was a Boy”, and demonstrates that Wordsworth’s poetry might be read in relation to recent neuroscience concerning the
“synesthetic” or “multisensory” basis of sense perception. Rather than expressing the experience of sense-data in abstraction, Wordsworth describes the way physiological functioning and the surrounding environment are experienced as confused with each other. As Meyer remarks of a passage in “There Was a Boy”: “The intensity of visual and auditory perception in such intervals—their literally ecstatic nature, the sense of being driven out of, and beyond, one’s senses—occurs because one’s eyes and ears are focussing inward as well as outward” (40). What we read of in this poem is the sense by which the percipient carries the experiences of the surrounding world within them.

Meyer notes that for Whitehead “works of art, or more exactly, one’s experience of them, offered exemplary instances of symbolic reference” (2001: 190). Meyer equates such exemplarity with “literary miracles” which express Whitehead’s two modes as, on the one hand, “logically distinct” and, on the other hand, paradoxically, “fused together, examples of confusion due not to ‘logical inconsistency’ but experiential complexity” (190).

One particular example from *Vertigo* illuminates the difference between the two modes of perception Whitehead names. Leafing through archived papers from 1913 in the Verona civic library, the narrator entertains various fantasies. The advertisements he views, like Sebald’s text itself, contain both words and images. His comments in relation to the images are revealing of the role presentational immediacy plays in Symbolic Reference: “They were soundless and weightless these images and words of time gone by, flaring up briefly and instantly going out, each of them its own empty enigma” (120-121). This is in stark contrast to the narrator’s response, soon after, when he encounters the word “pigmei” in an article making hyperbolic claims about nationalist architecture and festivities:

For a long time my eyes remained fixed on the six letters of the word *pigmei*, the announcement of a destruction that had already taken place. It was as if I could hear the voice of the people, as it welled up, the violent inflection in the syllables: *pig-me-i, pig-me-i, pig-me-i*. The shouting roared within my ear, in reality doubtless the drumming of my own blood, amplified and distorted by my imagination. (121-122)

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23 Meyer borrows the phrases “merging of the senses” and “sensory convergence” from Barry E. Stein and M. Alex Meredith’s *The Merging of The Senses* (37-38).

24 The lines from Wordsworth’s poem read: “Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung/Listening, gentle shock of mild surprise/Has carried far into his heart” (cited in Meyer, 2001: 40).
Whereas in the former example the narrator is happily detached, entertaining the clearly apprehended visual data, in the latter he is struck with a haunting sense of gravity, all due to the confrontation with a single word. In the latter example, unseen, rhythmic voices, and the amplification of imperceptible physiological happenings provoke in the narrator a sense of confused implication. The metaphorical “as if” is revealing of the real feeling that the narrator hears the voices of the persecuted in the drumming of his blood. In both instances, the two modes of perception are operational. However, in the first instance perception in the mode of causal efficacy is recessive and perception in the mode of presentational exemplified, whereas in the second, the reverse is the case.

Essentially, the narrator’s response to this article is an answer, or propositional response, to the question he posed earlier: “what relation was there between the so-called monuments of the past and the vague longing, propagated through our bodies, to people the dust blown expanses and tidal plains of the future?” (106-107). Sebald suggestively exposes us to this “relation” by demonstrating the implication of the surrounding environment, documented history, the body, unconscious perception, imagination and conscious awareness. As Whitehead specifies, with regard to perception in the mode of causal efficacy, direct perception of the past is characterised by inheritance (Process, 119). As humans, we do not consciously experience this direct perception; perception for us is symbolically integrated with sense-data that function as mediators disclosing information about the things which compose our surrounds. Nonetheless, the feeling of inheritance may be preserved through Symbolic Reference, and in such instances we become conscious of the vector feeling-tone of the past as presentness. It is the sense by which we affectively...

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25 I am here making the assumption that the narrator associates the word “pigmei” with the regrettable idea of a sub-human species within the human, and the connotations this has with regard to both Western colonial enterprises and the internal realisation of such discourses and regimes of persecution in Germany prior to Sebald’s birth. Breaking the word down into its syllables, “pig-me-i”; and apprehending it as a kind of chant, highlights the narrator’s feelings of implication in the script. Here reading is an active, compositional process, where words, in addition to denoting meaning, seem to picture things within themselves and to call out meanings inclusive of and beyond their context.

26 Whitehead’s use of the word “vector” (which appears thirty-five times in Process and Reality) is an example of his using the language and concepts of modern physics to appeal to perception as an occurrence common to occasions said to be imperceptible—according to a definition of perception that privileges the knowing human subject. For Whitehead, perception is constituted primarily as a matter of feeling, and feeling is, for him, nebulous: “The philosophy of organism attributes ‘feeling’ throughout the actual world” (Process, 177). Whatever happens happens because it is able to feel what it is in relation to what it temporarily isn’t. “Vector,” notes Whitehead, is a word used in modern physics that describes “a definite transmission from elsewhere.” (Process, 116). “Feelings are ‘vectors’; for they feel what is there and transform it into what is here” (87).
comprehend the feeling of having come from somewhere, of having arrived, of having been on a journey. It names that sudden moment of realisation or awakening when we feel internally gripped by the distant reaches of history.

With Meyer’s remarks apropos of Wordsworth’s poetry in mind, we can think of the writer and their thinking body as a medium in which internal and external events are confusedly expressed. In order to discount the reality of such confusion, one might derisively describe it as hallucinatory: the perception of mental events as happening in an external reality. But are all hallucinatory experiences unproblematically opposed to so-called rational, clear and distinct perceptual experiences? Do we not always depend, to some extent, on feelings and perceptions derived internally for our characterisation of external events? And, likewise, are our feelings not composed, in some part, of the specific nature the objects we encounter? Is it not the reality of this confusion that our writing efforts should seek to express?

Presently I will turn to a further example from “All’estero” that aptly describes the intermixing of bodily and visual perception, and the process of conceptual elaboration through which our complex understanding of an event takes shape. After obtaining a replacement passport, the narrator wanders with a purposeful aimlessness through the streets of Milan. Upon untangling his shoelaces he comes to the sudden realisation that he “no longer had any knowledge of where [he] was” (115). He describes this as a “lapse of memory” and climbs to the “topmost gallery of the cathedral”, whereupon, “beset by recurring fits of vertigo”, he looks out at “the dusky, hazy panorama of a city” of which he remembers nothing (115). The narrator’s identity, previously represented by his misplaced passport, is now once again in the balance. This has the effect of creating a new context in which the narrator’s sense of self must be reconstructed according to the evidence experienced in his immediate surrounds. The narrator refers to the distressing intimacy of his fitful body and the seemingly meaningless panorama that fills his gaze—he is thus reduced to the defining aspect of human perceptual experience. His mind is blank, “nothing but a painful inane reflex”, and yet he still accounts for the contrasting varieties of perception that compose his experience (115-116). Then comes the following expression: “A menacing reflection of the darkness spreading within me loomed up in the west where an immense bank of cloud covered half the sky and cast its shadow on the seemingly endless sea of houses” (116). It is difficult, in this context, to attribute primacy to either the visual percept or the internal feeling. Although the cloud is described as a “reflection” of the
narrator’s internal experience, and therefore symbolic, the initial description of his feelings is metaphorical in the use of the word “dark”: we do not see inside our bodies such that they might be described as corresponding to a colour or tone. The narrator’s body does not contain a cloud, as such, but it is not the narrator’s internal experience as isolated from the surrounding elements to which the description stands to witness. Rather, there is a series of different events, bodily and environmental, that incorporate aspects of each other. The narrator’s identity is dispersed through his immediate surrounds while he remains elsewhere, and thus the identity of other events becomes crucial. Sebald gives us an insight here into the perceptual and cognitive cross-referencing that testifies to the situation of a human agent as an embodied part of a continually evolving environment.

In sum, Whitehead’s theory of Symbolic Reference is appealing to an analysis of Sebald’s prose for the following reasons: it dictates that the human organism is connected in a constitutive way to its surrounds; it proposes that the interaction between thinking, sense perception and unconscious processes is a symbolic activity, but not, like the Freudian unconscious, one that necessarily involves a repressive mechanism; and it recommends that what is pervasive in our experience is felt vaguely.

Sebald’s prose illuminates the contrast between the two modes Whitehead names, and invites the reader to attend to the dynamic synthesis of feelings and sense perception, with a particular emphasis on the role of expression and inscription in this process. The events of love, travel and the narrator’s continual and non-specific sense that he is “entangled in some dark web of intrigue” (71) invoke the vague and haunting kind of perception we typically associate with causal efficacy. What’s more, the narrator’s perception of his past, a past that is impersonal, indiscriminate and overwhelming, is synonymous with this mode. The experiences of vertigo that the narrator inhabits are a way of going inside his body, as it were, to realise the constitutive but not always articulate sense that it is the amplifier through which the past is transmitted, entertained and modified.
Section III: Beyle

The first chapter of *Vertigo*, “Beyle”, confronts questions to do with perception, memory, authorial perspective, and what relation these things have to do with writing—and not simply writing in the literary sense, but more generically as trace, recurrence, datum, mark. Beyle, the chapter’s protagonist, is Sebald’s reanimation of H. M. B. Stendhal, the author most famous for his novels *The Charterhouse of Parma* and *The Red and The Black*. Sebald, however, chooses not to focus on Stendhal’s literary catalogue, sticking to the more difficult to classify works, *The Life of Henri Brulard*, ostensibly a work of autobiographical non-fiction, accompanied by strange little maps and sketches setting out perspectives, and *On Love*, a metaphysical treatise on the topic of love.

Sebald’s characterisation of Stendhal as Beyle is coloured by a profound ambivalence. Without a doubt Sebald in some sense reveres the author for being ahead of his time in approaching issues to do with authorial authenticity: “The notes in which the 53-year old Beyle, writing during a sojourn at Civitavecchia, attempted to relive the tribulations of those days afford eloquent proof of the various difficulties entailed in the act of recollection” (5). And yet “Beyle” is, for a large part, an evocation of its protagonist’s sexual exploits, which are not at all portrayed in a flattering manner: “And once fully appareled in the uniform of a dragoon, this seventeen-and-a-half-year-old went around for days on end with an erection, before he finally dared disburden himself of the virginity he had brought with him from Paris” (11).

Sebald has very specific historico-theoretical reasons for making the condition of Beyle’s libido a matter of visible concern. He wants, as is evident throughout the chapter, to show the way Beyle’s body, and more exactly his health, is the subject of a particular type of scrutiny affected by the discourses, products, instruments and institutions of medical science.²⁷ The story of Beyle’s development is told in part from the perspective of a practitioner, as though his physiological fluctuations, the

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²⁷ J. J. Long, Eric Santner and Richard T. Gray note the correspondence between Sebald’s work and that of Michel Foucault; each will be a point of reference throughout this thesis. At this stage, it might suffice to say that Sebald and Foucault—and they are by no means exclusive in their concerns here—take an interest in the way the autonomous individual is produced as a consequence of institutional, discursive and technological developments that compose a historical environment, and therefore they remain implicated in the manipulation and control of such developments by regimes Foucault identified as the knowledge/power nexus.
pathological manifestations of his various illnesses and desires, were as important to note as his romantic adventures. Sebald’s narrator is a collector of indices far more varied than those that affirm or deny the expectant yearnings of a romantic observer.

Beyle is introduced as a character agitated by his adolescence, the protracted dawning of his adulthood. He is a complex of departure and arrival, and is desperate to fill the mature figure he believes awaits him in the future: “Seventeen years old at the time, he could now see before him the end of his profoundly detested childhood and adolescence and, with some enthusiasm, was embarking on a career in the armed services which was to take him the length and breadth of Europe” (4-5). There is a characteristic tension encapsulated in Beyle’s immanent dissatisfaction, here expressed by his unhappy youth, and his hopefulness with regard to what lies on or beyond the horizon. While this expression might hint that Beyle is departing the period of transformation with which adolescence is synonymous, instead he continues, over the course of the chapter, to be implicated in the same periodic confusion.

Encountering this quote we might ask: how does the past manifest? How might we express our experience of it? Sebald seems to suggest one trajectory, and then have this fold back on itself until we’re not sure in which direction we’re moving, or what direction even is. Different temporal perspectives are rapidly accumulated and blurred together. “Seventeen years”, as Sebald describes it, is immediately complicated with other periods, “at the time”, which is to say, constituted by another time that has already moved on. One might rightly wonder how a character would “see before” them “the end” of something from which they are emerging. Sebald extends the contradictory sense of already being elsewhere from which we derive our more stable understandings of temporarily.

In an article that interprets Sebald’s work as continuing in the tradition of British Romanticism, James Chandler selects another, similarly constructed sentence from the first chapter of *Vertigo*:

Later, thinking back to that September day on the field of Marengo, it often seemed to Beyle as if he had foreseen the years which lay ahead, all the campaigns and disasters, even the fall and exile of Napoleon, and as if he had realised then that he would not find his fortune in the army. At all events, it was in the autumn that he resolved to become the greatest writer of all time. (Sebald, cited in Chandler, 246)
Chandler remarks—and he is referring both to this specific quotation and to the chapter since its beginning:

In the space of a few pages Sebald has almost imperceptibly complicated the configuration of time and tense underlying that initial simple declaration about Napoleon’s “historic” 1801 crossing of the Great St. Bernard pass. And as with the account of the visit to the Marengo battlefield, the effect of this complication is as much a matter of making the moment live as it is of rendering it ghostly. (246)

Chandler has hit on something crucial here with regard to the “poetics of suspension” or “literary time” identified by Amir Eshel in his article on Austerlitz (74). He notes that the vertigo of the book’s title is both thematised in Beyle’s various encounters with the historically catastrophic (to which I will refer soon), and equally, that it is a “function of the narrative rhetoric” that Sebald employs to construe such encounters (245). More generally, this gives the reader the sense that time spreads and decays, consumes itself, and is subject to unforeseen obliteration, pockmarks and renewals, rather than being experienced as a straightforward evolution or succession of moments.

Beyle displays both modern and mythical sensibilities. On the one hand, he is a “meticulous observer” who keeps a “minute record of the fluctuating state of his health” (39), who subjects his body to the clinician’s gaze—“with the aid of a mirror, he examined the inflammations”(14)—a gaze that exists in an intimate relationship with his sexuality, with his performances as a competitive, sexually productive individual: “Beyle now observed the figure he cut in his mirror, and, as he supposed, in the eyes of the Milanese women” (11).28 On the other hand, Beyle remains in thrall to imperceptible environmental contingencies in which seasonal changes equate with changes in mood: “Late autumn, however, had brought dejection with it” (14); “When the summer arrived his fears, and with them the fever and the terrible stomach pains, gradually subsided” (16). The graphic inscriptions with which he is obsessed, and which, in some part, we can put down to the medical, military and economic changes undergone during the revolutionary period (“the stubborn facts” that Whitehead, 28 According to Ian Hacking’s The Taming of Chance, “inflammation” was a key medical concept during and in the years following the revolutionary period, by which time the localisation of disease, rather than treatment of the individual, had become commonplace (82).
following William James, labels as characterising truth value in modernity), are shown by Sebald to have a runic quality, to be not without some mythical appeal.  

Beyle experiences the advances of modernity as a kind of disease. He finds himself at odds with the period into which he is born, and without the necessary means to lastingly ease the burden. His search for meaning amid a climate of rapid social and technological advances manifests in a perverse psychology and behaviour which is often self-destructive. Sebald makes it difficult for us to confidently attribute Beyle’s anomalousness to his peculiar internal energy (i.e. the melancholy tendencies of the writer; the life of the writer is but a protracted adolescence) or to his relationship with the revolutionary happenings that define his historical context. What’s more, while Beyle seems at odds with himself and his historical situation, the historical situation also seems at odds with itself.

There are two examples in the first chapter of Vertigo in which Beyle experiences an overcoming confrontation with invisible but emotionally resonant forces. In considering these examples, I examine closely both Sebald’s poetics, or expression, and the episodic and thematic dimension of his prose. I want to keep in mind the two kinds of perception that Whitehead proposed as peculiar to the human experience of sense perception—although I may not continually invoke Whitehead’s terms, I emphasise the co-presence of feelings of nearness and emotional overcoming that are to do with physiological fluctuations and the exposure to the force of the past, as well as the contrast of these feelings with what is identifiably external and at a distance from the perceiving subject, in this case Beyle.

During a performance of the opera Il Matrimonio Segreto, Beyle experiences the play as though he were part of it:

Beyle’s imagination, already in turmoil owing to the abnormal conditions prevailing everywhere, was now further agitated by the music of Cimarosa. At one point in the first act where the secretly married Paolino and Caroline join their voices in the apprehensive duet Cara, non dubitar: pietade troveremo, se il ciel barbaro non è, he imagined himself not only on the boards of that rudimentary stage but indeed actually in the house of the deaf-eared merchant of Bologna, holding his youngest daughter in his arms. So profoundly was his heart stirred that, as the performance continued, tears came repeatedly to his eyes, and on leaving the Emporeum he was convinced that the actress who had played Caroline and who, he felt certain, had more than once bent her gaze most particularly on

29 Long’s W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity treats this subject in detail, and is examined more closely elsewhere in this thesis.
him, would be able to afford him the bliss promised by the music. He was not the least troubled by the circumstance that when the soprano was grappling with the more difficult of the coloraturas, her left eye swivelled a little to the outward, nor that her right upper canine was missing; quite the contrary, his exalted feelings seized upon these very defects. (9-10)

Perhaps the first thing to note about this passage is the fact that the “abnormal conditions”, which are further intensified during Beyle’s experience of the opera, are described as “prevailing everywhere”. Beyle exemplifies the strangeness of the time he occupies, which isn’t to say he is equivalent to it. As I suggested earlier, he is at odds with himself and with a period that seems at odds with itself. The relation is at once disjunctive and conjunctive: it is conjunctive through disjunction.

Beyle is a character whose sensitivity equates to a feeling that he is part of something large and important. This, in the context of viewing the play, means that Beyle attends less to the boundaries between the staged reality and the reality that is purportedly outside it, than he does to the propositional allure of the play itself. What Beyle is subject to is an experience in which his own standpoint (as a viewer outside the staged reality) is constituted by its implication in what it apprehends. Thus, he feels himself not only to be among the actors but also among the very characters in the fictional reality of the play.

We can also appreciate the way Beyle’s emotions, and his conviction regarding them, emerge from an encounter that at once stretches beyond and includes the particular “exulted” details. Beyle does not passively register the scene and contemplate the relationship between what he sees and an abstract criterion for beauty. Rather, “his exulted feelings seized upon” particular details that, as the word “defects” would suggest, might elsewhere be consider undesirable or unimportant. Beyle’s seeing is at once responsive and active. His heart is “stirred” and the music “promise[s]” “bliss”. The specifics of Beyle’s experience of Caroline are in part afforded by what the music promises and the prevalent “abnormal conditions” with which the passage began. This isn’t to reduce the specificity of what Beyle takes to be a beautiful object, but to include, in a more concrete fashion, what that specificity refers to. Beauty is never something abstract, but it is abstracted from an encounter that is promising and alluring.

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30 Whitehead describes propositions not as judgements but rather as “lures for feeling” (Process, 25). See Shavrio’s Without Criteria for a discussion of Whitehead’s concepts in relation to aesthetics. I discuss Shavrio’s work in relation to Sebald and aesthetics in the final chapter of this thesis.
Shortly after the above episode, Beyle confronts the remnants of war. He did not participate in the Battle of Marengo. However, his spectral, writerly commitment to revisitation has him return to the “vast and silent terrain” (17). Despite being familiar with the battle according to legendary gossip, Beyle finds that his empirical engagement with the excess of its remnants transfers to him a feeling of gravity incongruous with the pictures he’d formed in anticipation:

Now, however, he gazed upon the plain, noted the few stark trees, and saw, scattered over a vast area, the bones of perhaps 16,000 men and 4,000 horses that had lost their lives there, already bleached and shining with dew. The difference between the images of the battle which he had in his head and what he now saw before him as evidence that battle had in fact taken place occasioned in him a vertiginous sense of confusion such as he had never previously experienced. It may have been for that reason that the memorial column that had been erected on the battlefield made on him what he describes as an extremely mean impression. In its shabbiness, it fitted neither with his conception of the turbulence of the Battle of Marengo nor with the vast field of the dead on which he was now standing, alone with himself, like one meeting his doom. (18-19)

The “vertiginous sense of confusion” from which the book takes its title appears explicitly here for the first time. Beyle’s efforts to compute the significance of the vastness of the destruction, evidently still present after the event, and therefore historically and physically active, are met with a kind of sensory reversion. It is comparable to the affective overcoming that leads, earlier in the chapter, to Beyle’s having “no clear idea whatsoever” of what he once found so “horrifying” (6-7), and the “overpowering sensation” that “blotted out the memory entirely” during his first experience of sexual intercourse. It is worth noting that the kind of perception to which Beyle succumbs during the above episode is characterised by its vastness (the word “vast” appears twice in the passage), in addition to the incomprehensible vastness expressed by the figures “16,000 men and 4,000 horses”. This feeling of vastness, whereby Beyle becomes confused with his surrounds, is in stark contrast to the kind of perception suggested by the monument, which is impressive only by dint of its shabbiness.

The perspectival instability of Sebald’s protagonists and narrators is retrospectively accounted for as instancing a greater sensitivity to the complex

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31 Eric Santner notes Sebald’s “recourse to the mathematical sublime” in order to convey something of the inexplicable “being ‘in the midst’ of historical events” (161-2).
unfolding of an event. Sebald does not construct a story in which the point of view stands outside their immediate surrounds. Perspective in his stories is metonymically and metaphorically distributed across a narrated event. The dizzying disorientation of vertigo represents a crowding of differing, suggestive perceptual directions that might, or might not, result in a singular, clear and distinct conscious perspective.

One of the feats of the “Beyle” chapter is how, in fewer than thirty pages, Sebald constructs a biography of such seeming completeness. “Beyle” is a case study, what Susan Sontag has called “a brilliant exercise in Brief-Life writing” (43). It is a piece of writing that seems to ask a question of scale: how can something short appear or feel long and vice versa? What is the relationship between duration and completion or accomplishment?

What this particular case study deals with is a peculiar conception of the relationship between writer and writing. Beyle is defined by his vocation. How a vocation is perceived, how it might contribute to the perceptual objects with which one keeps company, seems crucial to the narrative Sebald constructs. Beyle is at once purposeful, compulsive, reflective and perverse. The idea he represents as a character tempts one to suggest that vocational and psychological tendencies might in some instances overlap, or that the overlap of vocation and psychology makes for interesting legend. This isn’t to suggest that writers necessarily conform to universal type (as if!), but that there might be something like a writerly gestalt that is frequently invoked in characterisations of writers. Accordingly, writers are solitary, voyeuristic, have an intense interest in symbols, and exhibit a systematic confusion of the public and the private—all traits that are emphasised in Beyle. Perhaps one way of framing this perversity is to think of writers or writerly feelings as events during which those characteristics that are definitive of human consciousness become patently expressed.

Take, for instance, the episode where Beyle follows Métilde Dembowski Visconti to Volterra (19-21). There is a sense that Beyle’s biography becomes an enactment of the voyeuristic potencies probable to those of the writerly disposition. In fact, one might argue that writerly voyeurism constitutes the primary topic of *Vertigo*’s first chapter. The entire episode (of Beyle and Métilde) is defined by a series of efforts made by the protagonist to maintain an unseen connection with his object of desire. He disguises himself as someone else, follows her, and obtains a plaster cast of her hand as a memento. In order to get close to Métilde, Beyle both
recedes into the distance and remains proximate through supplements. It seems writing isn’t simply something he does in his spare time, as an author, but something, according to Sebald’s emphasis, that characterises Beyle, becomes him as a character, defines him as a mode of existence. Beyle’s efforts to recollect and to relive through documentation, in some sense coincides with the way he relates to and exists in his surrounds more generally: how, for example, he finds himself having taken on a false identity, how he is affected by mirrors, his inscription of ciphers in the dust, the initials in his braces. There are so many surfaces here, so much opacity into which the past is written.

Indeed, Beyle is an obsessive inscriber. Sebald constructs the first chapter in such a way that the activity and materiality of writing is continually and suggestively invoked, and his nuanced use of graphics adds another dimension to the way writing is investigated. As alluded to above, writing is shown to be inclusive of things such as Beyle’s inscribing the initials of his lost lovers in the dust (27) and the name and date of a sexual conquest on his braces (13). The cast Beyle acquires of Métilde’s hand also emphasises the degree to which the process of recording remains crucial for him.

In his analysis of Vertigo, J. J. Long equates these aspects of Beyle’s character with “a specifically modern abdication of subjective interiority to a series of mnemotechnical supplements” (19). According to Long, the episodes involving the plaster cast and the drawing grid are instances of authentic experience being “displaced by an external mnemonic mechanism” (94). This chimes with the more general claim that such techniques of displacement, as exemplified in Sebald’s prose, are part of modernity’s long history “that stretches back…at least as far as the revolutionary period of European history” (95). My own concerns are with how Sebald’s approach to writing prose accounts for the sense by which the perceptual capacities of his characters are, to some extent, determined by the things that compose their surrounds. The Beyle narrative charts a genealogy of supplementary techniques among which writing is exemplary. Writing, for Sebald, is not simply the representation of the thoughts of a character such as Beyle—it is this, but there is also a relationship of feedback between the way writing affects the thoughts of the character in the act of writing, and, relatedly, what writing is as a thing with aesthetic and material properties.

The chapter closes with yet another instance that questions and extends what writing might mean: “As had long been his habit, Beyle calculated, with growing
frequency, the age to which he might expect to live in cryptographic forms which, in their scrawled, ominous abstraction, seem like harbingers of death” (30). Sebald includes an image of numbers and letters in a table form, with various crossings out, which he describes as an “impenetrable note” (30). Here, writing is a kind of calculation, a word which has its etymological roots in the Latin word, “calculus”, denoting a small pebble used on an abacus. There is something at once ancient and modern, rational and mythical, in the way Beyle attempts to derive meaning from, and create meaning for, his life through the manipulation of symbols. For him, the relationship between material and symbol, imagination and document, is mutually constitutive. In some sense, the symbols and ciphers are more real, more substantial, than the feelings for which they supposedly stand. The perceived world symbolises itself, and the writer is continually losing and finding himself amid this strange play of cryptographic forms.

The beginning of the second chapter of Vertigo similarly testifies to the way Sebald emphasises the inscribed or enciphered quality of the perceived and perceiving world. Here the narrator’s wanderings, the path he imagines them to trace, are described as taking the form of “a precisely defined sickle- or crescent-shaped area” (33). The traces left by the narrator are characterised as a kind of writing: “If the paths I had followed had been inked in, it would have seemed as though a man had kept trying out new tracks and connections over and over, only to be thwarted each time by the limitations of his reason, imagination or will-power, and obliged to turn back again” (34). The reference to the sickle shape and the ink, and likewise, to the involvement of the narrator’s faculties of thought in repeatedly “trying out new tracks and connections”, makes the physical activity of wandering productive of signs in a manner comparable to the writing and reading in which such an activity is represented. In a similar fashion, the narrator’s solitary state, his lostness and confinement in a city that is at once strange and familiar, invokes the expressive quality of his existence within the writing. This is apparent when his unsuccessful experience of attempting to communicate is described as follows: “There is something peculiarly dispiriting about the emptiness that wells up when, in a strange city, one dials the same telephone numbers in vain. If no one answers, it is a disappointment of huge significance, quite as if these few random ciphers were a matter of life and death” (35). There is continuity between this example and the close of the first
chapter, with Beyle using ciphers to calculate the duration of existence as “a matter of life and death”.

Throughout “All’estero”, we witness examples of micro-narratives where characters—including, paradigmatically, the narrator—attempt to express themselves and meaningfully organise their lives (the “matter of life and death”) by deferring to codified systems or internally defined microworlds. The important thing to remember in the context of Sebald’s narratives is that these systems or forms of order are primarily expressive, their meaningfulness is constituted through the suggestion of unknown but imaginable varieties or order.

For example, Giacomo Casanova, who was a prisoner in the Doge’s Palace, predicts the date on which he should escape “using a system comparable to the Sortes Virgilianae”: “This instruction, pinpointing the very hour, was the all decisive sign Casanova had wanted, for he believed that a law was at work in so extraordinary coincidence, inaccessible to even the most incisive thought, to which he must therefore defer” (59). The narrator supplements this story with a more mundane coincidence that places him “near the Doge’s Palace” on the day of Casanova’s escape, a fact which is substantiated on a page of the narrator’s diary, included as an image in the text (59-60). Like Beyle’s scrawling and the indecipherable pattern the narrator follows and marks out around the city (his wanderings, like his thinking and his perspective, are at once random and limited), the scribbled page from the diary points not so much to the exceptional nature of the coincidence, but to its constitutive role in his writing enterprise: “drawing connections between events that lay far apart but which seemed to me to be of the same order” (94).

Later in the chapter, on the train to Milan, the narrator refers to “Der Beredte Italiener, a handbook published in 1878 in Berne, for all who wish to make speedy progress in colloquial Italian” (104). Of the book, the narrator remarks:

…everything seemed arranged in the best of all possible ways, quite as though the world was made up purely of letters and words, and as if, through this act of transformation, even the greatest of horrors were safely banished, as if to each dark side there were a redeeming counterpart, to every evil its good, to every pain its pleasure, and to every lie a measure of truth. (105)32

32 The Leibnizian undertones of this quotation are difficult to ignore, in particular the phrase “the best of all possible ways” and a cryptic world composed of elements comparable to “letters and words”. I discuss the relationship between Leibniz’s philosophy and Sebald’s prose in the third chapter of this thesis.
The apparent harmony of opposites instanced in this text, which, like the previous example, is also included as a graphic, speaks explicitly to an earlier remark, attributed to Beyle: “he had finally felt as if his life finally had its proper place in a perfect system, or at least one that was aspiring to perfection, and in which beauty and terror bore an exact relation to each other” (14). As I discuss in greater detail in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis, Sebald grants agency to the documentary forms of organisation on which humans have historically depended in order to create new worlds, worlds that they become increasingly and sometimes problematically embedded within.

Sebald’s interest in the creation of new systems of reference through differing and interconnected varieties of documentation highlights the metaphysical inclinations that inform his peculiar take on the genre of prose fiction. Kilbourn testifies to this when, in an article on the correspondences between Sebald’s prose and the work of Nabokov and Kafka, he observes:

…the course of events—a certain narrative logic—is determined neither by individual agency nor by some kind of “fate,” but by the complex interdependency and interconnectivity of things; in other words, by what is commonly referred to as chance, where chance occurrences, coincidences, and all manner of accidents, when viewed from the proper perspective, can be seen to relate together in fantastically complex but discernibly meaningful configurations. (2006: 43)

In response to this quotation we might wonder what, then, is the “proper perspective”, and by what means does one come to it? The systems of calculation deployed by Beyle and Casanova, and the narrator’s haphazard testing of possible connections in the Venice cityscape, all suggest that the activity of writing enables one to accede to a mode of habitation that makes chance happenings seem more likely. Kilbourn stresses that events are determined not by the poles of “individual agency” and the impersonal forces of fate, but rather by systems of meaning that are defined by their fantastic complexity. Such systems, as noted in the above citation, are characterised by “aspiring to”, by their having not yet arrived, by their capacity to suggest what is not immediately perceptible. In the “proper perspective” Kilbourn names, chance is not so much pure, chaotic randomness, but that element of internal specificity that requires
each happening be addressed according its complexity: the unique way it incorporates and exceeds its surrounds and its history.

Turning to Whitehead’s doctrine of perception, we experience the “interconnectivity of things” through perception in the mode of causal efficacy. Whitehead emphasises that our experience of causal efficacy is characterised by a vague sense of confusion between internal and external realms, a nearness to a past that is an overcoming, imperceptibly present force. Causal efficacy names a variety of perception that is affect-based and often incomprehensible or inexplicable. Perhaps it is characteristic of the sense of a gamble, as encapsulated in Beyle’s and Casanova’s efforts to defer to a system of meaning beyond their own rational capacities to comprehend, but to which they nonetheless adhere. The Causal efficacy of the peculiar experience of writing prose fiction relates to the sense by which the writer becomes committed to a documented, illusory existence.

Steven Shaviro, a theorist who recently turned to the work of Whitehead as a site of interest, comments on the romantic sentiment of causal efficacy:

There is more than a hint of Romanticism in Whitehead’s notion of causal efficacy, just as there is in Heidegger’s related notion of a world of equipment, forming “a single gigantic system of references” (Harman 2007a, 62). The withdrawal of things into an ever-ramifying network of traces has much in common with the early-nineteenth-century Romantic idea of nature… (2011: 10)

The “ever-ramifying network of traces” identified here by Shaviro, clearly invokes Sebald’s conception of an inscrutable system to which various characters and his narrator gain access through their activities of inscription and their compulsive preoccupation with the past. Shaviro earmarks Whitehead’s analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Mont Blanc” as an instance where the proximity of Whitehead’s ideas and the British romantic poets are apparent (11).

Chandler similarly situates Sebald in a romantic context, noting both his and Wordsworth’s conception of “the field of history as kind of ‘extended memory’” (250-251). That is, history construed as a field in which the traces of the past interconnect and inform an evolving present. Sebald’s prose, however, is distinguished from romantic conceptions of expression, not only by its themes, which are modern in their focus, but in the way he abdicates the expressive function to supplementary materials: the devices of mediation, the prosthetic thought forms that
populate his prose. The gamble taken by the writer in order to inhabit their illusory world is regarded as an event that must include the efficacy of the medium in the process.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Sebald’s take on the love story, a genre undoubtedly informed by romantic inclinations, is not so much about a romantic subject and a beloved object, but rather the differing ways in which writers have historically sought express emotions that are at once common and complex. He addresses what are perhaps thought of as philosophical or theoretical concerns through a unique use of the narrative form that emphasises the agency of graphics and documents.

In the third chapter of Vertigo, there is a particularly compelling instance that highlights what I take to be essential to Sebald’s syncopated love story. “Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva” (“Dr K.”), details the travels and insights of Dr K., a metonymic realisation of Kafka’s literary and biographical archive. In this chapter, we understand coincidence through the paradigm of misfortune. Like Beyle, Dr K. is, to some extent, preoccupied with the problem of love, a love which for him is represented by various degrees of its impossibility. Also, like Beyle, Dr K. is a writer, and Sebald’s narrative reanimates propositions, attributable to a certain Kafka, such that the status of the writer within the writing is apparent. For example, when Dr K. remarks on the beauty of the wedded couples, Sebald draws attention to the mediated expressiveness of the proposition: “How it is beautiful, he wrote, with an exclamation mark, in one of those somewhat awry formulations in which language for a moment gives free rein to the emotions”. This is followed by a statement in which an exclamation mark features: “How it is beautiful, and how we undervalue it!” (148) Writing is thus made to picture itself using multiple frames of reference. Sebald’s perspective is inside the writing—he manipulates both its semantic (meaningful) and its graphic (expressive) capacity. The presence of this exclamation mark also represents, in a more subtle fashion, what Sebald achieves with his use of uncaptioned images and graphics throughout the text. The dilemma of his narrator is represented by the effort to account for the way documents incorporate worlds. Sebald does this by fashioning new worlds in which documents contribute to the perceptual and emotional lives of characters or points of view, among which his narrator is paradigmatic.
Section IV: The Event as Invisible Observer

As I have been arguing, a defining trait of Sebald’s prose fiction is its continual appeal to a reality that has already been documented, to reality as document. This is no doubt in some part informed by the constellation of Sebald’s birth, born as he was in the aftermath of the historical atrocities of World War II, and thus discovering, though not necessarily making sense of, this event through its mediated transmission. However, Sebald’s approach to historical objectivity, and to the relationship between truth and documentation, should not be reduced to a “representational crisis” in the face of the inexplicable. What Sebald’s prose stands in evidence of is the extent to which the veracity of an account is sustained by the expressive capacity of things and events that instance their own discrete realities, and are world-forming in this sense. In the words of Bruno Latour, apropos of a definition of scientific experimentation, things become the judges of what we say about them. This isn’t to suggest Sebald’s prose is scientific, but that he recognises the reality of what comes between a subject and the truths it might seek to express.

The concluding pages of Vertigo are exemplary regarding this aspect of Sebald’s prose. The milieu is typical of his work, with the narrator rocketing along through the fringes of London on a train. He is thus, in a curiously modern way, separated from the surrounds he describes. The weather is characteristically tempestuous and bleak. He lists the passing stations, and perhaps in order for him to elicit a sense of meaningful involvement in something, turns his attention to Samuel Pepys’s diary, and to the similarly desolate, apocalyptic and, indeed, cinematic visions of his inner landscape:

Idly I turned the pages of an India paper edition of Samuel Pepys’s diary, Everyman’s Library, 1913, which I had purchased that afternoon, and read passages at random in this 1,500-page account, until drowsiness overcame me and I found myself going over the same few lines again and again without any notion of what they meant. And then I dreamed that I was walking through mountainous terrain. A white roadway of finely crushed stone stretched far ahead and in endless hairpins went on and up through the woods and finally, at the top of the pass, led through a deep

33 Marianne Hirsch coined the term “postmemory” to describe this second generation transmission. See Santner’s On Creaturely Life for a discussion of this concept in relation to Sebald’s prose (158-159).
34 Latour’s phrasing here is taken from an interview also featuring Steven Meyer, Wolfram Schmidgen, Josh Hoeynck, Carter Smith and Courtney Weiss, conducted at Washington University St Louis in 2006, and published in Arch Literary Journal.
cutting across to the other side of the high range, which I recognised as the Alps. Everything I saw from up there was of the same chalky colour, a bright, glaring grey in which a myriad of quartz fragments glimmered, as if the rocks, by a force deep inside them, were being dissolved by light. (261)

The moment the narrator introduces his dream the narrating “I” becomes a different, though continuous, character or point of view. It is the expressiveness of the dream that translates the meaning of the lines that the narrator, in his waking state, does not comprehend. In their indifference to us, dreams contribute, in a paradoxical fashion, to the objectivity of our speaking positions. Here it is a fictional objectivity, but an appeal to objectivity nonetheless. The dream enables the narrator to escape from the initial limitations of his speaking position: the perspective of the dreamer is a fluid one fixed by each detail. The dream captures or provides us with a snapshot of a scene in which the narrator is at once absent and included. It instances its own mode of selection and arrangement, much like the Der Beredete Italiener or any of the other documents on which the narrator depends in order to bear witness to his duration. The dream speaks for the narrator by including him within it, and the more agency it is granted the more compelling the his account becomes.35

The same is true of Sebald’s use of Samuel Pepys’ diary, which is woven into the conclusion. To be precise, it is actually the narrator’s dream that begins to quote from Pepys’ account. So, in a sense, the narrator has receded further into the distance, separated from us by his dream and the diary: he speaks through his dream which speaks through the diary. The narrator animates the past by describing how it persists within him as discrete, though interconnected, realities. In accounting for the autonomous existence of documents that are incorporated into and divide up the

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35 My argument here is situated in relation to Meyer’s comments apropos the correspondence between William James’ description of a certain “subconscious region” and the writing instruments used in laboratory investigations of automatic consciousness (namely, a planchette), and Latour’s characterisation of “quasi-objects” used in experimental science generally (2001: 377, fn. 30). In the article to which Meyer refers, Latour describes the writing instruments of modern, experimental science as: “inert bodies, incapable of will and prepossession but able to show, sign, write, and scribble inside the laboratory instrument and in front of reliable witnesses” (1990: 157). Meyer remarks that, “Latour extends the realm of phenomena James is describing from psychical research to all experimental science, suggesting that laboratory instruments are in essence elaborate writing instruments—pen and paper writ large” (377, fn. 30). The documentary status of a dream is attributable to its existence as an event that is, in a comparable way, “incapable of will and prepossession but able to show, sign, write, and scribble”—albeit dependent also on the events of conscious memory, speech or writing that make it publicly graspable. Such an understanding of dreams represents an effort to treat them as ontological equivalents to the knowing subject and is crucial to my interpretation of the differing varieties of writing Sebald deploys in accounting for the passage of his narrator.
narrator’s private experience, Sebald provides the reader with an insight into the perspective of a subject in formation (a subject as event).

The apocalyptic scene constructed from the fragments of Pepys’ diary suggestively resembles the scene from a dream described prior to it. The form Pepys’ account of the Great Fire of London takes in the narrator’s dream is that of “an echo that had almost faded away”. The visual imagery is described as “words returned”, the same words we read on the page. In this swirling arrangement of perspectives, Sebald has now brought into focus the immediacy of the written word, enlivened by the seamless sequencing of mediated realities. What’s more, in characterising Pepys’ account as a fading echo, Sebald invokes the way his own writing might persist within the reader. In addition to describing an evocative scene, Sebald has carefully attended to the bigger picture, to the suggestive background that accompanies us as we read, interpret, emphasise and neglect elements of the writing. He appeals to the dissolving, previously comprehended elements of a narrative that colour any moment of present consciousness with meaning, and to the easy to ignore specificity of the written page as interface.

The book’s closing image, which witnesses the conflagration of London, deftly invokes the sense of an invisible perspective that seems to look upon the event from within it. This time, the air functions as a sonic medium:

A muffled, fearful, thudding sound, moving like waves through the air. The powder house exploded. We flee onto the water. The glare around us everywhere, and yonder, before the darkened skies, in one great arc the jagged wall of fire. And, the day after, a silent rain of ashes, westward, as far as Windsor Park. (262-263)

The “thudding sound” here recalls the narrator’s temples in chapter II, described as “throbbing with pain”, and the “drumming [of his] blood” while reading the archived newspapers in the Verona library. In such instances, the difference between interior and exterior worlds, between physical and psychological happenings, is included within an event composed of both characteristics. The fact that a sound might be “fearful” accounts subtly for the human observer without reducing the specificity of that sound to human mentality. The event of the fire transfers its resonant features to the writing perspective such that they occur inside as well as outside the writer. The focus on sound, in contrast to vision, discloses the transference of the rhythms or
tremors of an event, the sense of its being perceived in the mode of causal efficacy rather than presentational immediacy. The tone appeals to an immanent prophecy. The narrator, ventriloquising Pepys, wonders: “Is this the end of time?”—and thus the book’s end is suitably situated at that anachronistic, and cataclysmic, moment when the destruction of something bears witness to implication of the past, present and future. The end of time remains a question considered from the perspective of an event that continues to take place.

An earlier episode in chapter II formally and thematically mirrors the book’s closing pages. Again, the narrator is hurtling through the landscape on a train, this time from Vienna to Venice. He describes cinematic visions, both of the mountain scenes flitting past and of his dreams. In this instance the dream is a comparatively brief account of his floating above a landscape that is apparently at once Austria and Argentina (50). However, upon waking, the narrator’s visions seem touched by the fantastic scenes to which he was exposed in his sleep. He opens the window of the train and the landscape floods in: “Dark, narrow, ragged valleys opened up, mountain streams and waterfalls threw up white spray in a night on the edge of dawn, so close that their cold breath against my face made me shiver” (50). After recognising the landscape, which had been subject to a recent natural disaster, the narrator, via the medium of a cloud, refers to a Tiepolo painting through which the narration continues:

The low-lying cloud drifting in from the Alpine valleys and across that desolated country was conjoined in my mind’s eye with a Tiepolo painting which I have often looked at for hours. It shows the plague-ravaged town of Este on the plain, seemingly unscathed. In the background are mountains, and a smoking summit. The light diffused through the picture seems to have been painted as if through a veil of ash. One could almost suppose it was this light that drove the people out of the town in the open fields, where, after reeling about for some time, they were finally laid low by the scourge they carried within them. In the centre foreground of the painting lies a mother dead of the plague, her child still alive in her arms. Kneeling to the left is St Thecla, interceding for the inhabitants of the town, her face upturned to where the heavenly hosts are traversing the aether. Holy Thecla, pray for us, that we may be safely delivered from all contagion and sudden death and most mercifully saved from perdition. Amen. (49-51)

Here again, it is not so much a narrator that tells the reader a story, but rather a series of mediums coming together in a particular manner and to which the narrative event
stands to witness. Like the dream in the previous account, the “low-lying cloud” is a medium that refers to another document. The narrator’s psychological specificity, his want to confess a certain conceit, moves into the background to allow these differing realities to speak through him.

The object of the painting, according to the narrator’s reading, is the presence of an immaterial materiality: the diffusion of light or aether, which is compared to a “veil of ash”. If we look to the earlier example, once again Sebald is emphasising a certain manifestation of light: a “chalky colour, a bright, glaring grey in which a myriad of quartz fragments glimmered, as if the rocks, by a force deep inside them, were being dissolved by light”. The material world is enlivened, energised by forces that are internal to it, which verge on the realm of imperceptibility. In staging the above scenes as such, Sebald is invoking the perceptual capacity of the observed world in contributing to the panorama composed.

Both Tiffany and Connor, to whom I referred in my introduction, discuss the paradoxical materiality of ether, and its suggestiveness as an object or event that metonymically represents the cognitive and perceptual efforts of humans that sought to delimit its nature (2000: 131-138; 2010: 148-172). I discuss their work in relation to Sebald’s use of thought forms and his accounting for the perceptual capacities of immaterial reality (in the form of weather events, ghosts, energy and light) more comprehensively over the course of this thesis. Right now, what I wish to point out is the elegant density of Sebald’s prose concerning the presence of documents and mediums that speak with the narrator. That is to say, he both speaks through these mediums and, in a sense, they speak through him. He lives in a world of chattering, glimmering, oscillating things, and composes his accounts such that this noise imbues his visions with vivacity.

One final thing to note about the above excerpt is the closing word, “Amen”. At the same time as shifting, through the medium of the cloud, from an observed scene to a painting, Sebald has shifted his mode of address to that of a prayer. He is speaking from the perspective of the people in the painting to a God that seems to have deserted them. The use of ekphrasis here is not that of a stable, taken for granted speaking position that describes an artwork or an object with its own particular mode of reference. Instead, the speaking position of Sebald’s narrator incorporates or becomes the voices or realities of the objects or events it describes. He abstracts and
emphasises elements of them to contribute to an evolving and complex sequence of events that is at once personal and metaphysical.
2.

*THE EMIGRANTS & AUSTERLITZ:*

The Inscription of a Moment
The task of documentation is central to the conceit of all of Sebald’s prose fiction works. While in *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* the narrator’s mission principally concerns his own story, or his own literary-historical interests, in *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* he seeks out interlocutors whose story he evidently feels it is essential to tell. *The Emigrants* is structured as four character studies, each with a remarkable degree of thematic congruence: each chapter tells the story of a man (Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth and Max Ferber) who suffers an experience of loss in their earlier life, which results in a lack of continuity between past and present. Likewise, *Austerlitz* details the life of a character that suffered the childhood trauma of being separated from his parents, and who subsequently lives in a present directed toward a future that is without coherence. In both books the narrator attempts to account for this discontinuity or incoherence through composing a document that is aesthetically compelling.

As readers we are situated with the narrator at the very point when the consequences of the past are being weighed up in a reconstructed present. While the narrator is at pains not to misappropriate the biographical specificity of his various interlocutors, there is an implicit sense that he is re-experiencing or sympathising with their suffering. The narrator seems to view his life as an outsider, as though, to use the expression of Henry Selwyn in the first chapter of *The Emigrants*, he were an “ornamental hermit” (5). In light of this, rather than focus on the thematic or biographical proximity of the narrator and the characters that he compulsively and fortuitously meets, in this chapter I emphasise a formal connection between the situation of the writer-narrator within his own text, and the lives of these characters, who seemingly only know themselves as a series of opaque documents, or through a past they regard as inexplicable.

In my reading, I treat the two books as if they comprise a single work. This might be regarded as a somewhat audacious move. My reasoning relates to what I interpret in Sebald’s work as an invitation or a suggestion to imaginatively consider what constitutes a book, and how narrative persists in memory. Implicated in such reasoning is a certain understanding of time, of the way history can be read, and of the influence of the past in the present. What Sebald’s understanding of time suggests is that events which, according to one paradigm, might appear unrelated, or remote from each other, according to another paradigm, might in fact appear impossibly close. In this sense, supposedly modern civilisations may, according to certain practices or sets
of ideas, exist in a paradoxical proximity to civilisations considered to be comparatively archaic.

The paradigm of the book as a self-contained, unitary event or object is one way to guide oneself though the terrain of an author’s oeuvre. I obey the conventions of this paradigm for a good portion of this thesis. However, in analysing The Emigrants and Austerlitz, I have adhered to a method of reading that implies slightly more shifty ground with regard to the separation of the two works. In my interpretation, I recommend that certain parts of one book might be read as indexically persistent in another. For instance, the final narrative of The Emigrants, “Max Ferber”, seems to unmistakably herald the more novelistically developed conceit of Austerlitz. As Borgman et al. point out in their article “Desperate Affirmation”, both involve children who were sent to England before the outbreak of war (208). Commenting on the characters of Ferber and Austerlitz, the authors remark: “They never saw their parents again. By adoption they were given a second life in which the past, including their mother tongue, was either erased or faded away, until it catches up with them again and pitches them into deeper melancholy and depression, madness or suicide” (208). Aside from this thematic continuity, there is a perhaps more significant critical, poetic and philosophical engagement in both texts as concerning the question of witnessing, of speaking in the place of the other, and of writing, especially of catastrophic events, paradigmatically the Shoah, that themselves pose problems as to whether or not they can be spoken or written.

My reading of the two texts, in particular The Emigrants, is uneven in its focus. I spend significantly more time discussing the final chapter, “Max Ferber”, than the three preceding chapters. My reasons for doing this primarily relate to the prominent role the narrator’s own task of documentation is given in this chapter, and its striking continuity with other examples from Austerlitz.

Section I: Writing as Liveliness and the Compositional Moment

The Emigrants and Austerlitz each invite us to consider the ways in which a certain compositional moment is implicated in, or confused with, the empirical and recollected events which it is describing. In these narratives, as from the very beginning of Sebald’s (published) prose-fictional project, questions to do with the
limitations and estrangement one feels in confronting the past, through memory, while writing, are exhibited as part of the writing process.

In order to adequately grasp the complexity of an event, the narrator-writer of Sebald’s books appeals to a variety of graphic devices in which the traces of the past are seen to circulate in allusive communication with each other. Sebald includes the compositional scruples of a writer as part of the phenomenological and recollective experience of a first-person narrator. Critics are moved to point to the paucity of the narrator’s memory as evidenced by his recruitment of objects of representation, which typically include: gravestones, diaries, photographs, newspapers, maps, buildings and letters. Sebald emphasises the role things play in creating readings and expressions of the real and in what inscriptions are if we consider them to be kinds of things. Hence the prominence of writing aids such as the agenda (127; 132; 135), or the image of the child writing (171) in The Emigrants, both of which recommend that writing occurs as part of certain materials or practices, and that it lends itself to certain postures and modes of attention.

When attempting to piece together “the account of Max Ferber”, the narrator comments on the difficulties he confronted in the effort not only to “do justice to” his subject matter, but also, more generally, “the entire questionable business of writing” (230). The narrator remarks, “Often I could not get on for hours at a time, and not infrequently I unravelled what I had done, continuously tormented by scruples that were taking tighter hold and steadily paralysing me” (230). At this point, the narrator’s writing, which exists in an indexical relation to the writing we are reading, begins to disintegrate; it no longer remains an extension of his thoughts or his efforts to intend lexical meaning, and instead becomes pictographic, or a kind of writing drawing: “I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds

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36 In his article on an alternate history of organicism in seventeenth-century biology (in particular, the work of William Harvey), and the potential relevance of Whitehead’s philosophy for science studies, James J. Bono footnotes a remark made by Ludwig Wittgenstein that is especially relevant in this context. “My colleague, Jim Swan, reminds me,” writes Bono, “of Wittgenstein’s remark about the place where ‘thinking takes place’ as (among others) ‘the paper on which we write’” (2005: 175). Bono goes on to list a series of contemporary thinkers for whom “material, embodied gestures” are “fundamental to thinking”. These include: Gilles Châtelet, Brian Rotman, Sha Xin Wei, Mark Hansen and himself. The present argument proposes that Sebald, albeit according to a differing generic realisation, would not be out of place in such a list, or at least that his work is obliquely and thought-provokingly in communication with the projects of these authors.
and patches, utterly botched” (230-1). In a typical appeal to the pathological dimension of his vocation, Sebald here describes writing as both a kind of action, and also composed of extratextual elements that contribute to the graphic aspect of the text. It seems no accident that the image of a salt crystal, directly preceding this description, instances a kind of deranged outgrowth that is comparable to the narrator’s failed testimonial.

Something similar takes place in Austerlitz. Jacques Austerlitz relates to the narrator that while working on his ongoing and impossibly wide-scoped “investigations into the history of architecture and civilisation” (120), he experiences something like an eclipse of his literary-cognitive faculties:

I began to assemble and recast anything that still passed muster in order to re-create before my own eyes, as if in the pages of an album, the picture of the landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey had taken me. But the more I laboured on this project over several months, the more pitiful did the results seem. I was increasingly overcome by a sense of aversion and distaste, said Austerlitz, at the mere thought of opening the bundles of papers and looking through the endless reams I had written over the course of the years...now I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence, and no sooner had I thought such a sentence out, with the greatest effort, and written it down, than I saw the awkward falsity of my constructions and the inadequacy of all the words I had employed. (121-122)

Here, writing is emphasised as an activity without any specific content, something that Austerlitz had to “assemble” and “recast”—words that hit a kind of common ground between physical and mental processes. Shortly after, he even describes a sentence as “a makeshift expedient, a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance, something which we use, in the same way as many seaplants and animals use their tentacles, to grope blindly through the darkness enveloping us” (124). The description of a sentence as something that might “grop[e] blindly” perhaps recalls the Whiteheadian term “prehension”, which names the process whereby different events internalise and uniquely express their relations with the world (SMW, 80; 86). A prehension is, in this sense, a grasping, as the word’s etymology recommends, and is testament to the shift in Whitehead’s metaphysics from an account of perception modelled on, and biased toward, vision, and the clear and distinct consciousness with which it tends to be associated. Similarly, for Sebald, writing is as much a way to touch, to hold, and to internally feel, as it is a way to distinguish, comprehend and
elucidate. We witness these countervailing tendencies in the distress of Austerlitz and the narrator concerning their compositional processes, and their inability to know, utterly, who they are beyond this activity.

Although Sebald characteristically traces the contours of Austerlitz’s representational efforts as a kind of failure—as if, in the process negating something, he is better able to weigh up and express what it is—he also, as in the example from *The Emigrants*, invites us to consider what writing might mean as kind of energised, organic substance or residue, something beyond its role as a container of meaning; a kind of formless form in which implicit structures of order might be referenced and expressed. Of course all writing makes use of implicit grammatical structures and styles. But more often than not, at least concerning journalistic, essayistic, academic and narrative prose (perhaps less so poetry), the sense of writing as a loose organisational structure is backgrounded in order to get to the point—often necessarily so. I’m suggesting that Sebald’s prose evinces a sustained interest in the way things organise themselves and fall apart, which manifests at both thematic, formal, graphic and grammatical levels of the text.

As meaningful expression disintegrates or loses its coherence, writing becomes pictographic, at once word and image, and likewise, a distinctively time-filled process:

> I could see no connections any more, the sentences resolved into a series of separate words, and the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-grey trail gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature, and the sight of it increasingly filled me with feelings of horror and shame. (124)

The ciphers on the page, and the larger words and sentences they form, are meaningful as forms of liveliness. We might use a sentence to “gropo”, and letters might be creaturely forms of expressivity. We are reminded that writing and reading require particular kinds of movement: the creature crawls, which is reminiscent of the scrawl that is being described. Writing isn’t simply the setting down of words that contain meaning, but it is also the instance of a graphic performance, and suggestive of gestures, undead rhythms and trace forms of organisation. Although the congruence between writing and a certain creatureliness (Santner, 2005) is here expressed by way of a metaphor, what I will come to argue in this chapter is that the
relationship is more than metaphorical concerning the implication of writing as a thing within the moment of composition. That is, I contend that writing is both something through which the writer thinks and perceives, and, paradoxically perhaps, something that thinks, or perceives the writer. Sebald’s prose expresses an awareness of the efficacy of the medium in creating an event to which both writer and writing bear witness. This awareness is built into the way his narratives work.

In the context of Austerlitz, the loss of meaning described above is a product of Austerlitz’s undeveloped understanding of his past, his lack of memory, and his continuous efforts to avoid confronting the trauma of his childhood. However, considering the other quasi-biographies and autobiographies represented in Sebald’s oeuvre, the “sense of aversion and distaste” and the “feelings of horror and shame”, here described in response to one’s vocation, are not peculiar to Austerlitz. For example, the narrator of The Rings of Saturn, who compares weaving to writing, notes that both can be torturous, debilitating processes: “It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of the working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling they have got hold of the wrong thread” (283). The relationship between writer and vocation is characterised here by a perverse and romanticised crossing of commitment and suffering.

Sebald’s narrative conception of what writing is is an activity that exemplifies the precariousness of order that both keeps chaos at bay and, in some sense, tends toward chaos. Although Sebald thematically accounts for this precariousness through invoking the sense by which his narrators and other characters lose control of their cognitive-linguistic faculties, his work is perhaps more interestingly read as providing an example of a particular kind of control or awareness concerning the complexities of writing and thinking. The intricacy the narrator of The Rings of Saturn names as pursuing him into his sleeping state is present on the page before the reader in the carefully balanced, elegant, yet paradoxically dense quality of Sebald’s prose. It is perhaps worth recalling a comment Sebald made in relation to Nabokov’s prose, namely that “in a good sentence there is a place for everything and everything is in its place” (Campo Santo, 152), thus recommending that, in addition to conveying meaningfulness, a sentence might also invoke a sense of stylistic specificity, not in the words as such, but in the sense of rhythm and pattern they orchestrate.
Another example in which the energetic, emotionally resonant capacities of writing are emphasised comes when narrator of *Austerlitz* visits the fortress of Breendonk, where Jean Amery, among others, was tortured during World War II. Following the reference to Amery, Sebald, using Claude Simon’s *Les Jardin des Plantes* as an intertext, briefly narrates the story of Gastone Novelli, who was subject to a horrific form of torture similar to that undergone by Amery (26). Following his liberation from Dachau, Novelli fled to South America, where he:

...lived in the jungle with a tribe of small people who had gleaming, coppery skins and had emerged beside him as if out of nowhere one day, without moving so much as a leaf. He adopted their customs, and to the best of his ability compiled a dictionary of their language, consisting almost entirely of vowels, particularly the sound A in countless variations of intonation and emphasis. (27)

Novelli, upon returning to Germany, painted and drew pictures in which the letter “A” was “depicted again and again in different forms” (27). Included in the narrative, from margin to margin, are three rows of the letter “A”, described as “ranks of scarcely legible ciphers crowding closely together and above one another, always the same and yet never repeating themselves, rising and falling in waves like a long-drawn-out scream” (27). In this context the letters unmistakably carry the force of the scream Sebald describes. In the absence of an adequate form of representation, Novelli recreates the scream within him as a kind of “vibratory line” where the symbolic value of graphemes and the gestural suggestion of lines combine.37 There are multiple correlations here between writing, voice, graphic, narrative and drawing. What is perhaps paradigmatic with regard to the writing of the letters is the fact that they are “always the same and yet never repeating themselves”. Sebald recreates that rhythm (“rising and falling”) in a way that isn’t simply referential. The repeated letters in some sense induce the experience of that unheard scream.38

37 This expression is also used by Meyer, who appeals throughout his book on Stein to Whitehead’s notion of life as “vibratory existence” (Whitehead, cited in Meyer, 2001: 201). Meyer also invokes Stein’s “memorable description of Fracias Picaba”: “According to Stein, Picaba had ‘conceived and is struggling with the problem that a [painted] line should have the vibration of a musical sound and that this vibration should be the result of conceiving the human form and the human face in so tenuous a fashion that it would induce such vibration in the line forming it’” (cited in Meyer, 201).

38 I am here reminded of a particular excerpt from Steven Connor’s book on the history of ventriloquism, *Dumbstruck*, in which Connor passes over the idea of writing as something more than a representational device: “During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a number of claims were made either to have discovered the ways in which the original workings of the vocal organs are
The “rhythm of the visible world”, to borrow a phrase of Gertrude Stein’s, is again connoted in Austerlitz’s trip to the town of Terezín (Stein, cited in Meyer, 2001: 37). Austerlitz describes the objects he confronts in the window of the Terezín Bazaar as “perpetuated but for ever just occurring” (197). Austerlitz is not simply hallucinating here, he is, rather, accounting for perceptual activity that is not part of the picture *per se*, the sense by which his vision of the objects in the window is informed by the continuation of the recent past as active within the present, something we inhabit through our sense of rhythm. Austlertiz’s description of the objects appeals to a kind of perception that testifies to the connection between observer and observed through generative (or destructive) movement of time as energy.

We can similarly appreciate this sense of internal connection between differing events in Sebald’s poetics of inscription, between his use of graphics and writing. The sequence of “A”s and the surrounding prose is one of many examples where Sebald uses one object (or image, or event—the exact category here isn’t what’s crucial, initially at least) to describe another through mutual implication. It is important to take note of the specificity of the example: a row of letters. In using an image to substantiate a description, Sebald creates, or makes use of, resonant pathways from the description to the image, and, because the image is a letter, because it is explicitly writing, from the image back to the description. This act of ekphrasis does not simply describe an artwork, but shows two frames of reference to be at once discrete and resonant, to be at once external to and inside each other. Sebald here uses letters to describe, to draw, and to draw out the scream present in Novelli’s artwork.

Sebald took the investigation of writing and its effects to be a crucial question motivating his work, a question he investigated through the construction of prose fiction. Here, Meyer’s study of Stein offers an appealing and original lens through pictured in speech, or to have invented new universal systems of notation for these processes. These projects can be seen as attempts to arrest the speaking body in writing, or to animate writing with the motions of speech” (Connor, 2000: 344). Connor refers to one Francis Mercury van Helmont, who claimed “that Hebrew preserves the actual sounds made by Adam in the garden, the written forms of Hebrew characters being self-referential ideographs that depict not objects in the world, but the disposition of the vocal organs required to produce them” (344). This, especially considering Connor’s use of the word “disposition”, recalls my own suggestions, making use of Santner and Meyer, with regard to what Sebald captures of a character’s “inclination”, a character who is at once internal to the writerly consciousness, and apart from or outside the writer, as an emotionally resonant artefact in its own right.

Although Sebald’s books are often considered formally innovative due to the presence of uncaptioned photographs, a more subtle form of internal reference within the graphic medium of writing is perhaps what constitutes their uniqueness. Think, for example, of Dr K.’s exclamation mark in the third chapter of *Vertigo*. Sebald’s entire mode of diction is informed by the suggestiveness of script in relation to the image, and of the presence of one form or medium enfolded in the other.
which one might interpret Sebald’s work. Meyer begins the conclusion to his study of Stein’s writing with an image of Picasso, not one of Picasso’s own paintings, but a photograph of the artist, titled “A Passionate Line”, taken by Gjon Mili and published in Life magazine in January 1950. The image features Picasso crouching, holding what appears to be a small flashlight, and having just drawn a scribbly centaur in the air with the light. I take Meyer’s analysis of this image to be exemplary with regard to my own efforts to locate and describe the interrelations of the differing events realised in Sebald’s prose. Of the photograph Meyer remarks, “the work’s suggestiveness, its resonance, derives from the multiple correlations among its features”, and then proceeds to unpack the “features” composed in the image (2001: 293). Importantly for Meyer, “no strict dividing line exists between the drawing and the artist” (293), with the image capturing the energies of created object and creator as part of the same event, connected by the line that ends with the torch in Picasso’s hand. What’s more, Picasso is suggestively represented as a centaur, exhibiting a further correlation between the artist’s image and the artist as image. Meyer also notes the fact that the notion of hybridity is repeated in Picasso-as-centaur, in the centaur-as-animal (half man, half horse), and the “hybrid form of the artistic medium (drawing-photograph)” (293). The photograph makes visible the “internal experience” (293) of the artist in the externalised, temporally constituted form of the line.

This image invites us to look differently at the relationship between artist as creator and their creations. Picasso is at once subject and object, both creator and created, thing representing and represented thing. The medium of the line, composed of light from a flashlight, is continuous with the photographic reality that captures its difference. Creative potency seems not to belong to one thing in particular but is instead shared among the contrasting and interconnected aspects of the image. Each frame of reference is at once dependent on and creative of others.

Section II: Ferber at Work, Material Memory

As Sebald tells Carole Angier in an interview, the character of Max Ferber is “based on two people”; one is Sebald’s Manchester landlord, the other the painter Frank Auerbach (cited in Schwartz, 73). After having arrived in Manchester as a twenty-two-year-old immigrant, for typically vague reasons (described merely as “various”
(149)), the narrator gets to know the city through increasingly extensive wanderings. The narrator happens on Ferber’s studio during one of these rambles, which he describes as “[going] out, purely in order to preserve the illusion of purpose” (156). This description is typical of Sebald’s capacity to characterise different genres of thing according to a common conception of activity. Both the purposeful illusion sustained by the narrator’s wandering, and his writing scruples, come under the banner of a concentrated kind of distraction. We might even here invoke the salt twig, which the narrator mentions and includes as an image, with the telling insight that the “crystallised forms” would “[imitate] the growth patterns of Nature even as it is being dissolved” (230). The physical world also writes; matter possesses an imitative function that coincides with its persistence (its growth and dissolve). The salt twig writes through its active reference to other kinds of activity—it is an “illusion of purpose”, which isn’t to say it is purposeless—just as the wandering narrator imitates a sense of direction, and in doing so, creates direction through the incorporation of an imitative function.

The narrator first encounters Ferber and his work in situ, with the materials and implements of the artist and, likewise, the peculiar manifestations of light and shadow in the studio (“the curious light” (160)), contributing as much to the picture as the canvas, which, supposedly at least, is the focus of the artist and viewer’s attention:

Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with largely hardened and encrusted deposits of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning out towards the outer edges, in places resembling the flow of lava. This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure. It had always been of the greatest import to him, Ferber once remarked casually, that nothing should change at his place of work, that everything should remain as it was, as he had arranged it, and that nothing further should be added but the debris generated by the painting and the dust that continuously fell and which, as he was coming to realize, he loved more than anything else in the world. (161)

40 In an article on J. M. W. Turner, the mutual implication of the sciences and the humanities, and the writing abilities of glaciers, Michel Serres remarks: “We can no longer believe, arrogantly, that only humanity knows how to write! Right down in the ice is a secure archive, whose print is made of truthful remains—an exact timepiece and an unvarying conservatory” (11). The relevance of this quotation will become increasingly explicit over the course of this chapter.

41 This would seem to echo certain biographical and poetic details of Paul Celan, a fellow orphan of World War II. As Anne Carson notes in the epilogue to her book Economy of the Unlost: “As a child Paul Celan liked to draw burning candles. To capture with pen and ink the successive phases of flame and extinction preoccupied him intensely. ‘I did not love it, I loved its burning down and you know I haven’t loved anything since’, says his protagonist Klein near the end of Conversation in the
Ferber’s work here extends beyond the representational surface that is the site of his various applications and erasures. Much like Janine’s office, which I discuss in the concluding chapter of this thesis, the chaotic workspace is perfectly arranged according to the human subject for whom it is a habitat. And like Janine’s paper universe, the mess that surrounds Ferber is organised to the extent that it suggests other forms (“the flow of lava”). It is difficult for us to determine what, in Ferber’s art practice, is of greatest consequence: the thing represented; the representation; the action or process of representing; the dust that the process generates; or the lived space in which all these things occur. The conception of creativity exhibited here, which, it needs to be emphasised, is concomitant with a process of destruction, is distributed among all the aspects of the encounter.\textsuperscript{42}

As Sebald’s characterisation of Ferber’s practice continues, he emphasises the role that repetition and physical effort play in his process of depiction:

He drew with vigorous abandon, frequently going through half a dozen of his willow-wood charcoal sticks in the shortest of time; and that process of drawing and shading on the thick leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woollen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night. (161-2)

Upon regarding the painting at “the end of a working day”, the narrator expresses admiration: “with a few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, [Ferber] had created a portrait of great vividness” (162). However, the creative process, as though it were set against any idea of artistic completion, would often continue the next morning, with Ferber “excavating the features of his model…from a surface already badly damaged by the continual destruction” (162). The final description of Ferber’s portrait evokes a sense of the artwork being animated not by the depiction of the

\textemdash “Mountains” (120). The suggestive proximity of Celan and Ferber would seem to support Santner in his claiming Sebald in a lineage of German-Jewish writers and thinkers for whom the notions of the creaturely are central (12). The above quotation in particular, in its reference to Celan’s drawings and his interest in “successive phases”—what the movements of the candle might tell us about time—is suggestive of Sebald’s characterisation of Ferber’s artistic practice. Both share a “love” of the energies inherent in the object world, with Klein remarking that it wasn’t simply the candle or flame that provoked his concern, but the specificity of its action (its “burning”), and likewise, for Ferber, the production, or “increase” of dust is crucial to notion of what that dust is.

\textsuperscript{42} See Gray’s article “Writing at The Roche Limit” for a discussion of how the dialectic of destruction and creation informs Sebald’s prose, in particular his micro-characterisations of artists and craftsmen in The Rings of Saturn.
model exactly—although this plays an important part—but of the process that lead to that depiction:

He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences on the harried paper. (162)

Ferber’s practice would seem to problematise the notion of drawing as the representation of something absent on a surface with materials that are, if efficacious, essentially invisible in conveying that something. That the paper is continually cut into, and the charcoal layered and erased, argues for a temporal dimension to the creative process that energises the portrait with a past. We can accurately say that in this process the artwork itself, and what it is composed of, is used to perceive, or is shown to allow for a particular kind of perception internal to its own creation. The mixing of different strata, the presence of gaps, the importance of repetition, would all seem to suggest an awareness of time that is specific to the forms in which it inheres.

In his book, What Painting Is, art historian James Elkins compares painting with alchemy, emphasising not what painting represents but the way materials record the gestures and affect the imagination of the painter. “The material memories”, writes Elkins:

...are not usually part of what is said about a picture, and this is a fault in interpretation because every painting captures a certain resistance of paint, a prodding gesture of the brush, a speed and insistence in the face of mindless matter and it does so at the same moment, and in the same thought, as it captures the expression on a face. (3)

Elkins’ study is formed around the continually raised question: “What kinds of problems, and what kinds of meanings, happen in the paint?” (3). Such a question is certainly appropriate to Ferber’s practice, in which the engagement between artist and material, primarily dust, is construed as being significantly in excess of the faces depicted, or represented, on the paper or canvas. As many critics have noted, among them Gray and Santner, Ferber’s practice and the ekphrastic descriptions of the artworks he produces are “implicitly aligned” with (Gray, 2010: 50), or “exactly
mirror” (Santner, 164), the narrator-author’s own compositional difficulties, as discussed later in this chapter. And so the question remains for us to consider, as I have been recommending thus far: “What kind of problems and what kinds of meanings, happen in the writing?” As Elkins alternatively puts it, with reference to Yve-Alain Bois, “What is thinking in painting [writing], as opposed to thinking about painting [writing]?” (3-4). The substitution here, between painting and writing is, of course, not exact. However, it sets us on a trajectory whereby one might come to a conception of creative activity that treats the relationship between public substrate and private thinking as implicated in a dynamic togetherness, moving the focus from the expressive subject to the sense of a subject becoming committed to the object to which their activity testifies.

I will undertake a more detailed analysis of what kind of thinking the act of writing affords us when I consider the “literary time” of a large excerpt of Austerlitz later in this chapter. However, here it is worth briefly addressing the relationship between writing and gesture, which are both activities that give special preference to silence and the haptic. As Brian Rotman remarks in his essay “Corporeal or Gesturo-haptic Writing”, writing, both historically and in the future, might be something in excess of its alphabetically written form:

To achieve the body without organs of speech (as Antonin Artaud might have put it), it is necessary first to dumb the body, de-organise it, divest it of speech, silence it—so that, no longer governed by the sayable, it may become the field of other productions, other desires, can be alive to other semiotics, other mediations (here the gestural) that speech, unable to process silence except as an absence of itself, and yoked to its alphabetically written form that suffers from precisely the same problem, has always been only too pleased to elide. (2002: 432-3)

This is clearly relevant to the theme of muteness in the face of the unspeakable that informs Sebald’s thematic trajectory and his innovative approach to the written form. Concerning thematic exemplifications of the gestural that invoke writing as positive with regard to its relationship to silence, Sebald’s work regularly features hand

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This recalls the Jamesian distinction between “knowledge of acquaintance” and “knowledge-about” which Meyer invokes throughout his study of Stein. Essentially, the “knowledge of acquaintance” relates to what one feels, the irreducible peculiarity of their internal, emotional experience, and “knowledge-about” relates to what one knows, i.e. the “irreducible and stubborn facts” that have characterised truth value in modernity (Meyer, 2001: 14-22; SMW, 3). Meyer insists that, concerning our concrete experience, the two proceed in a mutually constitutive relationship with each other, a fact that Stein continually investigated as she attempted to think and feel (feel and think) through her writing (15).
movements that persist as a kind of inscription or writing. For instance, shortly following the narrator’s encounter with Ferber in his studio, he recalls a scene in the Wadi Halfa, the café where Ferber spent many of his mornings and evenings. Here we witness a characterisation of one of the cooks that confers upon the task in which he is engaged a sense of the sacred, or at least of importance, reminiscent of Ferber’s activities in the studio: “With a single sweeping slow-motion movement of his left hand (his right was always in his trouser pocket) the cook could take two or three eggs from the box, break them into the pan, and dispose of the shells in the bin” (163). As Sebald remarks elsewhere, it is as if such gestures instance what is at once immediate and timeworn, that whether or not one is witnessing such an action for the first or the thousandth time, what one perceives in addition to what is present is the history, or customary quality, that informs such movements.\footnote{It is also worth mentioning here, considering the central themes of \textit{The Emigrants}, that the cook in the café is, like the narrator and Ferber, an immigrant, a Massai chieftain in fact: “Now close to eighty, he had travelled (said Ferber), by which highways and byways he could not say, from the south of Kenya to the north of England, in the postwar years. There he soon learnt the rudiments of local cooking, and, giving up the nomadic life, had settled to his present trade” (163). I should make note of the care and detail that informs the micro-narratives laced together in Sebald’s prose, concerning both their internal complexity and their resonance with other episodes.} We might think also, for example, of the goodbye gesture of the barman in The Great Eastern Hotel in \textit{Austerlitz}: “The way he wished us \textit{Good night, gentlemen}, with his eyes clouded by weariness and his head tilted to one side, struck me as an extraordinary mark of distinction, almost like an absolution or blessing” (96-97). Or equally of Adela’s parting gesture to Austerlitz, about which I will have more to say: “she raised her free hand and put the hair back from my forehead, as if she knew, in this one gesture, that she had the gift of being remembered” (111). What these characterisations of gesture account for is the sense of previous energies contributing to a particular kind of competency in the present, a competency that bears witness to a complex and productive history that the gestures themselves in part continue. Like Ferber’s drawings, such gestures induce a feeling that they have “evolved from a long lineage”, and are, therefore, time-filled.

Dr Ambramsky’s parting gesture in the in the third chapter of \textit{The Emigrants} might strike us as especially relevant considering his insistence on silence: “Dr Ambramsky walked the rest of the way beside me in silence. Nor did he say a word in farewell, but described a gentle arc with the goose wing in the darkening air” (116). And similarly, the wave of “the girl from Genoa” in the third chapter of \textit{Vertigo}, is suggestively
construed as a kind of writing: “her right hand on the rail, while the left described, somewhat awkwardly, a sign in the air which betokened the end” (160).

Section III: Bad Kissingen, the Cryptic Empirical

The above examples are all important instances of Sebald thematising or referring to gestural writing. They appeal to a kind of signification that is immediate, fleeting, and implicated in bodily movements and embodied thought. But how is this gestural capacity reproduced in the poetics of the text? What poetic features account for the author’s thinking in writing in addition to the events (like the examples of gestures listed above) that are accounted for as representations?

In what follows I look to the dense self-referentiality of Sebald’s prose, in terms of both his work’s thematic and its poetic dimensions. I consider the operative role writing and reading play in structuring the meaningfulness and expressiveness of empirical encounters, and how Sebald, rather than instancing a divide between things represented and the activity of written composition (the now of writing, or thinking in writing), gives us a series of discrete worlds in which writing plays a distinguishing and connective role.

The presence of written forms and forms of writing, as structuring empirical, mnemonic and imaginary landscapes, is abundantly clear in the narrator’s expedition to the Bad Kissingen cemetery in the closing stages of the “Max Ferber” chapter. This episode needs to be understood in relation to the narrator’s efforts to testify, to act as a medium for the dead, the past, the fragile and barely perceptible traces of history. The narrator remarks, “The memoirs of Lusia Lanzberg [Ferber’s mother] have been very much on my mind since Ferber handed them over to me, so much so that in late June 1991 I felt I should make the journey to Kissingen and Steinach” (218). It is the narrator’s not knowing what exactly to do with the weight of a past inherited by proxy that compels him, much like Beyl in the first chapter of Vertigo, to visit the place where that very past is buried or hidden—where it is both present and absent. It is worth emphasising that what weighs on the narrator’s mind does so through an indirect inheritance which nonetheless incites the deepest sympathy, though it is a sympathy marked by its cautiousness with regard to misappropriating the biographical details of others.
In chapter two of *The Emigrants*, following attempts to “belatedly...get closer” to his old school teacher, Paul Bereyter, through a series of fanciful imaginings, the narrator remarks: “Such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter” (29). As we will come to see, this is at once insightful and somewhat counterfactual concerning the communion that goes on between Sebald’s narrator and the ghosts of the past. Indeed, the pathos of Sebald’s narratives comes from the contrast, perhaps the writerly scruple *par excellence*, between the exacting efforts to account for the documentary biographies of characters such as Bereyter, and the intimate, affective presence that accompanies the suggestive arrangement of details. Although Sebald’s narrator-author derides the role of the imagination in perceiving intimacy through emotion in the above citation, his narratives are clearly guided by such aims.

The pedagogical advice Sebald offers here is not, of course, that our knowledge of someone is ever complete, or adequate to their emotional presence in our lives. We always remain, to some extent, at a loss for words in our attempts to account for that vague imprint that others leave within us. This perhaps constitutes the great melancholy of our existence as social beings. What the above insight recommends, and what we are continuously aware of in reading Sebald’s prose, is that what one knows isn’t primarily true or false, fact or fiction (as though all problems could be laid to rest with this knowledge), but rather, one comes to an awareness of what one knows through the very act of writing it down. Again, the obvious analogue is Ferber, who comments that the faces he renders remain “ultimately unknowable” (162). And yet despite this, he compulsively draws—not, we might therefore presume, to complete something or other, to do justice to his model, but to inhabit that sense of compulsion which is often characterised as foreign to oneself.45

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45 This is described in *Austerlitz* as “an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations from somewhere in my brain” (60). It is no doubt tempting to attribute this agency to the Freudian unconscious. However, I think Santner’s notion of creatureliness, which is identifiable by the synonym “undeadness”, offers a more inclusive and appropriate characterisation of the creative energies that one is at once possessed by, and engaged in promoting. Although Santner’s interpretation develops from a Freudian understanding of the unconscious, I wish to illuminate aspects of creaturely expressivity that resound with Meyer’s treatments of writing according to Stein’s practice, that is, writing as animated by a liveliness felt in the moment of composition and evidenced poetically on the page.
Concerning Sebald’s efforts in “Max Ferber”, the process of inheritance and expression relates to what is at once the narrator’s remove from, and his implication in, the stories and documents he receives. The implication takes place as the narrator attempts not to appropriate the biographical details of others, but through his coming to terms with the unique way perceived or read events persist as part of one’s emotional character, and how these are at once shaped according to this character and constitutive of it. This is why the experience of writing as composition is so crucial to what goes on in Sebald’s prose: it offers the chance to account for the “certain adjustments” undergone by our “inner self” in confrontation with the stories of others, or with any body of data apprehended as external, for that matter, over time (77).46 Emphatically, for Sebald’s narrator-author, these stories are not his own, but then, from a certain perspective, neither is anything. Although Sebald’s books operate within the generic scaffolding of autobiography, they are better read as actively posing the question of what we can possess of our experiences such that they might be called autobiographical.

The narrator’s trip to Kissingen, in particular the cemetery, is, on the one hand, written about, and on the other hand, shown to be already written, in the sense that what the remembered narrator perceives is, to a large degree, composed of inscriptions that suggest the later act or event of composition (although attributing chronological priority to this event is exactly the kind of move I am hoping to avoid). As Gray remarks of the structuring of The Rings of Saturn, “The narrative itself is thus constructed in the form of temporally layered, concentric rings, imitating in its temporal texture the spatial strata in the rings of Saturn named in its title” (2009: 496). Here I’m suggesting something slightly different to Gray. What the narrator bears witness to empirically, according to his remembered point of view, exhibits a continuity with the “now moment” of composition, within which it is implicated. The perceived scene, or the dating of the empirical scene, and the remembered, composed, now moment of writing, are implicated as part of the same event—their continuity is comparable to the formal continuity instanced by concentric circles, that is, circles with the same centre, at once inside and outside each other. In Gray’s article he refers to this now moment as “a more amorphous ‘today’”, which Sebald frequently invokes

46 In the third chapter of The Emigrants, Ambros Adelwarth, who was something of a genius in this regard, is said to have remarked that the acquisition of a foreign language came down to “certain adjustments…to his inner self” (77).
The same argument can be made for the structuring of Sebald’s prose fiction as a whole, and is explicitly present in the episode discussed below.\footnote{47}

The reference to the narrator’s reading of a newspaper at the episode’s beginning, and the use of that newspaper as both a mnemonic device and a structural analogue (in the sense that newspapers feature a combination of text and graphics), is an explicit example of what J. J. Long has termed “archival consciousness” (2007). What Long emphasises by his use of this term is the degree to which Sebald’s narrator, and his characters generally, are dependent on mediated objects (written things) to elicit what they are thinking and feeling. My argument in the final chapter of this thesis is that Sebald’s texts demand a broader definition of what constitutes an archive. That is to say, forms of organisation such as clouds, dreams and various other “quasi-choate” phenomena (Connor, “Dust”) need to be included in the external forms on which Sebald’s narrator depends in order to express himself and become intelligible to us.

Considered in relation to archival consciousness and the perceptual and compositional activities in which the narrator is involved, newspapers further highlight the inscribed and inherently obscure nature of the empirical scene. Sebald’s narrator reads the paper not so much for its news, but, as Long argues, he “laments the weirdly skewed sense of history” incited by its names and dates (92), as in the following:

It was the 25\textsuperscript{th} of June. According to the paper, there was a crescent moon and the anniversary of the birth of Ingeborg Bachmann, the Austrian poet, and of the English writer George Orwell. Other dead birthday boys whom the newspaper remembered were the aircraft builder Willy Messerschmidt (1898-1978), the rocket pioneer Hermann Oberath (1894-1990), and the East German author Hans Marchwitz (1890-1965). (220)

The narrator concludes his reading-writing with the elliptical conjoining remark, “Pondering the peculiar sense of history apparent in such notices…” (221). Note the appeal to the newspaper as a mnemonic device (“the newspaper remembered”). Likewise, we might say that “the 25\textsuperscript{th} of June” (as a mnemonic aid) remembers the birth of Ingeborg Bachmann or of George Orwell. The emphasis here is moved from the human remembering to the inscriptions that enable humans to remember, which

\footnote{47 In the first chapter I discussed the dizzying or vertiginous effect of Sebald’s sentence structure with regard to tense, which might also be relevant here. See also Chandler’s “About Loss” (246).}
subtends an emphasis from the writer’s recollective memory to the compositional moment or the event of remembering.

The reading and rewriting of names and dates composes a significant part of the narrator’s Kissingen journey. Later, while wandering through the cemetery, he comments on the inscriptions written on the headstones:

It was no longer possible to decipher all of the chiselled inscriptions, but the names I could still read—Hamburger, Kissinger, Wetheimer, Friedländer, Arnsberg, Auerbach, Grunwald, Leuthold, Seeligmann, Frank, Hertz, Goldstaub, Baumblatt and Blumenthal—made me think that perhaps there was nothing the Germans begrudged the Jews so much as their beautiful names, so intimately bound up with the country they lived in and with its language. (224)

A list of names such as this is an instance of Sebald drawing attention to the graphic aspect of his writing. Names and dates make the indexical function of ciphers apparent. Like the uncaptioned images and graphics that break up and connect the alphabetic text, the above list of names functions as a form of documentation that works at the surface of the narrative. Yet unlike the images, the list is not obviously set apart from the text: they are dissolved into the narrative, blurring the line between graphic and semantic forms of reference. Even without the use of graphics, Sebald enlivens the medium within which he works by demonstrating that ciphers are at once in the world, and perspectives on the world.48

What would a date be, were it considered something not written by a human? Or similarly, what is a name that doesn’t belong to anybody? How does the non-human agency that informs writing affect both the meaning that human writing elicits and the form that it takes? Is there a clear distinction here, and if not, what are some more suitable and imaginative interpretive trajectories by which to consider the human and the non-human as things that write?

Like the conception of “things” outlined by Sebald in the posthumous Unrecounted, our names and dates “outlast us, they know more about us than we

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48 The aforementioned intimacy between Jewish people, their names and their places of habitation, relates to the fact that traditionally Jews did not have surnames, and thus, when adopting the convention of the surname, tended to go by what was closest at hand, a fact of which Sebald would have no doubt been aware. I wonder to what extent such a convention of naming was something of an ideal for Sebald, concerning the relationship between writing and place. In a sense, Sebald’s writing enterprise is an effort to replicate this intimacy between place and writing, while similarly preserving a sense of the Jewish people’s precarious relationship to dwelling. I am thankful to Ivor Indyk for bringing this to my attention.
know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are—in fact—the book of history opened before us” (*Unrecounted*, 80). This is to suggest that human knowledge has evolved from the things of which it is composed, that is, from non-human perceptual capacities written into it. Interestingly, Sebald describes things as synonymous with writing and reading, in that they are “the book of history”. Thus, we need not draw a too rigid distinction between things that represent, on the one hand, and things represented, on the other. Like the crystal that fascinates the narrator with its simultaneous imitating and dissolving (its status as an object that writes and embodies time), the above conception of things argues for their inclusion not only as what is perceived, but also what instances perception.

In addition to emphasising the thingly manifestation of names, and of inscription more broadly, Sebald also points to the symbolic aspects of the material world. The keys the narrator is given and which appear in the text as images with identifying tags attached (221), are instances of objects that are defined by their existence as forms of writing, that is, as enciphered surfaces, akin to passwords or signatures. As Steven Connor recommends in *Paraphernalia*, “Like gramophone records, keys seem as though they should be legible” (99). A key is an object in which function and symbol coincide, or at least patently overlap. “Keys are at once hardware and software, stuff and sign, matter and idea, sensible and intelligible” (101). The keys also feature tags, as though their indexical worth required an increasingly elaborate system of signification; as though certain indecipherably significant bodies compel us to add to their significance, to photograph, and write on, or about, them.

The keys remain enigmatic, or cryptic, in that ultimately they do not serve to unlock the gate, with the narrator having to climb the wall (222-3). The gates, it would seem, cannot be decoded. The system of signification is structured by trace indecipherability, which further suggests the unreadable inscriptions on some of the gravestones. In their apparent loss of purpose in the network of material signification involving the tags, locks, gates and, crucially, their own inscribed surface, the keys suggest the non-human, or creaturely, forms of writing to which I have been referring throughout.

This also recalls Santner’s highlighting of the Benjaminian inheritance in Sebald’s work, specifically his notion of natural history, which names an overlap between natural and historical realms. Santner points out that Benajmin’s *Naturgeschichte* relates “not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artifacts of
human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life” (16). In pursuing an alternate thread that sits alongside Santner’s reading, my concern is with the implication of the physical world in the symbolic and conceptual architecture humans elaborate in order to acquire a vantage of it. The muteness of natural being, to borrow from Santner’s phrasing, does not equate with a lack of meaning or agency. Rather, as Sebald makes clear, matter is expressive of purposefulness inherent to it, and in which human history participates.

In his reading of the Ferber chapter, Santner draws attention to “the complex process of ‘inheriting’” enacted here, “of [Sebald’s] taking responsibility for, the various symbolic and ‘proto-symbolic’ transmissions from his various ‘neighbours’” (166). Santner refers to the narrator’s final meeting with Ferber, who has been hospitalised with pulmonary emphysema: “He clearly found it next to impossible to use his voice, and so responded to what I said only at lengthy intervals, in an attempt at speech that sounded like the rustle of dry leaves in wind” (The Emigrants, 231). This is a haunting and evocative metaphor, made all the more so by its inferential relation to other instances, throughout the chapter and book, where communication is structured by trace indecipherability.49 As Santner argues, Ferber’s voice “assumes an inhuman quality” (165), it is “proto-symbolic”, as opposed to symbolic, if we consider symbolism to be exclusively in the service of human speech that can be decoded at the expense of its inherent expressivity. Such a decoding would enable us to forget the role of mediums and mediation in the production of meaning, and likewise forget the physical expressivity of Ferber in his efforts to become significant.50

In addition to Sebald emphasising the co-presence of human and non-human expression, what seems to be at stake in this episode is the way different lives, or remote events, might communicate or resonate with each other through a particular

49 See the above discussion of gestures and the salt crystal for a paradigmatic example of this.
50 Santner revealingly traces the origins of Ferber’s rustling voice to Kafka’s story “The Cares of a Family Man”, in which the character Odradek has a laugh that “sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves” (Kafka, cited in Santner, 165-166). The dubious ontology of characters such as Odradek informs speculative fictional efforts to conceive of a non-human world that is internal to and constitutive of the human. Laughing, for instance, is compulsive, something that seems at once passive and active, alive, energetic. The comparison to rustling leaves is entirely accurate, if we understand the non-human world as informed equally by expressive energies.
kind of concentration or practice. As the narrator remarks, in a manner that unmistakably recalls his reading the death notices and anniversaries in the newspaper:

A shock of recognition shot through me at the grave of Maier Stern, who died on the 18th of May, my own birthday; and I was touched, in a way I knew I could never quite fathom, by the symbol of the writer’s quill on the stone of Friederike Halbleib, who departed this life on the 28th of March 1912. I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; 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)

Here the narrator remarks on the “shock of recognition” at the time of the encounter, when reading the date “the 18th of May”, the immediacy of which is captured as the date reappears in the text, much like the photograph above it. He also comments on his being “touched” regarding the symbol of the writer’s quill on Friederike Halbleib’s headstone, which is instructive concerning the primacy of tactility and affect in such responses. What, we might ask, has touched the narrator? What has he made contact with, of what does he, for that instant, become composed? Indeed, the notion of tactfulness describes well both the physical sensation of touching which the narrator undergoes, and his stylistic commitment to writing of the dead in a manner that is sympathetic with their silence or at least their quietness.

Keeping Santner’s thesis in mind, one might persuasively argue that the narrator is touched by the undead or by undeadness. This is an internal touching experienced due to the narrator’s feeling beside himself, his feeling overcome with a kind of pre-individual connection to what he both is and isn’t. Crucially too, we are then referred to the now moment of composition, of which I have just spoken, with the narrator noting, “now as I write these lines”—these lines which we are reading. We find that this now moment is characterised by an inherent metaphoricity (“as if I”) and its appeal to feeling (“it feels”). The presence of inscriptions (which are never present or entirely decipherable), both at the “now time” of writing and during the initial cemetery visit, make for a continuity between perception, memory and composition. The narrator’s sympathy with Halbleib concerning her vocation puts us in mind of a compositional moment not possessed by anyone as such, but structured by emotion, the feeling of being outside oneself, and the “as if” feeling of oneself becoming another.
Whitehead recommends that the primitive element (primitive here meaning “first” or “most inclusive”, rather than necessarily crude) in “the higher stages of experience” is sympathy: “feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another” (Process, 162). The sympathy here isn’t, however, strictly romantic or sentimental. Rather, as Meyer says of the modernist focus on the tactility of words, what is sympathetic in Sebald’s prose is afforded by the devices which bear and perform inscriptions.  

If the narrator is, or exhibits symptoms of, a paranoid megalomaniac, as Santner at one point suggests (178), we need to understand the self, or ego in question, as existing curiously apart from itself, as ornamental or indexical. Santner comments: “the narrator in Sebald’s texts…at times exhibits the unnerving habit of writing himself into someone else’s life story so that it seems almost to be about him” (178). It isn’t simply that Sebald’s narrator refers to his sympathy as he does in the above example (“it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss”), but that he provides a vehicle by which we can witness the taking place of such sympathy within the graphic performance. The fact that meaning is possible is due to the persistence of things apart from each other existing inside each other, and that writing might photograph or translate one’s sympathetic energies as part of its surface, prosody, and liveliness.  

There is a final detail in the narrator’s visit to the Kissingen cemetery to which I would like draw attention. Facing the grave of Lily Lanzberg, Ferber’s grandmother, who committed suicide in the shadows of the National Socialist regime’s rise to power, the narrator places a “stone on the grave, according to custom” (225). This gesture, while it might appear inconsequential enough, is the finishing touch on a sequence of embedded analogues paradigmatically related to writing that occur in close succession over the course of the episode. The displacement of a stone arguably constitutes the most minimal gesture of human significance, barely distinguishable from a change wrought by the environment without human presence, and thus

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51 Perhaps we do not exactly sympathise with Sebald’s characters or narrators because we get to know them, but rather due to our appreciation of the necessary opacity that sympathy requires. As Meyer remarks of Stein’s compositions: “My use of the word opaque may seem puzzling, for I regard it as a positive quality, and aim in my readings to respect the integrity, or opacity, of these dense texts” (2001: xxii). Santner, regarding ethical questions, also points to a need to respect the opacity of characters, or of what he calls “the neighbor”: “The beings whose proximity we are enjoined to inhabit and open to according to the imperative of neighbor love is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it” (xii).
problematises the bifurcation of the natural and the artificial. The stone signifies that someone, a particular (but unknown) visitor to the grave remembers. Perhaps we are also put in mind of ancient forms and instruments of writing such as the abacus or the abax (the “sand table” from which the abacus is derived) that preserve, more obviously, the connection between material and symbol. While the form in which Sebald’s writing appears is, on the one hand, incommensurably different to these gestures of minimal significance, on the other hand it seems to preserve some relation to what is often lost of such customs in the vast majority of writing that adheres to conventions of authorship. What, exactly, constitutes this positive relation is the sense by which Sebald deploys his narrator as the particular but unknown visitor. And while Sebald obviously does not write using stones, the expressive relationship between human and non-human agency is similarly attuned. One not only writes so that the voiceless (humans and non-humans) might speak through them, but it is the voiceless and the non-human that afford one the capacity to speak or write as such: one occupies their territory.

Sebald provokes us to consider alternate ways of categorising phenomena beyond the natural and artificial. As Lorraine Daston notes, in an essay that similarly uses examples that problematise any absolute distinction between the aforementioned categories, in modern Latin and many other vernaculars, the meaning of the word “artificial” is closer to what we mean today by “elaborated”, and contrastingly, “natural” meant “direct” (243). Consequently, things such as fossils, certain crystalline forms and seashells might be considered artificial, whereas artworks that are comparatively simple—Daston refers to a cameo “depicting two helmeted figures”—would be described as natural (232).

Considering the various examples Sebald includes throughout his narratives, from root systems to crystals, from branching arteries to leather-bound agendas, dockets, passports, stamps, street signs, gravestones, maps, letters and newspaper articles, the material or non-human world—the world of things—and the world of humans, as conscious, knowledge-possessing individuals with sophisticated sensory apparatuses, developed memories, and imaginations, exist in a relationship of dual utility, or

52 In his book detailing the history of cemetery architecture in the west, Last Landscapes, Ken Worpole notes that in the churchyard at Gamla Uppsala in Sweden, many of the graves “are covered with a fine pink gravel, which is regularly raked into different patterns, as in a Zen garden” (59). Both this example, and the Jewish custom described above, seem to suggest ancient forms of writing that I am arguing resonate with Sebald’s formally innovative conception of the graphic medium.
mutual implication. Faced with Sebald’s interwoven examples, we are encouraged to think through the confused aspects of the material and the symbolic, the experienced and the represented, such that, if followed the one would always lead to some perspective on the other.

Section IV: Writing of The Unseen, or the Perception of Time

In the second part of this chapter I will consider the way Sebald conceives of the presence of the past through his poetic descriptions of insubstantial phenomena. I begin by taking a brief look at the use of a particular image (a painting by J. M. W. Turner), and then analyse in detail an episode from Austerlitz that I’m calling “Adela’s Goodbye”. This episode is exemplary in exhibiting Sebald’s preoccupation with the significance of the invisible and the in-between. I make the point that there is an equivalence between the manner of description (what I am calling Sebald’s poetics) and what is being described, and this equivalence has consequences for the way we conceive of events and things generally. I consider what implications Sebald’s conception of the physical world has for our understanding of history, and how his prose is exemplary in the way it appeals to the recent past or immediate memory of the reader.

As suggested in the previous chapter, Sebald frequently construes perception as defined by its indistinctness. Nowhere is this more marked than in his description of bodies that occupy the air, and in his portrayal of the air itself as a certain kind of significant body. In his book, The Matter of Air, Steven Connor names Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, J. M. W. Turner and Claude Monet as among the artists and writers for whom atmospheric indistinctness has been a preoccupation. According to Connor, “modernist haze was a phenomenon not just of ambivalence, but, more exactly, of interference, an accidental mixing of registers and channels. It is a kind of visual noise that implicates the conditions of perception and registration in its nature” (176). Connor’s broader contention is that romantic and modernist figurations of atmospheric phenomena are different: romantics tended to take haze as a subject from a stable vantage; whereas modernist writers and artists conceived their very thought forms as varieties of mist.
In relation to such ideas, I’m advancing the argument that Sebald makes the invisible significant, and does so in a way that has specific consequences for the way we conceive the perception of time. Sebald’s prose recommends that vague relations to unseen things suffuse the immediately perceived world, and that these unseen things are synonymous with the affective presence of the past. Sebald both contrasts and integrates what it is to look back (in our memories) and to look out (to the world around us). Thus, on occasion, the external world takes on the qualities of something remembered, and what is described as being remembered seems as though it were happening immediately.

Take, for instance, the watercolour sketch of Turner’s, which is included in the narrative of *Austerlitz* as an image. Austerlitz refers to this image while recalling a funeral scene, one of his last memories of the Fitzpatrick family and their paradisiacal dwelling, Andromeda Lodge:

> This almost insubstantial picture, bearing the title of *Funeral at Lausanne*, dates from 1841, and thus from a time when Turner could hardly travel any more and dwelt increasingly on ideas of his own mortality, and perhaps for that very reason, when something like this little cortège in Lausanne emerged from his memory, he swiftly set down a few brush-strokes in an attempt to capture visions that would melt away again the next moment. (109-110)

Obviously, mourning and the way we apprehend death are important thematic presences here. My concern is with how this passage provides an insight into the interrelationship between perception, memory and time. In addition to the sketch being characterised as an effort to “capture” fleeting “visions”, visions defined by their changing from moment to moment, Sebald names a certain equivalence, with regard to Turner’s practice, between perceiving things immediately, “from life”, and “looking back at the past later”—perceiving things as memories (109). The artist or writer is engaged in capturing that sense whereby the perceived and the remembered are part of the same atmospheric spectrum.

Turner’s image exemplifies the drab and the misty, with the background and foreground seeming to merge in an indistinct blur. The sketchiness of the painting is appropriate to the suggestive quality of the details it depicts. Sketches and drafts are perhaps defined by their being inhabited by the compositional process, rather than as a comparatively static final product. Sketches are artworks that are in an in-between
state. The object depicted, and the technique employed to assist in its depiction, is similarly “insubstantial”, participating in the same energies or the same aesthetic paradigm.

Funeral at Lausanne is a particular example of a sketch that relies on the suggestiveness afforded by the few strokes and dabs of which it composed. In a manner comparable to a Rorschach blot, it draws attention to the fact that subjective vision plays a role in the event of perception, and that we perceive invisible things both by making use of the suggestiveness of what is present and of our imaginations. The greyness (an in-between colour) and apparent formlessness of the painting makes it paradoxically, excessively, significant. In this sense, the painting isn’t simply something remembered, but something that itself possesses certain attributes which we tend to equate with remembering.

In the greater context of the narrative, this image substantiates the atmosphere of Austerlitz’s memory, specifically the funeral of the uncle and great-uncle of his school friend Gerald Fitzpatrick. The private world of the recollecting subject is enunciated by an object that is already mediated, and therefore public. Although Austerlitz is reminiscing, the story is made more immediate through its translation into another medium. There is an overlap between present and past according to a shared aesthetic. The past inheres in the objects that occur in the present. Again, there is an equivalence between perception as impersonal memory, and memory as private perception. This isn’t simply something which the narratives trace thematically or referentially. Rather, we experience the way the present and the past interpenetrate as Sebald manipulates or taps into our immediate memories. What we “have just read” is incorporated into “what we are reading”, such that we experience the same “melt[ing] away again the next moment” instanced in Turner’s memory and watercolour. This is a peculiar and critically under-examined aspect of Sebald’s work.

Sebald’s approach to history might therefore be described as being governed by aesthetic specificity of certain examples, rather than by chronology. Particular events that are seemingly remote according to dated, or teleological narrative time, might be paradoxically proximate if we read history as though it were composed in a fashion similar to that instanced in the painting, or, for that matter, in Sebald’s prose. Which is to say, the way we approach the question of temporality requires a mindfulness of the variety of forms in which time inheres. Our emotional responses to things might assist in eliciting a map of the past that is appropriate to its chaotic, obscure nature.
As Sebald reputedly remarked to a student in one of his creative writing classes, “Chronology is artificial and essentially determined by emotion. Contiguity suggests layers of things, the past and the present somehow coalescing or co-existing” (cited in Lambert and McGill, 8). I treat the relationship between time and the non-representational aspects of Sebald’s poetics later in this chapter.

As a pupil at the boarding school Stower Grange, Austerlitz became friends with a younger boy named Gerald Fitzpatrick. He would often stay with Gerald and the Fitzpatrick family at Andromeda Lodge, near the Welsh town of Barmouth. The Andromeda Lodge episode features many evocative descriptions of animals and the natural world, in particular a wonderful poetic-scientific discourse on moths attributed to Gerald’s Great-Uncle Alphonso (90-94). Austerlitz’s friendship with Gerald and his time at Andromeda Lodge comprise about sixty pages, and are interrupted by a digression on the nature of time, a conversation that takes place in the present, as it were, between the narrator and Austerlitz at The Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park—the home of standardised clock time. (Describing this episode as interrupting the present is somewhat misguided. Sebald’s texts are built from continual interruptions, and distinguishing the interruption from what gets interrupted requires a move of abstraction necessary for analysis, but inaccurate with regard to the experience of reading his books.)

Austerlitz, conversing with the narrator in the observatory, recalls his last visit to “the Fitzpatricks in Barmouth for the double funeral of Uncle Evelyn and Great-Uncle Alphonso”, who died “almost within a day of each other” (109). After walking Gerald to the station, sometime after the funeral (hours, days, or weeks—it remains unclear), Austerlitz returns to the house:

When I returned—dusk was already falling, said Austerlitz, and fine rain hung suspended in the air, apparently without sinking to the ground—Adela came to meet me from the misty depths of the garden, muffled up in greenish-brown tweed with millions of tiny drops of water clinging to the fine fuzz of its outline and forming a kind of silvery radiance around her. She was carrying a large bunch of rust-coloured chrysanthemums in the crook of her right arm, and when we had walked side by side across the yard without a word and were standing in the doorway, she raised her free hand and put the hair back from my forehead, as if she knew, in this one gesture, that she had the gift of being remembered. Yes, I can still see Adela, said Austerlitz; in my mind she has remained unchanged, as beautiful as she was then. At the end of those long summer days we quite often
played badminton together in the ballroom of Andromeda Lodge, which had been empty since the
war, while Gerald fed and watered the pigeons before night fell. The feathered shuttlecock flew
between us as we struck it back and forth. The trajectory it followed, always turning on its way
although you could not have said how, was a streak of white drawn through the evening hour, and I
could have sworn that Adela often hovered in the air just above the parquet floor for much longer
than the force of gravity allowed. After our game we usually stayed in the ballroom for a little
while, looking at the images cast on the wall opposite the tall, arched window by the last rays of the
sun shining low through the moving branches of a hawthorn, until at last they were extinguished.
There was something fleeting, evanescent about those sparse patterns appearing in constant
succession on the pale surface, something which never went beyond the moment of its generation,
so to speak, yet here, in this intertwining of sunlight and shadow always forming and re-forming,
you could see mountainous landscapes with glaciers and icefields, high plateaus, steppes, deserts,
fields full of flowers, islands in the sea, coral reefs, archipelagos and atolls, forests bending to the
storm, quaking grass and drifting smoke. And once, I remember, said Austerlitz, as we gazed
together at this slowly fading world, Adela leaned towards me and asked: Do you see the fronds of
the palm trees, do you see the caravan coming through the dunes over there? (111-112)

I include this lengthy quotation in order to preserve a sense of Sebald’s lyrical
digressions over an extended period. The passage traverses and knits together a
variety of evocative scenes. Each scene contains aspects that emphasise the
significance of the invisible, casting the atmosphere as something that bodies forth
other forms. The air here is a medium, filled with particulate bodies, a kind of
formless or in-between form. It occupies a space that is neither quite ground nor sky
(“suspended in the air”), and blurs the outline of the more distinct shapes, such as
Adela, that emerge from it. The expression “clinging to the fine fuzz of its outline”
poetically encapsulates the physical world as mutable, nebulous and inclusive.

It is also significant that both the initial scene, and the scene into which it segues,
take place during dusk, a time of day that is, like the suspended rain, defined by its
being in-between. During dusk the flow of time is apparent; it contains parts of both
night and day, shadow and light, and is therefore a kind of obscure event itself. Do not
all of our memories, in a sense, occur at dusk?

In addition to describing the details of a specific scene, Sebald is connoting, to
borrow Connor’s phrasing, the “conditions of perception and registration”. His
narrative takes the form of a speculative adventure that characterises the confusion of
the perceived world and memory. Whether we perceive or remember them, certain
events and things embody the quality of memory. A narrative built out of such events
and things thus gives memory a sense of immediacy, and makes perception time-filled.

Adela’s gesture, for instance, is described as immediately suggestive of the fact that it will be remembered. If we take this proposition at face value, it means that time, our perception of the past as memory, is operating paradoxically. It is as though Austerlitz were perceiving things via a kind of sixth sense: how can we apprehend, immediately, that something is memorable? Isn’t the quality of memorability something that is decided retrospectively? What might it mean if memory, or at least the apprehension of something as meaningful in relation to time, were something that emerged from the present moment?

As we read on, we find that the details of each scene persist in the next. The game of shuttlecock played by Adela and Austerlitz becomes a kind of writing in the air, with the trace of its trajectory evoking the insubstantial but significant presence of the particulate bodies described earlier. Now it is Adela, rather than the rain, that seems to disobey the forces of gravity and hover between earth and sky.

If perception usually involves the localisation of a region as distinct from the percipient, what we witness here is something that is at once inclusive and contrasting with this idea. What Sebald so masterfully details is the intermixing of the photographically distinct—the frozen, timeless beauty of Adela carrying the flowers—and the more vague background from which such percepts emerge and return. Recalling Turner’s treatment of paint as an attempt to capture the transience of the perceived or remembered world as it melts away, Sebald’s prose gives us the same sense of each event being informed by the passing of the present and the continual return of the past. This is evident in the way the image and description of Turner’s watercolour blends into, or provides the suggestive precedence for, the passage above. As we read, we experience one taking-place blend into another, which it then partially mirrors. Thus, our memory of the recent past is repeatedly invoked in the now of comprehension, often in a manner that is difficult to detect, unless one is subjecting the text to close analysis.

The shadowplay on the pale surface of the wall exemplifies the poetics of the prose in which such events are described. Sebald here emphasises continual change, with the “sparse patterns” described as “fleeting, evanescent…appearing in constant succession…something which never went beyond the moment of its generation”. Anything has the potential to become a surface where a kind of live-writing occurs.
Each discrete happening is defined by the other presences for which it acts as an index. For Sebald, writing is an occurrence afforded by the suggestive evolution and disappearance of different forms. This process is intensified in human script, but it nonetheless enjoins non-human manifestations that are similarly structured by inference.

The present argument, to do with the significance of bodies which occupy the air, is strengthened if we move back, as it were, from this localised example, and consider what composes the Andromeda Lodge episode in its entirety. As always, Sebald’s thematic continuity is remarkably intricate. As one reads, there is the contrasting sense of the narrative developing through a near-chaotic inclusiveness, and what is often a more difficult to articulate sense that things are arranged the way they are for a specific purpose. For example, the name Andromeda Lodge might suggest the Andromeda Galaxy, which is significant when read alongside Gerald’s preoccupation with astrophysics, his hobby of flying light aircraft, his keeping homing pigeons, and Uncle Alphonso’s marvellous discourse on moths. All these details invoke ways in which creatures inhabit the insubstantial and the vast.

Gerald’s descriptions of distant nebulae appeal to a paradoxical or obscure quality that informs the physical world: “He spoke of huge regions of interstellar gas which, not unlike storm clouds, became concentrated into vast, billowing forms projecting several light years into the void, where new stars were born in a process of condensation steadily intensifying under the influence of gravity” (115). Austerlitz notes that the astrophysical phenomena Gerald describes are analogous to the poetics of his description: “I observed the way his ideas, like the stars themselves, gradually emerged from the whirling nebulae of his astrophysical fantasies” (116). The means of description, or medium, coincides with what is being described. Both Gerald’s ideas and the stars “gradually emerge” from the less organised, but no less energised, background of “whirling nebulae”.

In a similar fashion, Austerlitz observes otherworldly meteorological occurrences from his room in Andromeda Lodge:

But on bright summer days, in particular, so evenly disposed a lustre lay over the whole of Barmouth Bay that the separate surfaces of sand and water, sea and land, earth and sky could no longer be distinguished. All forms and colours were dissolved in a pearl-grey haze; there were no contrasts, no shading any more, only flowing transitions with the light throbbing through them, a
single blur from which only the most fleeting of visions emerged, and strangely—I remember this well—it was the very evanescence of those visions that gave me, at the time, something like a sense of eternity. (95)

Again, these “visions” are descriptive of the misty medium which Turner took as his object. The “pearl-grey haze” exists as a body without “contrasts”, composed entirely of “flowing transitions”. Similarly, “separate surfaces” become one indistinguishable form. Rather than describing specific, memorable, visual details, Sebald describes processes that such details obscure. This, again, has the effect of making it seem as though the prose is descriptive of the processes put to work in comprehension.

Importantly, the abstract move of considering the physical world as separate to the thinking subject is avoided. In its place, Sebald describes mediums, like the above body of haze, that instance both world and subject. This suggests a more imaginative, way of perceiving and describing matter in a literary or poetic sense.

In Toy Medium, Daniel Tiffany considers the significance of meteoric bodies in a composite history of poetry, science and metaphysics, according to the archaic definition of the word “meteor”, which refers “to any atmospheric phenomenon (clouds, dew, winds, lightening, rainbows, comets, and so on)” (2000: 97). Tiffany argues convincingly that meteoric phenomena are the sites of analogy for impalpable and imponderable bodies, ur-forms of imagination and matter. It would seem no accident then that weather plays such a prominent role in the poetic imagination. With regard to Wallace Stevens’ poetry, Tiffany argues that the “correlation of poetry and weather (of lyric and meteoric bodies) implies a more general equivalence between matter and materia poetica” (111). Tiffany laments the lack of attention given in criticism of Stevens’ poetry, and attributes this to the fact that, in writing about weather, Stevens is equally writing about matter, and that his lyricism has a bearing on what he proposes about both (111). In light of this, we might appreciate how the meteoric bodies in Sebald’s prose play the role of mediators between perception, thinking, writing and matter.

Thus far I have been largely focusing on the narrative and referential elements of Sebald’s prose concerning the perception of time—the way his fiction books use suggestive anecdotes and descriptions to surprise us, and to provoke us to consider temporality as complex and particular. Looking to the poetics of Sebald’s writing on a micro level, we witness the narrative unfolding in what is often a dizzying zigzag of
different speaking positions or timeframes. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald deploys the conventions of narrative so as to create an experience of time that is appropriate to Austerlitz’s critique of linear time—which I am soon to discuss. We are forever darting backwards and forwards, even within a single sentence, such that it becomes less important when and where exactly the time in which the narrative is occurring is, and instead about the rhythm or irregular sense of order that each sentence elicits.

Take the large prose section I labelled “Adela’s Goodbye”. The citation is broken up by (we might equally say “coheres around”) the presence of the discursive register, “said Austerlitz”, which occurs three times. This has the effect of continually repositioning our sense of where the account is taking place, and who or what the account is coming from. We read “said Austerlitz” as a pause, a mark in time that highlights the already mediated quality of the account. Having a speaking position outside the narrator reduces the authority of his voice. It also suggests the implicit relationships between author and narrator, and reader and writing. It appeals to what one might call the narrator-author’s inner constitution, the often, but not necessarily, unconscious listening or attending to oneself that accompanies thought, and which writing intensifies and documents.

Words and expressions such as “returned”, “already”, “Yes, I can still see”, “after” and “once, I remember” capture an evolving, multidirectional trajectory for the tale. It’s as though, in addition to providing us with the narrative information, Sebald is working that information into something that might remember itself. As Amir Eshel remarks with regard to the citation he analyses from *Austerlitz*, “The tense structure maintains a constant oscillation between different temporal forms”, which results in “an unstable temporality that shifts between different layers of the past and different aspects of the present” (92). A picture or map of the trajectories suggested by the speaking positions and tenses used by Sebald might look something like the distant galaxies Gerald describes.

*Austerlitz* can be read as an investigation that repeatedly confronts the question as to how humanity has attempted (and failed and succeeded) to derive meaning from the world through a better understanding of time. That Sebald chooses to undertake this investigation using the medium of writing is of no small consequence. Sebald’s approach to such questions is perhaps unique in its inclusiveness with regard to the
different examples of the written form, and relatedly, how often these differing examples are used to account for the way we are affected by time.

Although the entire book treats such questions as implicitly significant, they become an explicit focus when the narrator accompanies Austerlitz on a walk through Greenwich Park to the Royal Observatory—an appropriate location for a disquisition on the nature of time, and revealing of the important role place plays in systems of meaning-making. Surrounded by “ingenious observational instruments”, Austerlitz begins his critique of the measurement of time and the misguided notion that time is defined by its linearity (100-101). He points to the role of metaphor in helping us conceive of what time is, noting the limitations of the “time is a river” metaphor, and proposing that perhaps the weather provides a better model on which to base our understanding of time:

And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension that disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruptions, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction? (100-101)

Rather than focus on Sebald’s critique of standardised clock-time, I’d prefer to consider how his own prose imitates the weather, as characterised above. The crucial points of his critique seem to be that we use metaphors in order to understand what time is, and that the measurement of time depends on practices, materials and instruments. This conception of temporality informs and is informed by Sebald’s use of prose fiction, which proposes an alternate conception of temporality to the linear or the chronological.

In a book-length interview with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres distinguishes time from its measurement, remarking: “The French language in its wisdom uses the same word for weather and time, le temps. At a profound level they are the same thing” (1995: 58). According to Serres, “Time doesn’t flow; it percolates. This means precisely that it passes and it doesn’t pass” (58). He notes that, “All of our difficulties with the theory of history come from the fact that we think of time in [an] inadequate and naïve way” (59). The relevance of this to Sebald’s work is striking, and it is made all the more pertinent by the fact that, throughout the interview, Serres argues for the
value of literature and poetry in investigating the ways in which bodies occupy and are occupied by time.

Shortly after Austerlitz proposes his meteorological conception of temporality, he tells the story of a trip he and his then-history teacher, André Hilary, took to a rundown country estate called Iver Grove, typical of those found throughout Sebald’s prose. The owner of Iver Grove, James Mallord Ashman, provides Austerlitz and Hilary with a narrated tour of the house. Of particular interest is the observatory-billiard room, which Ashman’s ancestor built at the top of the house, and where, in addition to watching the movements of the moon he used to “play frame after frame of billiards against himself” (105). While in the room, in which everything is covered by a “gossamer-thin layer of dust”, Austerlitz comments: “It was as if time, which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as if the years behind us were still to come” (105-108). Ashman then relates an anecdote which, in the context Sebald has so expertly prepared, is particularly telling:

…and as he ran his finger over the long row of notches he carved in silent fury at the age of eight on the edge of his little bedside table, the day before he was sent off to preparatory school, Ashman remembered, the same rage had flared up in him again, and before he knew what he was about he found himself standing in the yard behind the house, firing his rifle several times at the little clock-tower on the coach-house, where the marks he made are visible on the clock-face to this day. (108)

What are the different elements that make this passage and the surrounding text so suggestive concerning the relationship between writing and time? The “long row of notches” carved by the young Ashman recalls a primary kind of writing where physical form and meaning coincide. Rather than the more obvious opposition to time’s measurement, what remains crucial here is the sense by which we can understand the measurement of time as a kind of expression. It is perhaps also significant that Sebald emphasises that these marks were made in silence, reminding us that writing tends to be a distinctively soundless genre of meaning-making. The closing image, of a clock-face covered with marks, resounds with the earlier image of Ashman cutting into his desk as a child. Here the passing of time is felt as a kind of rage, an unwillingness to be subject to its necessity, which is, at the same time, a cathartic realisation of that necessity in the form of expressive inscriptions.
The scene takes on additional significance if we look back over the pages which have led up to it. For instance, the story of Ashman’s ancestor playing successive games of billiards against himself and the documentation of this fact in a records book: “Over the mantelpiece hung an engraving after Turner’s View from Greenwich Park, and the records book in which the selenographer, under the rubric Ashman vs. Ashman, had entered all games won or lost against himself in his fine curving hand still lay open on the tall desk” (105). Sebald might just have easily told the story of Ashman’s eccentric billiard-playing relative and not bothered with the detail of that story existing as documented inscription, presumably in tallies—a tally being, historically, a piece of wood scored with notches. But instead, the process of internal documentation becomes central both to the narrative and the mediums in which that narrative is realised. We might recall Beyle’s calculations and inscriptions in the first chapter of Vertigo. Each observed detail seems an archive or a system inscribed with the data of past activity.

It is also relevant that Ashman’s ancestor was a selenographer, a vocation perhaps comparable to writing in that it involves studying darker marks on a pale surface, and that, like writing, seems a profoundly solitary undertaking. The double-page photograph Sebald includes of the moon’s movement, as a shadow in one location and a white disk in another, suggests the other kinds of mark-making that have been considered above. It seems that the moon itself is performing a kind of writing in its trajectory. Mentioned also is the miniaturist and artist John Russell of Guildford, whose depictions of the moon, in the form of a map “measuring five feet by five feet”, are described as remarkable due to their “precision and beauty” (105). Accuracy and artistry here are part of the same project, which contrasts to the idea of maps being purely instrumental devices, or that instrumentality is inherently without beauty.

In unpacking the relationships shared among the varying elements that make up this, or indeed any, portion of Sebald’s prose, one grows to appreciate how cleverly concealed they remain within the steady flow of the work. Although the sheer amount of detail seems almost hyperactively compiled, as one looks now to this part, now to that, the experience of reading does not induce the associative neurosis of many postmodern narratives—such as those of Thomas Pynchon, for example. The reason for this, I would argue, is the background of suggestive, metaphysical ideas produced through the careful and imaginative arrangement of particulars.
Section V: Two Episodes from *The Emigrants*

The observation and documentation of time is a crucial aspect of Sebald’s prose fiction. Sebald demonstrates a concern with time and its relationship to perception and memory, as apprehended through our bodies and with instruments, and conceived with the assistance of materials and metaphors. Two examples from *The Emigrants* add depth to this argument. Although I propose that the nature of time is a more explicit focus in *Austerlitz*, it is also a formative preoccupation in the earlier book. One of the examples occurs at the end of the first chapter, and is interestingly similar to an example used by Serres in his book-length interview with Latour, quoted from above—although I am not suggesting that Sebald was influenced by Serres’ book. The second example was brought to my attention in a critical piece by James Wood, referred to in my introduction. It points to the fact that Sebald’s prose is intricately and allusively put together, and supports my argument about time.

Like all the chapters of *The Emigrants*, the first, “Dr Henry Selwyn”, is about how the past returns to haunt its eponymous central character.53 The narrator and his wife Clara live on Dr Selwyn’s estate—in fact, the estate is owned by Mrs Selwyn; Dr Selwyn describes himself as “merely a dweller in the garden” (5)—for a period of roughly six months. During this time, Selwyn hosts a dinner party (at which there is only one other invited guest) and tells the story of Johannes Naegeli, an alpine guide with whom Selwyn formed a strong bond in the summer of 1913: “never in his life, neither before nor later, did he feel as good as he did then, in the company of that man” (14). The suggestion is that the two men may have been more than friendly acquaintances.54 Naegeli goes missing: “It was assumed that he had fallen into a crevasse in the Aare Glacier”. This sends Selwyn “into a deep depression” (15).

After forgetting about Selwyn and the story of Naegeli, the narrator, some fifteen years later, happens upon a newspaper article while on a train from Zurich to

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53 I analyse this chapter in greater detail in the following chapter of this thesis.
54 See the chapter “On The Sexual Lives of Creatures and Other Matters” in Santner’s *On Creaturely Life* for a more detailed discussion of homosexual relationships in Sebald’s narratives. As I have mentioned elsewhere, I want to stress the ambiguity and unrealised potential characteristic of such relationships.
Lausanne, in the vicinity of the Aare Glacier where Naegeli was thought to have fallen:

At that point, as I recall, or perhaps merely imagine, the memory of Dr Selwyn returned to me for the first time in a long while. Three quarters of an hour later, not wanting to miss the landscape around Lake Geneva, which never fails to astound me as it opens out, I was just laying aside a Lausanne paper I’d bought in Zurich when my eye was caught by a report that said the remains of the Bernese alpine guide Johannes Naegeli, missing since summer 1914, had been released by the Oberaar Glacier, seventy-two years later. (23)

The use of the word “released” establishes congruence between the newspaper and the glacier. It seems the natural world is also an archive, with an ability to preserve and document the past. This has significant implications with regard to the way the natural and cultural realms are divided or, in this case, interconnected. Like the room in Iver Grove, the glacier has its own particular way of recording the past. The presence of the date 1914 reminds us that such a chronology (1914 to July 1986) is just one way of determining the significance of the past. We might also measure the significance of the past according to the contents of the glacier, which preserves Naegeli in the form of “a few polished bones and a pair of hobnailed boots” (23), that is, as an index. According to a non-linear trajectory, 1914 might in fact be very close to July 1986. It is also characteristic of Sebald’s narrative that the narrator’s ability to remember is supplemented by a chain of mediators, including the newspaper and the glacier. His memory is as much the product of these chance encounters, which are “released” by some greater agency, as they are his conscious efforts at recollection.

Sebald sums up the consequences of this story by noting, “they are ever returning to us, the dead” (23). I take him to mean that the past is active, both inside and outside us. Sebald’s narratives, from sentence to entire plot, thematically, formally and stylistically, might be interpreted as hingeing on what this citation suggests. According to the present study, “the dead” in the above remark aren’t simply dead humans, but also the entire process, and the variety of forms (glacier, boots, bones, newspaper), by which the past is said to inhabit the present.

Serres tells a similar story, illuminating particular aspects of Sebald’s prose with regard to the way time is experienced as a process of mediation that isn’t specifically natural or cultural, living or dead. He offers the following in response to a comment made by Latour about the modernist tendency to conceive of the past as obsolescent:
Let me tell you a story. Have you heard how some brothers, in their seventies, were grouped around their father for a funeral vigil, weeping for a dead man aged thirty or less? He had disappeared into a crevasse in the high mountains. He reappeared more than a half-century later, deposited in the valley by the glacier, perfectly conserved, youthful, from the depths of the cold. His children, having grown old, prepare to bury a body that is still young. (61)

Serres closes with the following remark concerning his demonstration: “Admire how, on the problem of time, an unpretentious true story agrees with recent science, to produce good philosophy” (61). It seems that, like the intermixing of past and present in the glacier, stories are always mixtures from which different disciplines abstract specific kinds of significance. Serres’ story recommends that time is multiple, that things and events are paradoxical combinations of the remote and the intimate. Another example Serres uses is the car, which makes use of the ancient invention of the wheel (45). According to Serres, “An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together with multiple pleats” (60).

In the third chapter of The Emigrants, the narrator pieces together the biography of his own great-uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, whose life, like each of the book’s four principal characters, was marked by a deep sense of anguish: a foreignness experienced both externally, in relation to one where he lives, and internally, according to a more difficult to intimate emotional unease—like Selwyn, Adelwarth is presumed to be “of the other persuasion”, however, I don’t wish to limit the profound unease instanced by this character to his sexual preference (88). The narrator visits his relatives, Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir, who live in America, and inquires about Adelwarth. So in this sense, already the conceit is to do with the process of documentation. The narrator accompanies Kasimir on a drive to the appropriately precarious “spit of land that stretches along the coast of New Jersey and is nowhere more than a kilometre or so wide” (87). In his typically sombre and extravagant fashion, Sebald evokes the meaning of the expression “at sea”:

This is the edge of the darkness, he said. And in truth it seemed as if the mainland were submerged behind us and as if there were nothing above the watery waste but this narrow strip of sand running up to the north and down towards the south. I often come out here, said Uncle Kasimir, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never quite know from where. Then he took this picture, a
print of which he sent me two years later, probably when he had finally shot the whole film, together with his gold pocket watch. (88-89)

Uncle Kasimir, and the humanity for which he stands, is dwarfed in the face of the grim yet not uncommon spectacle of the coast on an overcast day. The feeling of foreignness, of being distant, proper to the biography of Adelwarth, is inherited and described in this moment by Kasimir and the way he is affected by his surroundings. But this isn’t what is most interesting, or most Sebaldian, about this passage. Rather, it is the way the scene, the experience, then circulates through a variety of mediums that are incorporated into the narrative. The detail of the narrator receiving the film “two years later”, and the film as something with its own specific duration (“the whole film”), reminds us of the way time is specific to the documents in which it persists. James Wood remarks on this, “the tiny, pregnant detail about how it took Uncle Kasimir two years to shoot the rest of the film suggests a life without photographs, a life without much sense of its own visibility [italics in original]” (277). The image in the narrative acts as an index for the absent images, and we are moved to wonder: where are these pictures that I will never see? How are they possible? The gift of the pocket watch further emphasises that Sebald wants us to consider the different paces at which time is felt. I am in agreement with Wood when he comments, “The book’s deep theme, after all, is visibility: how we see the past, and how it sees us” (276). Here we need to understand visibility not exactly as what humans see through their eyes (clearly the past could never see us in this way), but rather, how perception is constituted through a process of inheritance, which is felt according to the specificity of differing events.

In an odd way, this passage is reminiscent of a passage from Nabokov’s autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, to which Sebald refers at the beginning of his essay on Nabokov, “Dream Textures”. The story describes the experience of a man “who suffers a panic attack when he first sees a home movie shot in his parents’ house a few weeks before his birth” (*Campo Santo*, 146). The man is overcome by the anachronistic absence preserved in the reality of the film. Sebald summarises this as “the experience of the anticipation of death in the memory of a time before life” (146-147). Why exactly does this resound with the above passage from *The Emigrants*? Perhaps because both experiences are analogous to the experience of writing. The vague emotional state induced by the effort to recollect and document the past is
described accurately, if obliquely, by the experience of the man in *Speak, Memory*. The writer occupies the ungrounded position of the man who experiences his disappearance into a medium. He takes the place of an imperceptible ghost who haunts his own life, haunts it as an anachronism that disturbs the idea of a before and an after. For the writer, such anachronism is the norm.

Sebald uses the reference to photography in the example from *The Emigrants* not, as we might expect, simply to describe the content of the images, but rather the whole apparatus of inscription for which the image stands as index. There is a play of obscurity in both instances, the suggestion that we are always looking into the past, and feeling it as an absence in what we see. Our sense of time evolves from the way the different media events are inscribed within each other. We need to think of mediums as inclusive of natural processes as much as photographs and film. The glacier captures and releases Naegeli’s remains; Kasmir’s photograph preserves a certain portion of detail from a far greater oblivion that the narrative also manages to invoke. Both refer to a discontinuity among lives that the story accounts for through registering the traces of the past returning. Sebald’s narratives emerge from the effort to describe the way different chronologies are preserved and networked irregularly within each other.
3.

AUSTERLITZ & THE EMIGRANTS:

Architecture and Obscurity
Austerlitz and The Emigrants can be read as insights into the perceptual experiences of the characters and their surrounds. Austerlitz in particular traces the relationship between a perceiving, remembering subject and the buildings that subject occupies. Sebald’s account of the built environment, and of environments generally, is incongruous with a metaphysical outlook that posits an exclusive divide between the living and the non-living. The agency Sebald gives to spectral forms, and to atmospheric and material events not conventionally thought of as perceiving bodies, invites us to read the human, and the supposedly unique experience of human consciousness, as being folded into, or implicated in, a spectrum which ranges from the molecular, through the organic and the creaturely, to the cognitive unconscious. In isolation from other varieties of perceptual experience, there would be far less richness and variability to conscious perception. In Sebald’s prose, the blur between the internal and experience of thought-forms and memories, the fantastic descriptions of atmospheric bodies, and the pervasive sense of a spirit world interlocking with the world of living and material bodies, enables the reader to appreciate a perspective that is at once inclusive of and beyond the conscious, perceiving, speaking or writing subject.

Important also to the narratives of Austerlitz and the final chapter of The Emigrants is the sense of a subject’s journey to discover something about themselves or the world. This journey, in Sebald’s hands, does not equate with redemption or an overcoming of prior limitations and disquiet. The epiphanies experienced by Austerlitz and Max Ferber, both of which I discuss in detail in this chapter, are characterised by hallucinatory experiences, valuable not for the symbolic secrets they body forth, nor for catharsis, but rather, as paradigmatic exposures to the intense and complex nature of events seen from a perspective that departs from the conscious, knowing human. This is the pervasive but difficult to define sense of being part of something in excess of oneself. The journeys of Sebald’s protagonists are journeys through and to places, and journeys inwards, as though the real journey consisted in a greater harmony, or increased traffic, between these two realms.

The democratic accounts of perceptual experience offered by Whitehead and Leibniz make them appropriate reading companions for Sebald’s prose fiction. What both Whitehead and Leibniz attend to is the sense by which our clear and distinct conscious perceptions emerge from and remain informed by a nebulous, fluctuant background of difficult to discriminate perceptual activity. Both have been called
baroque philosophers in that they express philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities that prioritise the multiplicitous and fluctuant aspects of reality, conventionally thought of as dim or vague. Leibniz, for example, was the first philosopher to propose a coherent doctrine arguing for the existence of unconscious perceptions—which I discuss in greater detail over the course of this chapter. In this sense, his philosophy provides an alternate genealogy to that of Freud concerning the role of the unconscious in perceptual experience. Whitehead takes up Leibniz’s thread, and similarly provides an alternate conceptual outline to that of Freud and Cartesian philosophy, inviting us to consider a more active and complex relationship between conscious and non-conscious processes, and between living and non-living varieties of experience.

In this chapter I elucidate the links between the philosophies of Leibniz, Whitehead and Sebald, considering the relationship between differing varieties of perceptual experience, and how the singular fabric with which we associate consciousness is contingent on the physical process or events that exceed it. I appeal also to the secondary studies of Gilles Deleuze and Daniel Tiffany, who both read Leibniz and Whitehead (although Whitehead is less of a focus in their studies) as baroque, materialist philosophers that appeal to the obscure aspects of perceptual experience. Which is to say, they emphasise, in their accounts of each philosopher, what is dim and contingent in our apparently stable perspectives, and in so doing, describe how human perception might be read as exemplifying aspects of its environment, rather than simply existing within it.

Section I: Thinking and Perceiving Architecturally

The essential role architecture and architectural thinking plays in Austerlitz is signalled at the book’s beginning when the narrator, sensitive and articulate with regard to the perception of built space himself, engages the solitary, camera-wielding, note-taking Jacques Austerlitz in Antwerp Centraal Station:

Our Antwerp conversations, as he sometimes called them later, turned primarily on architectural history, in accordance with his own astonishing professional expertise, and it was a subject we

55 Regarding Leibniz’s doctrine of unconscious perception, and its alternate inheritance to that of the Freudian unconscious, see Jonathan Miller’s essay, “Going Unconscious” (19).
discussed that evening as we sat together until nearly midnight in the restaurant facing the waiting room on the other side of the great domed hall. (8)

As the reference to “the great domed hall” at the conclusion of this passage suggests, the conversations that take place between Austerlitz and the narrator tend to be mediated by variously allusive and detailed references to the buildings that make up their surrounds. Austerlitz speaks the essays that the narrator-writer later transcribes. His French, the language in which these conversations take place, is described as of “natural perfection”, and he often talks for hours on end simply by observing his surrounds and following, at length, the train of his thoughts (28; 31). The peculiar thing here is that while the narrator attributes dexterity to Austerlitz’s spoken discourse, we only ever appreciate it through his, that is to say, Sebald’s, writing. This point is brought home further by the narrator’s description:

From the first I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life. (12-13)

In light of this emphasis on the extremely articulate nature of Austerlitz’s speech, we are tempted to presume a certain comparability between the syntactical style and learnedness of the writing, and the initial conversations. Likewise, the method or genre by which Austerlitz expresses his ideas, “a kind of historical metaphysic”, clearly recalls Sebald’s own prose framework.

Austerlitz’s elaborate observations are the product of a sustained effort to substitute his psychological self with a body of knowledge. The trauma of Austerlitz’s childhood separation from his parents, not revealed to the narrator in these initial meetings, requires that he find supplementary interests in order to avoid the disturbing past that lurks within him, and, similarly it would seem, within the environments he passes through.

Sebald continues to refer to the specific style and medium in which we receive the ideas of his narrator and his characters. After these meetings in Belgium, the narrator makes it his habit to visit Austerlitz every time he travels to London. He remarks:
I remember to this day how easily I could grasp what he called his tentative ideas when he talked about the architectural style of the capitalist era, a subject which he said had fascinated him since his own student days, speaking in particular of the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in law courts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labour force. His investigations, so Austerlitz once told me, had long outstripped their original purpose as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study, based entirely on his own views, of the family likeness between buildings. (33)

There are echoes of both Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin in Sebald’s description of Austerlitz and his project (Long, 2007; Santner, 2006; Gray, 2009). What interests me here, however, rather than the common themes taken up by Foucault, Benjamin and Sebald in their critiques of modernity, is the characterisation of Austerlitz’s project as a kind of lively, unknown quantity, not dissimilar to the compulsive realisations of form in the buildings he describes. What constitutes the continuity between the peculiarities of Austerlitz’s “proliferating” project, and the “compulsive” architectural tendencies he takes as his object, is a conception of reality that treats thinking, writing and physical form as intimately interwoven.

When Austerlitz discusses the “paranoid elaboration” evident in the “increasingly complex” (16) designs of fortifications, we regard the intricacy and, to some extent, the idiocy, of these formal-material realisations, as the externalisation of thought processes, suggestive cross-sections—like the labyrinthine design that the narrator traverses in his dream in The Rings of Saturn (173)—of the human brain at work. In an inverse but complementary manner, the internal energies of things such as root systems and crystals are apprehended as instances of intricate and obscure physical processes that suggest the similarly complex physical activity of thinking. In addition to being things in themselves, things are also the ideas of things, material concepts with potential encyclopaedias that unfold within them.

As Austerlitz specifies, shortly after his discourse on the history of fortification, it is a certain “fascination with the idea of a network”, of which the railway system is the principal exemplar, that is the defining aspect of his interest (33). Indeed, throughout the book, what is encapsulated in this “idea of a network” is referred to again and again. A network recommends a conception of reality in which things are always growths. Often, in Sebald’s case, it is deranged, but just as likely it might be harmonious. Here one might think of the map of London and a patch of lichen, the
formal similarity of which the narrator invokes with reference to a poem some pages later: “London a lichen mapped on mild clays and its rough circle without purpose [italics in original]” (37). Or, similarly, of the star-shaped design that is realised in differing guises over the course of the book. It is difficult to determine whether or not this disorganised organisation is to be regarded primarily as a good or bad thing. In some instances, the tonal register of fear is indistinguishable from that of perplexity. Sebald seems reluctant to institute a clear opposition between what is, on the one hand, a marvel, and on the other, a horror—and this uncertainty is perhaps the really terrifying thing about it.

As I have already noted, the book’s propositions regarding the formal-material specificity of the built environment often mediate, or overlook, any direct conversation between Austerlitz and the narrator, or the narrator’s psychological self and a hypothesised reader. The buildings in Austerlitz are described according to the historical and metaphysical suggestiveness of their differing aspects. There is a pervasive sense that each part of a building obscures something important, that each part is informed by imperceptible relationships with other parts and with a history that stretches back in time. In this sense, the buildings experienced and described by Austerlitz and the narrator are not reducible to a singular perspective, as though one could adequately apprehend a building through a single map. Instead, we receive a gathering of diverse but interconnected aspects that are temporarily and precariously unified in the experience of the personages who pass through them. What fascinates Austerlitz in the idea of a network similarly informs the way buildings are accounted for in the narrative. We might even say that perceptual experience itself, whether human or non-human, is characteristically networked through space and time.56

The opening of Austerlitz, including the narrator’s experience of the Nocturama, the fortress of Breendonk and the Palace of Justice is exemplary with regard to the way Sebald characterises the interaction between the embodied spectator and the built environment as an event—an event constituted by the unification of temporally diverse aspects. In my reading of this section of the book, I appeal to Whitehead’s philosophy of events, as significantly influenced by Leibniz, and to his understanding

56 In The Rings of Saturn, the narrator, from his point of view in an aircraft, remarks on the “networks of complexity” by which one perceives human activity from such a distance (91). It is no different when one confronts a building on foot: one needs to account not for a singular aspect or a panorama (simply another different kind of singular aspect), but for the coordination of hidden aspects among which the temporary perspective is singular.
of perception or perspective as the defining element of both human and non-human experience. In a sense, I wish to put flesh on the bones of Long’s assertion that: “Whereas Descartes’ central premise was that the mind can be certain only of its ability to be present to itself, Sebald’s text repeatedly emphasises that the body exists in space and time and, through interaction with the environment, defines the parameters of mental activity: thought, dream, memory, imagination” (136). It is the exact nature of this interaction that Whitehead’s philosophy enables us to think through in a suggestive and coherent manner. Sebald’s narratives provide a detailed, historically interesting, imaginative and inhabitable realisation of what Whitehead discusses in more general terms.

In *Science and The Modern World*, Whitehead credits Leibniz with introducing the idea of perspectives in philosophy, and providing the model on which he bases his notion of “organism”: “You will remember that the idea of perspectives is quite familiar in philosophy. It was introduced by Leibniz, in the notion of his monads mirroring perspectives of the universe. I am using the same notion, only I am toning down his monads into unified events in space time” (87). For both of these philosophers the ultimately real constituents of the cosmos are defined by their internal relatedness to other things, that is, the grasping of diverse aspects into a unity which refers to other events. For Whitehead, an organic, as opposed to a purely mechanistic, view of reality, sought to “put the mind back into nature” and replace a merely physical understanding of what there is with a physiological understanding (184). Detailing the process by which we become conscious of “the effect of stimuli along the bodily nerves”, Whitehead notes:

…the mental cognition is seen as the reflective experience of a totality, reporting for itself what it is in itself as one unit occurrence. This unit is the integration of the sum total of its partial happenings, but it is not their numerical aggregate. It has its own unity as an event. This total unity, considered as an entity for its own sake, is the prehension into unity of the patterned aspects of the universe of events. Its knowledge of itself arises from its own relevance to the things of which it prehends the aspects. It knows the world as a system of mutual relevance, and thus sees itself as mirrored in

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57 Whitehead also remarks: “It is evident that I can use Leibniz’s language, and say that every volume mirrors in itself every other volume in space” (*SMW*, 81). And elsewhere: “It is obvious that the basing of philosophy upon the presuppositions of organism must be traced back to Leibniz” (*SMW*, 193). For an insight into the Leibnizian inheritance in Whitehead’s work, see the comprehensive study of Piefrancesco Basile, *Leibniz, Whitehead and the Metaphysics of Causation*. 
other things. These other things include more especially the various parts of its own body. (184-185)\textsuperscript{58}

Here Whitehead’s language is decidedly similar to that of Leibniz, whose doctrine of monadic perception proposed that each monad perceived, or mirrored, the universe in its entirety, in varying degrees of confusion and distinctness (1908: 317).\textsuperscript{59} Thus, a cognitive event is the upshot of a unifying process that exceeds it. Cognition, or the conscious awareness of something, is then constituted by the arrangement of suggestive particulars that refer to other events, but refer in their own unique or unified way.

Both Austerlitz and Sebald’s narrators, and similarly, the four principal characters of The Emigrants, experience a relationship with the presence of the past in which non-conscious perception is particularly intense. This non-conscious perception is emotional and affect-based. In the cases of Austerlitz and Max Ferber in particular, exposure to experiences of non-conscious perception results in mental collapses and epiphanies—I will detail the nature of these episodes later in the chapter; for now I want to set up a general idea of the way Sebald’s conceit operates. Austerlitz, Ferber and, to a lesser extent, the narrator, receive hallucinatory visions of their previously non-conscious but nonetheless present past. What these visions reveal is that despite not knowing it, that is, not being consciously aware of it, they each carry within themselves the marks of their pasts. In a contrasting but nonetheless suggestive manner, Austerlitz’s extensive knowledge of the architectural spaces he visits enables him to recurrently trace a substitute identity in the environments within which he and the narrator converse. The “countless fine lines through history” that he traces are similarly the fine lines, or “marks of pain”, that characterise his thinking, and the non-

\textsuperscript{58} In Science and The Modern World, Whitehead uses the words “event” and “prehension” interchangeably: “It is necessary to understand that space-time is nothing else than a system of pulling together of assemblages into unities. But the word event just means one of these spatio-temporal unities. Accordingly, it may be used instead of the term ‘prehension’ as meaning the thing prehended” (91). The thing prehended or the event is the non-conscious, or not necessarily conscious, relation between a standpoint and the universe it incorporates. This, as noted above, is an explicitly Leibnizian, or monadological, conception of reality. While Whitehead credits Leibniz with introducing the notion that the “ultimate actual things, are in some sense procedures of organisation” (194), he distances himself from Leibniz’s “divine arrangement of a pre-established harmony” (193).

\textsuperscript{59} Leibniz writes, “each simple substance [or monad] has relations which express all the others, and that, consequently, it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe” (316-317). Monads are differentiated according to the regions of the universe they perceive distinctly: “nothing can limit it [the monad] to representing only a part of things: although it may be true that this representation is confused as regards the detail of the whole universe, and can be distinct only in a small part of things” (317).
conscious relation experienced in his hallucinations (14). Austerlitz both replaces his identity with his architectural scholarship, and possesses a barely perceptible awareness that the secrets to his past are somehow incorporated within certain mythical places (mythical according to his own hidden origins). In this sense, the conceit of Austerlitz exhibits the evolutionary truth that we, and the capacity for conscious thought that supposedly defines the human, have evolved from the patterns and rhythms in which we take such an interest and compulsively participate—it seems no accident that Darwin, and a kind of Darwinian phenomenology, features prominently in the Andromeda Lodge episode (83-84; 93).

Presently I will return to the beginning of Austerlitz in order to demonstrate the extent to which Sebald’s narratives can be read in a suggestive relationship with the above insights from Whitehead’s philosophy. In typical fashion—“plagued by a headache, and […] uneasy thoughts” (3)—the narrator finds himself among the wide-eyed raccoons and owls in the Nocturama of Antwerp zoo. The narrator notes that over the years his memory of this “topsy-turvy miniature universe”, where night is day and day is night, becomes “confused” with the waiting room of Antwerp Centraal Station (5). Thus, we already have expressed here the idea of a building enclosing not just a specific space, but an entire discrete universe, marked from an outside reality by its anachronistic diurnal cycle. The confusion experienced by the narrator isn’t accounted for simply by the haziness of his memory, but rather by an initial, architectural and atmospheric confusion between the interiors of the two buildings:

When I entered the great hall of the Centraal Station with its dome arching sixty meters high above it, my first thoughts, perhaps triggered by my visit to the zoo and the sight of the dromedary, was that this magnificent although then severely dilapidated foyer ought to have cages for lions and leopards let into its marble niches, and aquaria for sharks, octopuses, and crocodiles, just as some zoos, conversely, have little railways trains in which you can, so to speak, travel to the farthest corners of the earth. It was probably due to ideas like these, occurring to me almost of their own accord there in Antwerp, that the waiting room which, I know, has now been turned into a staff canteen struck me as another Nocturama, a curious confusion which may of course have been the result of the sun’s sinking beneath the city rooftops just as I entered the room. (6)

Sebald isn’t only drawing attention to the instability of memory here. He is accounting for the manner in which different forms persist within each other, and that the memory and imagination of his narrator is a particularly complex and intensified
site where such confusions take place. We might also make note of the fact that Sebald refers to the narrator’s ideas as “occurring [...] almost of their own accord”, and that his thoughts were “triggered”. The narrator is responding to the suggestiveness of his surroundings; what constitutes the event of his conscious awareness are the persisting aspects of his recent past, which are imaginatively and perceptually confused or unified. The narrator’s perspective is relayed to us through a particular grouping of other perspectives that are arranged according to a suggestive unity or idea.

The wide eyes of the animals, the warping of night- and daytime environments, the reference to the temporally and perceptually indistinct atmospheric conditions of dusk—all this results in an unstable and suggestive interior space. While the narrator doesn’t refer to his own fluctuant condition beyond his introductory remark, we get the sense of an architectural environment that behaves according to a comparable mutability. What Sebald creates is a theatre of looking in which the perceptual capacities of the human manifest as aspects of the surrounding world and its occupants. This isn’t to reduce the surrounding world to the human, but to account for the way human capacities exist in a dynamic relationship with the things they encounter.

Such examples are not infrequent in Sebald’s prose. The synecdochic sense of different worlds erupting within each other, and of the necessity to ornament one world with the indexical presences of another, is both his way of reading the colonial tendency to collect and display as a spectacle of sovereign power, and of reading the presence of the past (present as remainder) in the aftermath of catastrophic events, principally, at least in Austerlitz, the Shoah. These historically specific examples are part of a more general effort to account for the presence of the immediate or distant past as rewritten into the present occasion. As in the above example, the traces of what recently was arrive again and at once write themselves into, and are absorbed by, the events that follow them.

Sebald demonstrates perception is a scale-dependent event that emerges according to the multiple forms that inhabit the perceptual field. The narrator’s creative

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60 We might also note Austerlitz’s observation soon after this passage: “Someone […] ought to draw up a catalogue of types of buildings listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of less than normal size—the little cottage in the fields, the hermitage, the lockkeeper’s lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children’s bothy in the garden—are
memories and perceptions do not provide us with instances of static, geometric space. Rather, the narrative account responds to the suggestiveness of the diminutive forms and their enclosures, to the expressions (of both people and animals) and to the layering of atmospheric filters, some of which, like the apprehension of his recent past, are at once external and embodied—what one has just seen becomes the imperceptible filter or feeling-tone through which the present reality is experienced.

What the narrator experiences and expresses isn’t simply random association; the environments he enters at the book’s beginning tell real historical truths that relate to formal or topological correspondences between displays of power and the manipulations of bodies. As Michael Silverblatt astutely notes in the interview referred to in the introduction of this thesis, the concentration camp is suggested in the descriptions and the networking together of these apparently disconnected and remote architectural events (cited in Schwartz, 79). The “curious confusion” of aspects and the seemingly unmotivated ideas that occur to the narrator testify to an imperceptible intermixing of forms that is at once private and impersonal.

The narrator’s expedition to the fortress of Breendonk, shortly after his meeting with Austerlitz in Antwerp Centraal Station, involves a highly unusual, highly nuanced account of the interaction between perception, memory and architecture. Sebald’s description of the outside of the structure is suggestive of an alternate reality. The narrator cannot comprehend the building’s monstrosity, describing it variously as “a whale from the deep”, “a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence”, and, in response to its ground-plan, “the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature” (20-22). The narrator cannot come to terms with the fact that the fort was designed and built by human hands, and it provokes in him feelings of disgust and revulsion. The proliferation of creaturely metaphors recommend that different forms energise the narrator’s experience of the material reality inhabited by the building. To him it is not just a building, not just a massive, ugly lump of cement, but something, despite its irrational design, that nonetheless points to a history for that irrationality—not necessarily comprehensible, of course.

The incomprehensibility that the narrator inhabits in confrontation with such a monstrosity is equated with the limitations of his perspective:

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those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right mind could truthfully say that he likes a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice on the old Gallows Hill in Brussels” (18-19).
From whatever viewpoint I tried to form a picture of the complex I could make out no architectural plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. (20)

We get the sense of a point of view, or the relationship between a percipient and a built structure, that is composed of multiple other aspects. That the building “kept shifting” and is in excess of the narrator’s capacity to apprehend it suggests that dimensions other than the clearly perceived contribute crucially to his experience. Sebald’s use of images and maps here, depicting contrasting viewpoints—inside, outside and above the building—reminds us that our sense of what something is is always composed of what we cannot immediately see of it, and continually evolves according to our temporal engagement with it.

The narrator’s subsequent experience of the gloomy, labyrinthine interior of Breendonk exemplifies an often paranoid apprehension of the nearness of the past. The perceived heaviness of the structure, its masses of thick cement, are experienced internally by the narrator as a bodily and atmospheric heaviness, a heaviness of the past, and the long history of destruction instanced by the particular site. This is testament to the idea that in seeing something as apart from us we also affectively experience it as part of our bodies. Emotional, physiological experiences and materials participate as categorically contrasting expressions of similar ideas. The narrator variously remarks on the “clouding over” of both his memories and his initial experience (30)—the experience of forgetting for Sebald is as much to do with immediately perceived dimness as it is with the more conventional varieties of gradual amnesia. The suggestiveness of an “iron hook hanging on a cord from the ceiling” (33) results in the recollection of series of memories from the narrator’s childhood, which coincide with a bout of nausea:

No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favourite of my father’s and which I always disliked. Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to me to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat. (33)
There is a circularity here in the description of the narrator’s childhood memories as a building (“when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open”), and the fortress as a material memory that has incorporated within its features, or its feeling, the history to which it has been exposed. The narrator’s sensitivity to this troubling and overwhelming presence is characteristic of the series of epiphanies that he and, more significantly, Austerlitz, experience in confrontation with architectural sites that seem defined by the spaces they reserve for the dead—or the undead, to adopt Santner’s concept.

This experience of physical overcoming, hallucination and involuntary memory speaks to Austerlitz’s earlier remarks that, “In his studies of railway architecture…he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places, although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper” (14). There is a certain continuity between the idea of a place or building exuding emotional resonance and the narrator and Austerlitz’s sense that only a porous border separates the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the genealogy Sebald traces, our memories are, in some sense, intelligible, via what might be thought of as the mythical or irrational idea of a perceptible spirit world. The bodily feelings one inherits from a building such as Breendonk, without perceiving the route by which that inheritance takes place, suggest what might be considered a kind of paranormal sensitivity. However, the attribution of paranormality only seems relevant if the transfer that occurs between the percipient and the perceiving world is not accounted for with adequate concepts and mythologies. That a building is inhabited by ghosts, or that it makes one feel unusual, recommends that our clear and distinct impressions do not tell the whole story, and that imperceptible things participate in a causally efficacious fashion in our experience.

Section II: Liverpool Street Station and the Baroque Epiphany

In his introduction to Deleuze’s The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque, Tom Conley notes that the baroque, in its narrative manifestation, is characterised by “an individual’s account of his or her voyage to and from an ineffably universal event, which set the body in a trace, and which has left marks, scars, or other physical
evidence that confirm the individual’s tale of passage” (1993: xii). The experiences undergone by both the narrator and Austerlitz—and as I discuss later in the chapter, Max Ferber—involve quests to uncover meaning and trance-like encounters, defined by an intense influx of non-conscious perceptions into conscious apprehension. Both Whitehead and Leibniz, who Deleuze extensively discusses in his book, account for the experience of non-conscious and non-human forms of perception in their doctrines of “perception in the mode of causal efficacy” and “minute perceptions” (petitis perceptions) respectively. As already mentioned, what is crucial to the philosophical doctrines of Whitehead and Leibniz is the persistent influence of confused, dim, hazily conscious perceptions, which suggest a vast background of non-conscious perception that is obscured in terms of the clear and distinct awareness of something, but which adds to the richness and depth of our perceptual experience.

As Conley notes, perception conceived in such a manner is defined by its attentiveness not to a subject or an object, but to an enlarged conception of what constitutes an event:

> The mystical venture convinces because no language can be said to represent what it means. It is tantamount, in part, to what Deleuze, by means of Leibniz, Henri Michaux, Gaëtau Clérambault, might call an event: it may not have an empirical or historical basis but it happens to be the virtual sensation of a somatic moment of totalisation and dispersion. In the novel or poetry, it can be felt as a seriality of epiphany. Its scientific analogies might include the thoughts of infinity that come with the view of the world in which all of its visible objects are moving aggregates of infinite numbers of atoms and molecules. In the vision of Alfred North Whitehead, a philosopher inspired by Leibniz, an event can be seen in the duration that produces the site of a pyramid, an avalanche of snow, or the jagged edge of rifts in a block of ice. (cited in Deleuze, 1993: xii)

In this avowedly non-anthropocentric view of perceptible experience, there is no generic difference between the human subject perceiving and other things which compose, or don’t compose, its environment. Our sense of the infinite is not a product of the mind in confrontation with an idea of the infinite, its inconceivability, but rather a real and impossible to bear connection with the presence of the past. In the

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61 I refer to Whitehead’s doctrine frequently throughout this thesis. See Chapter 1 for references to causal efficacy in his work. For Leibniz’s notion of “minute perceptions”, see “The Monadology” (1908: 309-310). Ian hacking mentions Leibniz’s notion of petitis perceptions in relation to Antonio Damasio’s “neurological interest in Freud’s unconscious”: “I think what he [Damasio] needs is a concept closer to Leibniz’s petites perceptions, innumerable goings on which would be like perceptions if only we were conscious of them, and which sometimes do build up into real awareness” (“Get Knitting”).
epiphanic experiences of Austerlitz and Ferber, each character gains access to an obscure history defined by its expressiveness. In their exposure to such events, neither character overcomes nor escapes the past. With reference to the above quotation, their epiphanies are of a serial nature, and do not equate with either redemption or artistic accomplishment (in this sense, of their adventures or projects being finished). Each continues to live out an agitating and crippling connection with the past.

In what follows I will analyse a number examples from *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*. In each example the protagonists (Austerlitz and Ferber) attempt, compulsively, to establish a coherent relationship with the past. During these quests to find meaning they experience extreme departures from perceptual equilibrium, involving mental collapse, epiphany and hallucination. They consciously experience themselves as non-conscious individuals or events. And, likewise, we can appreciate the non-conscious experience of consciousness as a kind of pattern or network of scars, “countless fine lines”.

Provoked by a mounting sense that he is about to experience a “disintegration of [his] personality” (123), Austerlitz begins what he terms his “nocturnal wanderings”, which take him to “the most remote areas of London” (126). It is not simply a geographical remoteness Sebald names here, but a sense of travelling far back in the past. Liverpool Street Station is among the buildings Austerlitz frequents, and for him it preserves a particularly intense relationship with the past. It is here that he experiences an epiphany that sets him on an incomplete quest to uncover the secrets of his erased childhood.

During his travels in this nocturnal realm, Austerlitz is brought into contact with a phantasmagorical reality: “I began seeing what might be described as shapes and colours of diminished corporeality through a drifting veil or cloud of smoke, images from a faded world…” (179-180). Although Sebald describes these visions as tricks played upon Austerlitz by his senses (180), we do not get a strong sense of a hallucinatory reality that is opposed to an empirical one. Without explicitly isolating spectral phenomena, Sebald’s observations, of what is ostensibly a mundane, empirical reality, suggest a barely perceptible “otherworld” characterised by a multiplicity of confused or indistinct perceptions. He makes the idea of ghosts and other strange presences not seem so fantastic. This is evident in the description of the crowds in the underground and the unusual light that pervades the station:
Even on sunny days only a faint greyness, scarcely illuminated at all by the globes of the station lights, came through the glass roof over the main hall, and in this eternal dusk, which was full of a muffled babble of voices, a quiet scrapping and trampling of feet, innumerable people passed in great tides, disembarking from the trains or boarding them, coming together, moving apart, and being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir. (181)

What Sebald describes here is an impersonal mass of shifting relations characterised by indistinctness, both visually in the “faint greyness” and “eternal dusk”, and audibly in the “babble” and “trampling” of the numerous commuters. This realm of the barely perceptible and the fuzzy invokes both the unconscious thinking of the human observer and a material world of “diminished corporeality”, where things are apprehended as events, processes and forms of energy. It is among these real and imaginary spirits that Austerlitz becomes aware of the pull of his own unaccounted for past, “that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which, as I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time” (182). This emotional sensitivity is without a cohesive mental counterpart. Instead, Austerlitz experiences his immediate surrounds as distorted memories, and corporeal figures as ghosts.

The above description of crowds and the indistinct, but often spectacular, atmosphere of twilight is the first in a series of examples where Sebald draws attention to unseen or barely seen perceptual activity, activity that appears at once physical and psychological, material and insubstantial. It is as though Austerlitz wanders into environments that coincide with the inaccessible, emotionally resonant narrative that persists within his unconscious. However, Austerlitz’s visions should not simply be regarded as symptomatic of his suffering. Sebald clearly wishes the reader to understand the sense by which Austerlitz’s perceptual experience is perversely enriched through his apprehension of spirit forms and indistinct bodies that appear to have perceptual capacity.

The suggestion of an obscure correspondence between the living and the dead is further highlighted in the two full-page images, one a photograph, the other a map, that appear on pages 185 and 187 respectively. The first features what appear to be cackling skeletons—according to the narrative, those unearthed during the rebuilding of Broad Street station in 1984. Many cultural critics, including Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Siegfried Kracauer, have pointed out the proximity of photography and
ghosts, of the inherent ghostliness or undeadness of the photographic image (Benjamin, 2005; Barthes, 2000; Kracauer, 1995). In Santner’s study, he notes the dual sense in which a photograph can be considered a medium: “a technological means and substrate for the production and reproduction of images and a locus of commerce with the dead (or undead)” (2006: xx). The animated quality of the skeletons in the image is paradoxically emphasised by their stillness, as if it were a precondition of their being able to cackle or “babble” for eternity. Captured in the medium of the photograph, the dead and the living occupy the same reality, which has the unnerving effect of making the skeletons appear lively, just as it makes photographs of the living seem as though they are ghosts.

The second image features an engineer’s map of railway lines, described as “muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas” (186). This is a similarly evocative appeal to supposedly lifeless forms as, if not exactly vital, then intricate and active. Sebald is inviting us to respond to different perspectives and mediations that both resonate and contrast with each other. He expresses an understanding of how an example is composed of multiple aspects, and how, when juxtaposed with other examples, one can generate vague and compelling insights akin to the creation of another, unspeakable language.

In Santner’s analysis he refers to a quotation from Barthes’ Camera Lucida that conveys the idea that the photograph, through an interaction of chemicals, materials and light, “is literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes, cited in Santner, 156). Concerning the present study, what is of particular relevance in this insight is the relationship between the medium of representation and the thing represented, that the photographic medium is, to some extent, coextensive with the taking-place of the event or object that it depicts. In a sense, in their very substance or form, photographs hypothetically activate the existence of ghosts—they are spirits embedded in matter. As argued in the last chapter, Sebald’s conception of the written form displays a similar tendency to create a system of reference whereby the things represented are suggested by the medium in which they appear—in Barthes’ terms, they emanate from the medium.

Sebald’s discussion of the underground world of the dead, and of the practices surrounding the disposal of the dead, might call to mind his essay “Campo Santo”, which features a discourse on the archaic and extravagant funeral rites of the people of Corsica—a place of interest for Sebald; he composed several essays on the island
collected in the posthumous volume that bears the same name as this essay. With evident fondness, Sebald recalls “little dwellings for the dead everywhere, *da paese a paese:* burial chambers and mausoleums, here under a chestnut tree, there in an olive grove full of moving light and shade, in the middle of a pumpkin bed, in a field of oats…” (24). He adds, “many old Corsican women used to go out to the dwellings of the dead after the day’s work was done, to listen to what they had to say and consult them on the cultivation of the land and other matters to do with the correct conduct of life” (24-25). This is in contrast to the way the dead are treated in Western modernity: “We can no longer speak of everlasting memory and the veneration of our forebears. On the contrary: the dead must now be cleared out of the way as quickly and comprehensively as possible” (34). When Sebald speaks of the dead in such a way, he is not simply alluding to symbolic gestures, but to the way we conceive of the past as a material or energetic influence in the present. Our conceptions of place, and of what composes place, are influenced by whether or not we consider the underworld of the dead to be active inside us and in our surrounds, or whether they are simply consigned to an exclusively imaginary, strictly fictitious realm.

The idea that the dead are watching over us, and that the buildings and environments we inhabit are similarly inhabited by the dead, exerts considerable influence on the way we conceive of the relationship between our thinking, perceiving bodies and the surrounding world. It also influences the way we think about what is ostensibly non-conscious, inorganic matter, and the extent to which we suppose such matter exhibits perceptual and expressive aptitude. That the living might “consult” the dead, and that certain substances, structures or techniques might work as mediums to facilitate the taking-place of such exchanges, is frequently and variously realised in Sebald’s prose. My argument here is that we need to understand this form of paranormal consultation in line with a metaphysical conception of substance that grants it and expressive and perceptual capacity.

In conceiving of residences for the dead, Sebald allegorises the function of representation, and enables us to consider how ideas to do with writing and photography might be dispersed in processes that are less obviously technological and symbolic. The idea of something being submerged, of something being present inside something else, is conveyed through Austerlitz’s childhood fascination with the underwater inhabitants of Llanwddyn, a Welsh village sunk under the Vyrnwy reservoir. Sebald alludes to the similarity between the hidden underwater realm and
an album of photographs in which those villagers are depicted: “This notion of mine about the sub-aquatic existence of the people of Llanwddyn also had something to do with the album which Elias first showed me on our return home that evening, containing several photographs of his birthplace, now sunk beneath the water” (72). Although Austerlitz would not, at the time, have made the connection himself, both the story and his intent reviewing of the photographs speak of a vaguely conscious, sympathetic awareness that their story suggests his—the sense that his own childhood lies submerged somewhere in the past, that those with whom he is most familiar continue to eke out their foreshortened existence in a village of ghosts.

What’s more, it is these photographs from which the young Austerlitz draws his ideas about the existence of ghosts: “Sometimes I even imagined that I had seen one or other of the people from the photographs in the album walking down the road in Bala, or out in the fields, particularly around noon on hot summer days, when there was no one else about and the air flickered hazily” (74). This sense of the dead inhabiting the same reality as the living is confirmed in the advice of Evan the cobbler. In contrast to Elias, “who always connected illness and death with tribulations, just punishment and guilt”, Evan describes the dead, similar to Austerlitz’s visions in later life, as beings of “diminished corporeality”: “At first glance they seemed to be normal people, but when you looked more closely their faces would blur or flicker slightly at the edges” (74-75). Evan likens the diminished reality of the dead to the shrinking of a piece of linen in the wash (75). This positing of the difference between the dead and the living as something to do with scale, rather than something absolute, seems fitting with regard to Sebald’s recurrent appeal to the interlinking of the two realms.

The way Sebald aligns these details is what makes his books unique. We can appreciate the idea of worlds contained within worlds, and that the process of inscription or mediation relates not only to the tracing of ciphers on page, but also to the way the traces of differing worlds are inscribed, as shadow realms, within each other.

It is with this in mind that I would like now to return to the epiphany experienced by Austerlitz in the Ladies’ Waiting-Room in Liverpool Street Station. The internal atmosphere of the station is described as a twilight of the dead, where people’s movements are characterised by “incessant to-ing and fro-ing” (132). The avatars of this unseen world tend always to have something peculiarly mechanical about them.
Austerlitz becomes compelled to follow a white turbaned porter while waiting on the platform. The porter also seems something of an apparition or a mechanical ghost. He “perform[s] the same movements over and over again” and disappears through a door in the “interior façade of the station” “with an odd jerk” (134). Austerlitz describes his reasoning for following the porter as inexplicable: “We take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious” (134). These adjustments are then intelligible as ghostly chattering and insubstantial figures, such as the porter, and thus the workings of the imaginary or unconscious realm and the realm of physical phenomena seem to play out in an spectrum of distributed potencies.

It is the shadow in the Ladies’ Waiting-Room, rather than the light, that discloses features and remains pervasive to Austerlitz:

> Although this light, a profusion of dusty glitter, one might say, was very bright near the ceiling, as it sank lower it looked as if it were being absorbed by the walls and deeper reaches of the room, as if it merely added to the gloom and were running in black streaks, rather like rainwater running down the smooth trunks of beach trees or over the cast-concrete façade of a building. (190)

The relationship between the room Austerlitz enters and his unconscious is here made explicit. There is a deliberate confusion between Austerlitz’s hallucinatory externalisation of his past, and what may or may not be a hallucinatory experience of the Waiting-Room. The architecture is constitutive in conceptualising the way unconscious thinking and perception persist. We get a sense of space that is at once physical and psychological. Thinking is construed as architectural in its nature, and the things perceived have the same qualities as entities grasped in our memories and imagination.

The confusion of the interior and exterior aspects, both of the building and of Austerlitz’s relationship with his becoming-conscious awareness of his past, is heightened by particulate bodies and atmospheric events that take place within the station. Like the scene of “Adela’s Goodbye”, analysed in the previous chapter, Sebald gives prominence to the meteoric bodies which populate the atmosphere with their fantastic activities:

> I stood in that empty space beneath the ceiling which seemed to float at a vertiginous height, unable to move from the spot, with my face raised to the icy grey light, like moonshine, which came
through the windows in a gallery near the vaulted roof, and hung above me like a tight-meshed net or a piece of thin, fraying fabric. (189-190)

The room’s light is perceptible as a kind of fabric, a texture separate from every surface other than itself. It seems no accident that one of the memories—“scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind” (191-192)—with which Austerlitz is immediately confronted during this underground epiphany, involves a mysterious body of fog:

White mist had risen from the meadows outside, and we watched in silence as it crept slowly onto the church porch, a rippling vapour rolling forward at ground level and gradually spreading over the entire stone floor, becoming denser and denser and rising visibly higher, until we ourselves emerged from it only above the waist and it seemed to stifle us. (192)

The continually evolving and barely organised body of mist defines the oddness of this image. Once again, the weather enters the internally ornamented atmosphere, is given shape by the building, blurring our conceptions of inside and outside, and suggesting the non-conscious perceptions that similarly characterise Austerlitz’s relationship with his traumatic past. Sebald’s characterisation of the memories experienced by Austerlitz as “drift[ing]” similarly evokes the vagrant and unstable habits of the fog.

In Toy Medium, Daniel Tiffany notes the correspondence between baroque natural philosophy, its conceptions of invisible motivating forces, and a poetics of meteoric bodies of the kind Sebald evocatively gives form to here. According to Tiffany, the concept of “ether”, which was entertained by thinkers including Descartes and Newton, among many others, provided an intuitive substrate for the imperceptible and unthinkable aspects of reality (135). In the context of Sebald’s narrative, the co-presence of Austerlitz’s visionary overcoming and the mists, vapours and strange displays of light and shadow that pervade the air suggests a realm in which unconscious thinking and imperceptible things are structurally homogenous. Quoting from Roger Caillois’ doctrine of “lyrical” or “automatic thinking”, Tiffany notes: “the ‘process of lyrical materialization’ (which constitutes the nucleus of automatism) presumes that ‘the mental and supposedly inner world of representation would be objectively confused with the physical and supposedly outer world of perception’” (Caillois, cited in Tiffany, 84). Caillois proposes a relationship between internal and
external realms familiar to us in Sebald’s prose, along with a theory of matter that accounts for the implication of the physical and psychic world. There is a lyric proximity between what is postulated about the unseen but pervasive realm of the atmosphere and the similarly experienced world of thought. Internal atmospheres or climates, such as those instanced inside Liverpool Street Station, share an irresistible formal congruence with unseen or suggested thinking processes.

What Sebald’s use of architecture enables us to appreciate is the sense of a discrete environment that incorporates a dizzying multiplicity of vaguely persistent aspects. The rooms of his buildings are not limited to what they enclose. The obscurity of what lies beyond them is formally congruent with the dimmer regions of his protagonists’ perceptual experience, and the reader thus has the sense of subject and surrounds existing as a coherent temperament.

Section III: Terezín

Another episode where Austerlitz encounters the architecturally incomprehensible takes place at Terezín, the ghettoised village, previously a fortress, where his mother Agáta was sent during the war. Austerlitz’s journey to Terezín is bookended by two dreams and punctuated by another. Indeed, the entire account of the village is so dreamlike that, despite its overpowering importance, he cannot make sense of much of what confronts him there. Prior to his expedition, Austerlitz remarks:

It does not seem to me […] that we understand the rules governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision. (185)

Here Sebald is explicitly invoking an alternate reality, something like a fourth dimension in which the world of the living becomes an aspect within the infinitely more vast world of the dead. The notion of a “higher form of stereometry” is reminiscent of the “deranged universe” within Liverpool Street Station, where “beams of light followed curious trajectories which violated the laws of physics, departing
from the rectilinear and twisting in spirals and eddies before being swallowed up by the wavering shadows” (135). Deranged and dumbfounding though this universe may be, Sebald makes it clear that the perceptual experience of his narrator and his protagonists, at least in the form in which it is conveyed to the reader, is enriched by their capacity, if not to communicate with the dead, then to invite them into their reality.

There is a certain congruence between Sebald’s insistence on a different order of reality that informs the world of the living and the metaphysical accounts of Whitehead and Leibniz, who each express that the clearly perceived, substantial world is only a limited perspective by which to account for perceptual experience. When Austerlitz, or Sebald’s narrator, experience a building, they experience it according to the laws of a “higher form of stereometry”, whereby the immediately perceptible inside or outside of a building is seen from a perspective that incorporates many positions at once, as though from the position of a ghost, outside of time. However, the dramatisation of this perceptual capacity as ghostly, or paranormal, when read alongside Whitehead’s conception of “the event”, seems less a position outside of time, than reality understood according time’s interior, which is to say, understood through an appreciation of the connectedness of differing, contingent durations incorporated within each other. To perceive the world of ghosts isn’t the fetishisation of a kind of supernatural morbidity, but rather, to understand the contingency of conscious perception on the basis of what is obscure within it.

On his way to Terezín, Austerlitz describes himself as “in a kind of trance”, unable to “imagine who or what I was” (185). The town is memorable due to its emptiness, the “silent façades” with their “blind windows” and boarded-up doors (189). Contrary to Austerlitz’s expectations, Terezín does not rise up out of the soil, like most fortifications, but “sunk into the marshy ground of the flood plain” (187), as though partially claimed by the world of the dead. Although empty, with no movement “apart from the whitewash peeling off the walls and the spiders spinning their threads” (190), Austerlitz still finds the town “extraordinarily oppressive” (189). He recounts a dream, which adds to the atmosphere of sleepy opacity:

Not long ago, on the verge of waking from sleep, I found myself looking into the interior of one of these Terezín barracks. It was filled from floor to ceiling with layer upon layer of cobwebs woven by those ingenious creatures. I remember how, in my half conscious state, I tried to hold fast to my
powdery grey dream image, which sometimes quivered in a slight breath of air, and to discover what it concealed, but it only dissolved all the more and was overlaid by the memory, surfacing in my mind at the same time, of the shining glass in the display windows of the ANTIKOS BAZAR on the west side of the town square, where I had stood for a long time around midday in what proved to be the vain hope that someone might arrive and open this curious emporium. (194)

Note the absence of specific narrative detail in Austerlitz’s account of his dream. Instead, Sebald emphasises the medium or screen on which the dream appears. Like the atmospheric bodies that populate the space within Liverpool Street Station, and like the delicate, suspended display of the spider webs, the “dream image” is grey, nebulous yet cohesive, subject to change, responsive to breath, impossible to focus on as we might focus on a patch of colour. There is a play of selection and concealment, with obscurity ultimately winning out. But the enfolded efforts to still the object of Austerlitz’s barely conscious thought reveal something more essential to its nature. Everything is a representational surface, which doesn’t so much represent a world or an object, but rather, exemplifies its material, almost insubstantial, opacity. Like the baroque background of gloom, the “wavering shadows” that “swallow” up the light, like the light which seems to add to the shadows, and like the incessant, invisible, indistinguishable chatter of the ghosts and the crowds, the process of thinking as written dream, on the “verge” of consciousness, draws attention to the conditions of its own emergence.

The relationship between display and obscurity that characterises the fragility of Austerlitz’s thinking is evoked further in the shop windows of the ANTIKOS BAZAR, which is represented in a series of three photographs, each one focusing more closely on an item in the window, with the final image featuring the hazy outline of a man holding a camera. We have moved from dream to photograph, as the differing temporal perspectives (the journey on foot, the dream of the journey on foot, back to the journey on foot, and likewise, the photographic reality, which preserves the immediacy of the moment in its own unique way) digress into each other. The traces of Austerlitz’s efforts to “hold fast” to his “dream image” remain with the reader in considering the random catalogue of objects named as appearing in the shop window. The detail noted by Austerlitz, that after looking for some time at these objects, he could “see [his] own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them” (197), invokes the unseen goings-on of thought, as though, in regarding the opacity
and seeming randomness of the arrangement, he begins to be absorbed into their history, or the history of the event which is their confrontation.

The gesture of Austerlitz pressing his forehead against the “cold window” (195) recalls the narrator’s trip to Breendonk, where, confronted with the incomprehensible presence of the past simultaneously in his surroundings and in his memory, he is forced to establish a kind of contact, a tactile counterpart, reassuring himself, if not of who he is, then at least that he is a body, somewhere.

The genius of this passage is in Sebald’s ability to invite the reader into the perspectival world of a character—not a character as a set of attributes defined by an author, but a character that represents something at once more specific and more general. Sebald gives us not the perspective of a character per se, but the event that this character occupies in order for it to become intelligible to us. What is crucial to this process is the capacity to show the sense by which, according to the unfolding temporality of the event, different aspects, defined by their manifestation as mutable mediums (surfaces of display and obscurity), are incorporated within each other. Think, for example, of the window that shows at once the view inside the shop, the black, shadowy branches, and Austerlitz’s barely perceptible reflection. Think also of the photographs that refer synecdochically to parts of each other, as though each photograph instanced both hidden parts and an imperceptible unity. And think of the dream, which is composed of the residual traces of mediums, at once internal and external to thought.

The process by which our conscious awareness of something emerges or evolves out of multiplicitous, imperceptible particulars is an aspect of Leibniz’s philosophy that Deleuze attends to at length, in a chapter of The Fold entitled “Perception in The Folds” (85-99). In what at times seems a particularly fantastic account of experience, based on an insubstantial metaphysics of substance, Deleuze elaborates from the Leibnizian doctrine of monadic perception, similarly so influential for Whitehead. Of the simultaneous singularity and universality of monadic perception, Deleuze notes: “Every monad thus expresses the entire world, but obscurely and dimly because it is finite and the world is infinite” (86). According to Deleuze’s emphasis, the obscure or dim regions of the monad are composed of “present and infinitely minute elements [italics in original]” or “micropersceptions” that can be likened to hallucinations lacking an object, “a lapping of waves, a rumour, a fog, or a mass of dancing particles of dust…a state of death or catalepsy, of sleep, drowsiness or of numbness” (86).
What is so gripping in his analysis, and what makes his take on Leibniz so relevant to my interpretation of Sebald, is the prominence he gives to this interaction between conscious and non-conscious perception, and the applicability and lure of his examples.

In light of the conceptual architecture Deleuze sets up, we can appreciate how, in the perception of a thing, the colour green, for example, our perception is dependent on, or has a relation to, numerous other particulars or “microperceptions” of which we are not aware: namely, the colours yellow and blue (90). Deleuze describes these microperceptions as “tiny, dark evanescent perceptions” (90). In becoming aware or conscious of something, our experience testifies to an enriching, often imperceptible, process of unification or organisation. In the realm of the clear and distinct these implicit forms of order provide our perceptual experience with its seeming completeness and its elasticity. Sebald continually points to the precarious balance that conscious experience both refers to and of which it is composed.

The peculiarities of Austerlitz’s expedition to Terezín—his dreamlike or somnambulant condition, the superimposed mediating layers that enlarge the perceptual experience, and the haunting presence of ghosts or spirit forms from the past—all exhibit a striking congruence with the account of perceptual experience Deleuze abstracts from Leibniz.

Section IV: Windows, Screens, Portals and Threshold Spaces

As Austerlitz’s journey through the imposing, silent façades of Terezín makes apparent, windows, doorways and all varieties of openings in faces or walls of buildings implicate, for Sebald, the selectiveness and obscurity of perception. Approaching a building according to its aspects that reveal, or conceal in revealing, an internal obscurity, requires, to some extent, that we think of houses and shopfronts as events. Why, exactly? Because a blackened window or a permeable wall is always a reference beyond itself, and subsequently we can appreciate that a building is a composite of differing interwoven aspects. Windows, and the threshold spaces of which they are exemplars, are the most insubstantial, event-like features of a building. They are, if you like, the building’s middle, or the condition by which a building becomes a medium.
In this section I will include an analysis of the prominence of such features in *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*. On numerous occasions in both books, Sebald uses architectural obscurity to implicate, suggestively, the perceptual capacities of his narrators and protagonists, or, better put, he attends to the peculiar unity of a thinking subject and built space in order for us, the readers, to appreciate the event in which they are both included.

Windows function as screens in that they instance a selection (a screening) of things from two different realms: from inside, part of the outside is permitted (usually the light or the view), while another part is restricted (usually the wind or rain or insects). As Steven Connor notes in an expanded transcript of a talk given on screens: “A screen filters; it is a permeable membrane, not a locked door. Screens cover and conceal: but in presenting a secondary or fictitious surface, they also partially disclose” (“Screens”).

In their inherent duplicity, or fictitiousness, screens exemplify similar traits to other inscribed surfaces, paradigmatically the page, as referred to and enacted in the writing and graphics of each book. When the narrator and his wife Clara take up residence at Prior’s Gate in the first chapter of *The Emigrants*, Sebald’s characterisation of the abode is striking for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the imposing façade of the house’s exterior:

The front of the large, neoclassical house was overgrown with Virginia creeper. The door was painted black and on it was a brass knocker in the shape of a fish. We knocked several times, but there was no sign of life inside the house. We stepped back a little. The sash windows, each divided into twelve panes, glinted blindly, seeming to be made of dark mirror glass. (4)

The narrator is at once prevented entry into the house, and seemingly exposed before its expressive surface. Affirming this emphasis on an exaggerated exteriority, the narrator recalls a similar memory:

And I recalled a château in the Charente that I had once visited from Angoulême. In front of it, two crazy brothers—one a parliamentarian, the other an architect—had built a replica of the façade of the palace of Versailles, an utterly pointless counterfeit, though one which made a powerful impression at a distance. The windows of the house had been just as gleaming and blind as those of the house we now stood before. (4)
Here, Sebald is implicating perception, verification and the built environment. Reality depends on a standpoint, whether one is close to or at a distance from the façade. He also connotes the literary activity in its supposed parasitic relationship with reality, flagging scruples to do with copies and replicas that frequently dot his narratives.

We get the sense of a black, gleaming mass that suggests looking but doesn’t have eyes. The expressivity of the exterior of the house coincides with its seeming to be unoccupied: “there was no sign of life inside the house”. Only moments earlier, driving through Hingham, the narrator notes of the town: “The market place, broad and lined with silent façades, was deserted” (3). The atmosphere is one of muted foreboding, derived from the idea of an inside-outside relation and an entry or the prevention of entry.

Deleuze notes the following as a key tendency in baroque architecture: “Baroque architecture can be defined by this severing of the façade from the inside, of the interior from the exterior, and the autonomy of the interior from the independence of the exterior, but in such conditions that each of the two terms thrusts the other forward” (28). This trait seems to be replicated in both the seemingly impenetrable façade of Prior’s Gate and the opaque or reticent expressivity of the chapter’s central character. My contention here isn’t, of course, that Prior’s Gate is an instance of baroque architecture, but rather that the interaction between the percipient and built space in Sebald’s narratives is characteristically baroque, due to the reasons I have been arguing throughout this chapter.

The emphasis on the surrounds and built forms at this chapter’s beginning is typical of Sebald’s prose. As readers we experience an emphatic sense of isolation and reticent expressivity in the descriptions of structures, such as Selwyn’s folly, and in Selwyn himself, who is similarly remote, ornamental and eccentric.\(^2\) There is here the establishment of a particular tone or aesthetic that similarly informs character and setting. It seems as though a kind of writing archetype, which simultaneously consistent and mutable, is realised in the different aspects that compose each scene. Selwyn’s preoccupation with thoughts that are paradoxically vague and precise (11) is

\(^2\) The narrator stresses this aspect of Selwyn’s character: “As long as the weather permitted, Dr Selwyn liked to be out of doors, and especially in a flint-built hermitage in a remote corner of the garden, which he called his folly and which he had furnished with the essentials” (10). This is confirmed on the following page when the narrator comments that during his stay at Prior’s Gate, “Dr Selwyn was scarcely ever in the house. He lived in his hermitage, giving his entire attention, as he occasionally told me, to thoughts which on the one hand grew vaguer day by day, and, on the other, grew more precise and unambiguous” (11).
surely a reference to the peculiar scruples that trouble the narrators, as well as Ferber and Austerlitz, as they grapple with expressing and composing the internal intensity that defines them as characters and seems to spill over into the company they keep and the atmospheres they inhabit. Things are withdrawn, expressive, vagrant but purposeful.

While the narrator and Clara are in the process of familiarising themselves with Prior’s Gate, a window once again becomes implicated in some perspectival trickery, this time from the inside looking out:

We had immediately been very taken with the prospect of spending a few months there, since the view from the high windows across the garden, the park and the massed cloud in the sky was more than ample recompense for the gloomy interior. One only needed to look out, and the gigantic and startling ugly sideboard ceased to exist, the mustard yellow paintwork in the kitchen vanished, and the turquoise refrigerator, gas powered and possibly not without its dangers, seemed to dissolve into nowhere, as if by a miracle. (8)

Evident in this example is a certain discontinuity between the interior and exterior of the house. The view of the outside seems to exist, for the narrator, in its own separate screen reality or pocket: one only need “look out” and the “gloomy interior” “ceased to exist”. By focusing on the outside prospect (a word which perhaps reminds us of the selectiveness of vision) the interior vanishes and dissolves, returning to the gloomy indistinctness from whence it began. The perceptual event is a process of transition from the gloomy and indistinct background (and here we need to think of a background beyond its meaning as a visual metaphor; background noise might indeed be a more helpful notion) into something of clarity, a “prospect”. This selectiveness of perception is synonymous with awareness. “All consciousness is a matter of threshold”, writes Deleuze, with reference to Leibniz’s characterisation of monadic perception (88). Here the window is the architectural exemplification of a threshold zone, whereby something remarkable is extracted from a gloomy or obscure backdrop of multiple micro-perceptions (90).

In her article “W. G. Sebald’s Peripatetic Fictions”, Eluned Summers-Bremner brings Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to bear on this scene, remarking that, “it is the way in which external space is framed by the window so as to occlude the viewing position in favour of the view that is odd, placing the narrator, not for the last time, in the position Lacan calls the object of the gaze” (318). This is equated with “the
uncanny sense that the world, or particular worldview frames us, has perhaps even awaited us, one whose external parameters we know to exist but are unable to see” (318). And while Summers-Bremner does not go on to draw these conclusions, I take her to be suggesting, like Herb Greene, that “events exist in geometrical relationships beyond our habitual assumptions” (101). Thus, the landscape and its architecture are, in some sense, communicating in a manner that, considered from a paradigm that prioritises clear and distinct, conscious, human sense-perception, would be considered imperceptible. In the above instance, it is not simply the subject that sees, but also the window and its relationship with the landscape—which might not be conceived as seeing as such, but is nonetheless active in contributing to the view.

An obscure and expressive reality is again exemplified with reference to a screen when Dr Selwyn invites the narrator and Clara to dinner. They are joined by Edwin Elliot, the only house guest during the narrator’s stay at Prior’s Gate. After dinner, the maid, Elaine, who appears “almost instantly, as if she had been waiting in the passage for a signal”, wheels out a projector on which they watch various slides of Selwyn and Elliot’s trip to Crete (15). Although no evident sentiment is shown during the show, and all four sit in silence, the narrator presumes that, for Selwyn and Elliot, it “was an occasion of some emotion” (17). This is confirmed, albeit obliquely, in the dramatic shattering of a slide depicting the Lasithi plateau: “We sat looking at this picture for a long time in silence too, so long that the glass in the slide shattered and a dark crack fissured across the screen” (17). In the muted atmosphere the expressiveness of that “dark crack” is all the more compelling. The emotion we are perhaps expecting to be communicated between the characters takes place on the supplementary screen, which is composed of different mediating layers. There is a vertiginous play of transparency and opacity among separate and suggestively connected surfaces. The screen is erected in front of a mirror that is described a few pages earlier as featuring “blind patches” and “multiplying the flickering of the firelight and reflecting shifting images” (12). Openings appear in openings, each surface is an aspect that refers to another world. The seen world is active in the creation of perceptual events which exhibit a certain congruence with subjective experience.

Despite its making a “deep impression” at the time, the Lasithi plateau and the

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63 Greene is an artist and architect inspired by Whitehead’s philosophy. I discuss his book, *Painting and the Mental Continuum: Perception and Meaning in the Making*, in the following chapter.
cracked slide all but vanish from the narrator’s memory, that is, until he is exposed before yet another screen, this time a cinema screen showing the Werner Herzog film *Kaspar Hauser*, which, as James Wood notes, resembles Sebald’s book in its “lovely combination of opacity and extremity” (280). Of the connection between the slide and the film memory, which features “a panoramic view of a plateau ringed by mountains” (18), Summers-Bremner observes: “This is not a scene of visual mastery in which the narrator intercepts, through identification, an image, but one in which he is unsettled by the unexpected return of a memory” (319). Sebald’s great skill is to give us the panoramic view of the impeccable shot, only to provoke the question: what does this clarity obscure, what unsettling fissures form the substrate to views that we take ourselves for? As Summers-Bremner notes, memory, or at least the visual memory we use in recollection, is the paradigmatic screen effecting a simultaneous recovery and neglect of the past. We always make a selection and, therefore, an exclusion from the dim vivacity that is our continuous, emotional accompaniment: “More apt than the description of memories as contents, then, is the figure of transmitting stations granting us a bearable version of the history whose outcome we are” (320).

Windows again function as a locus of interruption between interior and exterior worlds in the third chapter of *The Emigrants*, when the narrator is wandering around the suitably “run down” town of Deauville (116). Much like Austerlitz’s trip to Terezín, Sebald here emphasises the narrator’s exclusion, and it is the threshold of the window, acting as a kind of eye, where this emphasis is most striking:

If one pauses for a while before one of these seemingly unoccupied houses, as I did a number of times on my first morning walk through the streets of Deauville, one of the closed window shutters on the *parterre* or *bel étage* on the top floor, strange to relate, will open slightly, and a hand will appear and shake out a duster, fearfully slowly, so that soon one inevitably concludes that the whole of Deauville consists of gloomy interiors where womenfolk, condemned to perpetual invisibility and eternal dusting, move soundlessly about, waiting for the moment when they can signal to some passer-by who has happened to stop outside their prison and stand gazing up. (117)

The reference to the shutter here is a kind of doubling of the window, each performs the function of a screen. The boundaries of private space, and the invisibility of the
inside, are contrasted with the narrator’s exposure. The evocation of a soundless and invisible cleaning enterprise might recall Elaine and the passageways that enable her to move unseen through Prior’s Gate: “on every floor hidden passageways branched off, running behind walls in such a way that the servants, ceaselessly hurrying to and fro laden with coal scuttles, baskets of firewood, cleaning materials, bed linen and teatray, never had to cross the paths of their betters” (9). These labyrinthine, secret passageways are “festooned with a complicated bell-pull system” (9), a kind of imperceptible, mechanical communication device that enables occupants of the house to interact with each other while in separate rooms. The “ceaseless hurrying” and “perpetual flitting” (9) of the servants, who work in the “shadows”, and their efforts to upkeep the order of the house may put us in mind of an obscure system, an alternate, imperceptible reality that services the perceptible world. Elaine’s mysteriousness, her strange mutterings and her “unmotivated, whinnying laughter” (10) suggest a form of communication that depends not on meaning but on a residual expressiveness abstracted from this cryptic reality.

The proximity of laughing, the obscure mechanical system synonymous with Elaine’s movements, and the fact that her room is “full of countless dolls, meticulously dressed, most of them wearing something on their heads, standing sitting around or lying on the bed where Elaine herself slept” (10), seems also to unmistakably invoke the obscure materialist doctrine that Tiffany identifies as closely associated with baroque natural philosophy, and the idea that matter is inhabited by invisible, organic machines or automata.

There is the sense of houses within houses functioning as kinds of mechanical bodies, the internal workings of which remain essential but unseen. That the interiors of such buildings are “gloomy”, and that the “invisibility” the “womenfolk” are “condemned to” is “perpetual”, their “dusting” “eternal”, is a subtle but motivated form of characterisation. Despite being obscure, the interiors of Sebald’s buildings are

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64 “Exposure” is a word Santner uses to characterise the inherent creatureliness of the human: “The thought in all of this is of an originary exposure proper to human life, a vulnerability to the mattering of things before any choice or decision on our part, before any reflection about value…” (46-7).

65 On the role of automata in the baroque imagination and in seventeenth-century conceptions of matter, see the chapters “The Natural Philosophy of Toys” and “The Lyric Automaton” in Tiffany’s Toy Medium. Concerning the presence of imperceptible mechanical bodies in Sebald’s work we might also think of the following description of Paul Breyer in chapter II of The Emigrants: “This sometimes gave one the feeling that it was all being powered by clockwork inside him and Paul in his entirety was a mechanical human made of tin and other metal parts, and might be put out of operation for ever by the smallest functional hitch” (35).
filled with activity. The activity mightn’t strike one as particularly human, however—it is an estranged, ghostly and mechanical variety of movement.

The façades, or the faces of buildings, greet the narrator with a quality that is at once expressive and enigmatic. Windows are usually features that emphasise transparency, so the transformation of a window into a kind of concealment or vehicle for obscurity is perhaps further testament to the inheritance of monadic perception in Sebald’s work.

Austerlitz begins to reveal the details of his oppressed upbringing in a lengthy conversation with narrator in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel. He describes his childhood in the small Welsh town of Bala, under the care of a Calvinist preacher, Emyr Elias, and his wife, “a timid-natured Englishwoman” named Gwendolyn (61). Austerlitz makes specific note that the windows in the house were never opened. Thus, when coming across a house with all its windows open some years later, this provokes in Austerlitz “an extraordinary sense of liberation” (62), in addition to which he offers the following anecdote:

It was only few days ago that, thinking over that experience of liberation, I remembered how one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside while it remained unchanged on the outside, a circumstance which, as one is never both outside and inside a house at the same time, I did not register until I was thirteen or fourteen, although it must have been troubling me throughout my childhood in Bala. (62-3)

In the context of the narrative, we can make sense of this remark as contributing further to the belated recognition that is characteristic of Austerlitz’s childhood separation from his parents. The walled-up window is the architectural equivalent of an unmanifest but productive disturbance, the kind Austerlitz is forever having to negotiate, and which are often construed as feelings of ghostly accompaniment. Austerlitz’s aside that “one is never both outside and inside a house at the same time” might put us in mind of some generic limitations with regard to perspective and houses, or relatedly, to perception and our physiological selves—limitations Sebald seeks to invest with imaginative appeal. That Austerlitz “did not register” the architectural anomaly, but nonetheless suspects it “must have been troubling [him]” recommends that significant relationships exist between a percipient and their
surrounds, of which they aren’t consciously, or fully consciously aware. Austerlitz is part of the house in which he lives, both inhabiting the structure and having it inhabit him.

In Sebald’s prose unconscious and non-human perception exemplify each other. There is a sense of the surrounding or external world as making an active contribution to the perspective of the conscious human subject, a category constituted by what it is not, on the one hand, and the range of things it is, on the other.

Leibniz’s theory of monads and, similarly, Whitehead’s development of this Leibnizian doctrine in his theory of prehensions (non-conscious or not necessarily conscious perception), provide us with a suggestive insight into an understanding of experience in which human and non-human are entwined. Concerning the present chapter’s focus on architectural obscurity, what is essential in the philosophy of both thinkers is that perceptual agency isn’t reducible to the human. We can thereby appreciate, in a fashion that is at once metaphysical, metaphorical and empirical, that buildings might behave, if not as living bodies, then as structures with their own particularised relationship with the past and the environment, and can therefore be characterised as events of perception. In Sebald’s prose, architectural bodies are variously haunted, alien and monstrous, and in this sense seem to exceed the idea of merely stagnant, homogenous matter. Austerlitz’s habit of communicating to the narrator indirectly, via his surrounds and their histories, similarly appeals to the idea that communication and expression occur through the materials and specificities of the niches we inhabit. That is, perception always occurs through the exemplification of its non-conscious or unconscious varieties.

Section V: Max Ferber’s Dream, Inner Logic

Sebald’s conception of dreams and dream logic presents the reader with an alternative to the absolute divide between reason (waking life) and unreason (dream reality, imagination). It isn’t so much that dreams might predict the future, or that they might offer symbolic narratives which mask hidden psychological truths, but that the

66 Concerning the notion of prehensions, Whitehead remarks: “It was introduced by Leibniz, in the notion of his monads mirroring perspectives in the universe. I am toning down his monads into the unified events in space and time” (SMW, 87).
relationship between dream and reality, like the relationship between the living and the dead, is defined by mutual implication. There is no perspective outside the dream that is not in some sense internal to it. Much like the role reversal where it is the living who are “unreal in the eyes of the dead”, Sebald’s narratives seem to address the question of, “what is reality from the perspective of a dream?”

Considering the dream as event from a physiological perspective, we can appreciate that during sleep the body receives far fewer external stimuli than when awake. During the dream state the body perceives things internally. Elaborating from this understanding of what a dreaming body is, we can imagine buildings and events—even a metaphysics—that are themselves structured, formally, like a dream. This is important concerning the relationship between dreaming, narrative and writing in Sebald’s prose.

While neither Leibniz nor Whitehead discuss the physiological aspects of dreaming in detail, the work of both philosophers encourages an understanding of perception that is more inclusive in its spectrum than those offered by Cartesian dualism or by Freudian psychoanalysis. Both grant that our clear picture of what reality is is dependent on a hazy penumbral region that connects us, the thinking human, to a continually evolving cosmos, within which our body tends to be the most intensely felt region. From this perspective our waking reality and our dream reality are similarly constituted by vague and suggestive events that are meaningful because we perceive them internally, that is to say, we feel them.

In the fourth chapter of *The Emigrants*, when Max Ferber is sharing his previously obscure history with the narrator, he relates the details of a dream in which he and Queen Victoria “had opened the great art exhibition in the purpose-built Trafford Park” (175). Ferber wanders with the Queen, described as fat and smelly, “through the endless halls containing 16,000 gold-framed works of art” (175-176). After passing though “a painted trompe-l’oeil door”, Ferber and the Queen enter a room in which “clearly no one had set foot for years”, and that Ferber recognises as “his parents’ drawing room” (176). A figure named Frohmann Drohobycz is seated in the room, “holding a model of the Temple of Solomon, made from pinewood, papier mâché and gold paint”: “Just look, said Frohmann: you can see every crenellation on

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67 Concerning the departure of his thinking from Cartesian philosophy, Leibniz remarks: “…the Cartesians especially failed having made no account of the perceptions of which we are not conscious” (309).
the towers, every curtain, every threshold, every sacred vessel. And I, said Ferber, bent down over the diminutive temple and realised, for the first time in my life, what a true work of art looks like” (176). There is a structural congruence here between the unconscious or dimly conscious state of Ferber’s dream and the previously secret room.

The space of Ferber’s dream is defined by the fact that the rooms through which he and his companion travel are spaces of representation: the halls which are covered in thousands of paintings; the wall itself, which is painted with a door at once real and illusory (real in the sense that it opens on to another room); and the exemplary temple that sits in Frohmann’s lap.

The image Sebald includes here features an ornately furnished room with the walls covered in pictures as in Ferber’s dream. The pictures are so numerous it is as though their function, in the reality of the photograph, is to cover the walls, rather than display individual scenes. The intricately patterned Persian rug, the tablecloths, the chandelier, and the elaborate folds of the various pieces of furniture, along with the chiaroscuro—the shadows seeming to spread along the walls and the light emanating from pockets of nothingness—give the room an avowedly baroque atmosphere.

Similarly, the profusion of idealised depictions in the space of Ferber’s dream is reminiscent of certain characteristics of the baroque, as well as of Leibniz’s doctrine of monadic perception. The illusory space of the dream is, if not indistinguishable from the purportedly normal waking state, then continually enfolded within it. This is augmented further if we consider that in the lead-up to the dream, Ferber is subject to a series of “horrific hallucinations” as a consequence of his not being able to sleep (173). What’s more, Ferber’s restless nights are themselves the product of his anxiety regarding an inability to adequately depict the apparition of “the man with a butterfly net”—an apparition that recurs throughout Sebald’s narrative.68 There is no stable reality in which the phantasmagorical is absent or does not play a decisive role.

The connections here, between Ferber’s failed efforts to capture the sense, or meaning, of his hallucination, and the proliferation of hallucinatory and oneiric experiences that follow, are similar to those that inform Austerlitz’s subliminal experience in Liverpool Street Station and the longer section of the narrative in which

68 For an exemplary account of the way this image recurs throughout the narrative of The Emigrants, see Carol Jacobs’ article “What Does It Mean to Count? W. G. Sebald’s The Emigrants” (5-8). In addition to the intertextual appeal to Valimdr Nabokov, Sebald’s decision to feature this image would have no doubt been informed the symbolic proximity of butterflies and souls.
it occurs, including his nighttime wanderings and the breakdown of his literary-cognitive faculties, as discussed in the previous chapter. Like Austerlitz, who comports his manuscript in the backyard, Ferber destroys the artwork that compares, in such an “unsatisfactory” fashion, with his inexplicable encounter with the butterfly man (174). In both characters there is the prominent sense of an inexplicable, creative and unstable “lagoon of oblivion” (174), to use Ferber’s expression, which then manifests in similarly inexplicable, seemingly autonomous dreamscapes, environments and artworks—obscure, separate worlds that are defined by their internal inscriptions or inner logic.

The peculiarities of built space in Sebald’s books are significantly informed by the sense that architecture is inhabited by a productive but imperceptible agency. Take, for example, the Palace of Justice in Brussels, where the narrator meets Austerlitz by chance for the third time. The building, like the fortress of Breendonk, to which the narrator makes an excursion some ten pages prior, is described as a “singular architectural monstrosity”:

...[a] huge pile of over seven hundred thousand cubic metres [that] contains corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority. (38-39)

The logic of the building’s interior, its supposedly rational design, escapes Austerlitz’s efforts to understand its layout. During his wanderings the building is, typically, for the most part uninhabited, but is described as though it were a force or a body. Sebald’s incredulity at the building’s monstrousness borders on the comic in the passage that describes the small businesses, such as that of a barber, set up in some of its rooms (40).

The Palace contains an anomalous little world, defined by its obscurity. As the quotation makes clear, the building is, to some extent, shaped around the idea of an invisible principle, “the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority”. This echoes both Foucault and Kafka, who outline contrasting exemplifications of the relationship between the functioning of sovereign power and subjectivity in modernity. We might also think here of the influence of the Frankfurt School, in particular Theodor Adorno, on Sebald’s thinking, especially the thesis that rational designs, specifically rigid and
oppressive ones, have a tendency to manifest in a manner comparable to the varieties of madness they often seek to expel. The theses of Gray, Long and Santner, in their varying ways, stress this element of Sebald’s work.

A strikingly similar example occurs in *Vertigo* when, in the second chapter, the narrator refers to Franz Grillparzer’s *Italian Diary*, specifically his response to the Doge’s palace: “Trained in the law himself, he [Grillparzer] dwelt on that palace where the legal authorities resided and in the inmost cavern of which, as he put it, the Invisible Principle brooded” (54). Grillparzer refers to the palace as “an enigma in stone, the name of which is dread” (54). Elsewhere in *Austerlitz*, the unseen but decisive force is suggestively construed as “an astonishing, positively imperative internal logic” and an “agency greater than or superior to [Austerlitz’s] own capacity for thought” (60).

A defining aspect of Sebald’s prose is his deliberate allusiveness in the invocation of such forces. There is an analogical link between architectural obscurity, in the form of enclosed, secretive spaces, and the relationship between rational, clear and distinct consciousness and the dim but pervasive realm of non-conscious perception that consciousness obscures.

In *Infidel Poetics*, Tiffany notes the importance of “architectural analogies” in Leibniz’s doctrine of monadic perception:

Leibniz employs architectural analogies to characterise the formal—that is, nonintuitive—properties of the monad. In addition to the famous reference to windowless monads, Leibniz describes monads as “architectonic models” (échantillons architectoniques) of a physical universe from which each monad is nevertheless radically isolated by its incorporeal substance. Further, he views architectural experience (the unconscious awareness of spatial proportions) as emblematic of the monadological structure of perception. (2009: 33)

Tiffany also notes that Benjamin, a writer whose proximity to Sebald has been pointed to by many critics, was a devout reader of Leibniz:

Walter Benjamin later identified the windowless monad as the basic model for the lyrical structure of the Parisian Arcades. Describing the Arcades Project as a fragmentary vision of “the true city—the city indoors,” Benjamin explains, “What obtains in the windowless house is the true. And the

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69 In his article, “Writing at the Roche Limit”, Gray notes that Sebald’s library, in addition to containing numerous texts penned by Benjamin, contained a heavily annotated copy of Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2010: 54, fn. 4).
arcade, too, is a windowless house. The windows that look down onto it are like the loges from which one gazes inside, but one cannot look out from them." (33)

According to Tiffany, the reason why Leibniz’s doctrine of monadic perception was so influential for Benjamin, and the Jena Circle of German Romanticism (with which Benjamin’s philosophy is often in dialogue), was due to its appeal to aesthetic and sentimental sensibilities (100; 103). Tiffany notes that “the development of aesthetics as a concept, and later, as a philosophical doctrine bears the particular imprint of Leibniz’s ideas during this crucial period [German Romanticism in the eighteenth century] of its formulation” (100). Further:

Leibniz’s theory of monadic perception, a psychology of ontological substance, provided the philosophical rationale for placing sensation, intellection, and feeling on a continuum, so that perception and feeling might be regarded as “confused” forms of thinking—and thinking as a species of “perception.” (103)

“In this respect,” Tiffany continues, “the ‘Monadology’ provides the basis for eighteenth century conceptions of sentimentality, a discourse of ‘intellectual feelings’ and, hence, of objects, places, or events infused with emotional reflection” (103). It seems then that Leibniz’s philosophical scaffold was something of a thinking thing, to use Connor’s polysemous formulation, for writers engaged in the business of fathoming the limits of experience in its vaguer, that is to say, more “obscure”, guises. For Tiffany, this relates to the argument that what poetry produces—namely, poetic obscurity—needs to be considered as an event that possesses both figurative and corporeal dimensions. The objects of lyrical thinking and lyrical writing are not just what is represented in the prose or poetry, but in the interaction (or internal relation) between the represented thing and the medium representing, as in the previous chapter’s analysis: between the thing depicted and the specific relationship produced as the result of an interaction between the medium, thinking and emotion in the creative (experimental, poetic, artistic, literary) act. Standardised measurements such as maps, dreams and poems each set their own criteria for gauging the significance of things which they include partially, and to varying degrees of emphasis.

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70 Tiffany notes, “Alexander Baumgarten, for example, the first writer to use the term ‘aesthetics’ (in 1735, in his essay ‘Philosophical Meditations on Some Matters Pertaining to Poetry’), was known principally as an explicator of Leibniz’s philosophy” (100).
In reading *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, I am not attempting to prove whether or not Leibniz’s thinking had a decisive influence on Sebald, or even whether Sebald’s prose continues ideas of a Leibnizian inheritance. Rather, I am concerned with the extent to which events or things, in the context of this chapter, primarily architectural, are suggestive of emotional and cognitive contours of a poetic mind or minds. I am attempting to give metaphysical credence to anthropomorphism, if, in the process, the category of the human also undergoes alteration.

A particular example from *The Rings of Saturn* illuminates the degree to which Sebald’s micro-episodes are often informed by the notion of an imperceptible, abstract modelling—one I am arguing bears a striking likeness to Leibnizian metaphysics, to which Tiffany attributes both architectural and linguistic origins. After leaving the town of Lowestoft on his walking tour of the Suffolk coastline, the narrator happens upon a settlement of tents that stretch along the shore. Numerous peculiar and speculative details are noted about the fishermen that live in these tents. The narrator compares them to “the last stragglers of some nomadic people”, the number of which “remains more or less the same”: “If one strikes camp, another soon takes his place; so that over the years, or so it appears, this company of fishermen dozing by day and waking by night never changes, and indeed may go back further than memory can reach” (52). Sebald is evoking a kind of metaphysical order in which the fishermen and their arrangement of tents participate. He is using particular details to suggest things about number, pattern and time. This continues as the narrator remarks, “They say it is rare for any of the fishermen to establish contact with his neighbour”, rather, they are connected according to the view they share, the cycles of night and day, and that they are inhabited by the same “unfathomable feelings” (52). This emphasis on the paradoxically discrete but resonant existence of the fishermen is further emphasised in the comment: “each of them is nonetheless quite alone and dependent on no one but himself and on the few items of equipment he has with him” (52). Of these supposed items is a “little transistor radio” which makes a “scarcely audible scratchy sound, as if the pebbles being dragged back by the waves were talking to each other” (52).

This densely woven and peculiar account of the fishermen’s habits is worth examining in close detail. What is Sebald attempting to suggest in his characterisation of these hidden bodies that behave with puzzling regularity, and in the equally puzzling detail that the fishermen are disconnected from each other, yet in
communication through an indirect reference to a common landscape and inscrutable emotions?

Apparent in the activities of the fishermen is an appeal to a paradoxical logic or system that they both conform to and express. This is not the empirical characterisation of a scene based on the intuition of a phenomenological subject. This is an abstract, imaginative, speculative, quasi-mathematical exemplification that suggests an imperceptible and perhaps timeless reality, equally applicable to the noisy pebbles which, in their multiplicity and mass, obey similar laws of discrete but resonant expression.

The fishermen inhabit an insular world. They reside in an imperceptible interior, and correspond with each other indirectly through a common outside. This is the essential structure of monadic substance as adduced by Leibniz, and further elaborated by Tiffany in his characterisation of obscure beings and places in Lyric Substance. In this analysis, Tiffany stresses the paradox of beings that are at once radically isolated from each other, and therefore solipsistic, and yet able to communicate or express allegiance in the absence of ostensible relations (9). The analogy he uses, which is especially revealing in this context, involves a community of readers:

To activate effectively the analogy of a monadic readership, one must presume that a set of readers reads but a single text and, indeed, that this text constitutes the only knowledge they possess of an external world. All the readers of that text know in common—from diverse perspectives—the world produced by that text. Yet the “reality” they “perceive” together depends on the text consumed in complete isolation from one another. So, the fact that this text is common knowledge depends solely on expressive and reciprocal correspondences among solipsistic readers. (12)

The monadic readers communicate with each other through an intensified privacy. The similarity between these hypothesised readers and the fishermen is striking, and its importance is not limited to this particular case, but rather informs the generic structure of Sebald’s entire prose-fictional project. As Leone has pointed out, “solitude…is the source of Sebald’s original mode of being in the world” (2004: 90). This solitude or solipsism harbours the further paradox of its containing an encyclopaedia of topics.

The privacy of the narrator is also evident in the secrecy of his motives, which the reader only discovers, if at all, through indirect (oblique) reference. And like the
unfathomable feelings that constitute the expressive and discrete proximity of the fishermen, Sebald’s narrator visits and returns to various places and interlocutors out of an implicit sympathy, an insensible intuition that they are connected, even if such connections remain, for the reader and narrator, unmanifest.71

Section VI: The Anachronism of Ruins

Ruins are buildings that exemplify the contradictory nature of time. In Sebald’s prose, both urban and pastoral environments are always to some extent in a process of ruination or rebuilding, with the two often being difficult to distinguish. In keeping with the argument I have been advancing throughout this chapter, I want to recommend that ruins solicit particular responses from us with regard to the way we conceive the internal constitution of matter and, relatedly, how process-informed conceptions of our surrounds and habitats tend to suggest a certain imperceptible ruination or “perpetual perishing”.72

During his epiphany in the Liverpool Street Station, amid the “deranged” display of light and shadow, Austerlitz offers an aside that is significant concerning our understanding of both what a building obscures and its relationship to time: “I remember, said Austerlitz, that in the middle of this vision of imprisonment and liberation I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction that I had entered” (135-136). In addition to the paradoxical sense of “imprisonment and liberation”, Austerlitz’s insight reminds us that the supposed stability of, and the corresponding appeal to the permanence of, monuments, and the monumental inclination (which he elsewhere attributes as the defining feature of architecture in European modernity), is in fact held together and

71 Here we might also think of Ferber’s remarks in the last chapter of The Emigrants, with regard to an emotional resonance that he speculates connects him to Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose old house, at the time, Ferber was living in: “Doubtless any retrospective connection with Wittgenstein was purely illusory, but it meant no less to him on that account, said Ferber. Indeed, he sometimes felt as if he were tightening his ties to those who had gone before; and for that reason, whenever he pictured the young Wittgenstein bent over the design of a variable combustion chamber, or a test flying kite of his own construction on the Derbyshire moors, he was aware of a sense of brotherhood that reached far back beyond his own lifetime or even the years immediately before that” (167).

72 In Process and Reality, Whitehead refers to John Locke’s definition of time as “perpetual perishing”, which I think appeals to the relationship between time and perception in Sebald’s prose (Process, 60). I thank Michael Halewood for alerting me to this idea.
infiltrated by a contrasting and paradoxical force.  

Austerlitz remarks that his observation, contradictory though it may be, describes accurately the sense of “the new station…rising from the ruins of the old Liverpool Street” (136).

Ruins instance the co-presence of liveliness and the ghostly, which Chandler notes is characteristic of Sebald’s poetics (246). In a talk given on ruins, Connor remarks on the way ruins exemplify these duplicitous forces:

A ruin is always a temporal conundrum. It is neither nature nor art—traditionally, ruins have not only collapsed, they have been overrun by a nature they no longer exclude. It is neither past nor present: it is a past that has never been present, a presence that is not of the presence it inhabits. (“Sufficiently Decayed”, 1)

The anachronism outlined here would seem to stretch beyond the specific instances in Sebald’s texts where ruins are described, wandered through, or read as part of the narrative sequence of events. Austerlitz is among a horde of other characters that appears to obey the anachronism of the ruin as highlighted by Connor. In his discourse on the fabricated nature of clock-time, Austerlitz even invokes a brief genealogy of fellow beings who similarly inhabit the alternate space-time of the anachronistic: “The dead are outside time, the dying and the sick at home or in hospitals, and they are not the only ones, for a certain degree of personal misfortune is enough to cut us off from the past or future” (101). Austerlitz’s observation no doubt refers to his own dawning awareness of a past he has been cut off from, preventing a stable sense of self in the present and an apprehension of the future as ruin.

The relationship between ruins and cemeteries, as varieties of uninhabitable or uninhabited architecture, is one of thought-provoking similarity and difference. Both, as I have recommended, are emblematic of Sebald’s aesthetic and conceptual inclinations. A ruined cemetery is a kind of double ruination, as though the dead were inflicting their presence on the sites designed by mortals to preserve their memory.

One such place is the Tower Hamlet Cemetery, through which Austerlitz and the narrator walk, as the former details the events prior to one of his mental breakdowns. The context Sebald constructs typically involves a simultaneous appeal to the immediacy of the wandering tour, and to the distant, though seemingly no less

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73 In one of his earlier meetings with the narrator, Austerlitz describes his fascination with the “compulsive sense of order and monumentalism” associated with “the architectural style of the capitalist era” (44).
immediate, past to which the cemetery and Austerlitz both refer. We thus appreciate the sense by which the memory persists as much in the surrounds, in the specific details of place, as it does in the private realm of the narrating subject:

In the twilight slowly falling over London we walked along the paths of the cemetery, past monuments erected by the Victorians to commemorate their dead, past mausoleums, marble crosses, stelae and obelisks, bulbous urns and statues of angels, many of them wingless or otherwise mutilated, turned to stone, so it seemed to me, at the very moment when they were about to take off from the earth. Most of these memorials had long ago been tilted to one side or thrown over entirely by the roots of the sycamores which were shooting up everywhere. The sarcophagi covered with pale-green, grey, ochre and orange lichens were broken, some of the graves themselves had risen above the ground or sunk into it, so that you might think an earthquake had shaken this abode of the departed, or else that, summoned to the Last Judgment, they had upset, as they rose from their resting places, the neat and tidy order we impose on the them. (227-228)

Here the cemetery as ruin seems to at once sink and rise in a manner similar to that of the co-present decay and construction instanced in the underground of Liverpool Street Station. The ground is bulging with unseen reservations, as though an awareness of the underground environment enables one to bear witness to the energies by which matter persists or alters one’s conception of stable ground. The ruination of the cemetery coincides with a natural rebuilding or reclamation, with tree roots and lichen disturbing the geometric and lettered significance with traces of their own abundance.  

The anachronism of Sebald’s sequencing of events is exemplified by the fact that the Tower Hamlet Cemetery adjoins St Clement’s Hospital, where Austerlitz is taken shortly after his chillingly described mental paralysis (228-230). It is as though his initial, seemingly unmotivated voyages through the cemetery were formative in seeking out a future already partly written. The proximity of the cemetery and the hospital is of further historical and narrative significance due to the sense of both being houses for those “outside time”. In a feat of subtle narrative virtuosity, Austerlitz, from his new home among the dying, looks out at the graveyard, recently familiar in his wanderings. He remarks on the “improvement in [his] condition” as he

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74 In his book, *Last Landscapes*, Ken Worpole notes the perhaps comforting paradox that graveyards are now valued ecological niches: “There is a renewed interest in these Arcadian settings by environmentalists and gardeners. Churchyards have been found to be rich habitats for birds, butterflies and lichen, owing to the fact that many have been maintained without recourse to the use of pesticides or other harmful chemicals” (75).
watches the “foxes running wild”, “the faces of those […] people” and “the slow wingbeats of an owl in its curving flight over the tombstones at nightfall” (230).

Cemeteries and ruins, as conventionally unpeopled landscapes, tend, in Sebald’s prose, to be sites of comfort and contemplation. While one should not too swiftly overlook the fact that Austerlitz remains in a condition which he identifies, by architectural analogy, as a room with “four burnt-out walls” (230), we can appreciate here, and in other cases throughout Sebald’s narratives, incompletion and anachronism in the ruined landscape offering something of a relief. Connor comments on the sense by which ruins invite our mental energies through their ornament of suggestive absence: “They seem to insist on being reconstructed, urging the mind to imaginative restoration of the wholeness that they lack” (2-3). The somnambulation that typifies the wanderings of Sebald’s narrators and protagonists, a seemingly apposite state for the living occupant of a cemetery or ruin, might then also have something to do with a heightened awareness of an imperceptible, or aspirant, wholeness. The “outside time” inhabited by those history excludes has as its converse the “inside time” that is induced in the imaginative efforts to adequately, but not rigidly, return some kind of order to the bereaved and the orphaned. This is the paradox so regularly held up by Sebald’s prose: that we receive stories, in narrative terms, of those whose relation to their past is one that lacks sustaining coherence, but that the form in which we receive these details, in their elegant and inferential arrangement, induces an experience in us of immanent wonder and fulfilment (keeping in mind that fulfilment is necessarily a product of there always being something to complete).

Elsewhere, the comparisons between Austerlitz’s barely coherent mental state and ruined architecture are more explicit. While walking through the old spa town of Marienbad, with his aptly named friend Marie de Verneuil, Austerlitz comments:

I felt that the decrepit state of these once magnificent buildings, with their broken gutters, walls blackened by rainwater, crumbling plaster revealing the coarse masonry beneath it, windows boarded up or clad with corrugated iron, precisely reflected my own state of mind, which I could not explain to either myself or to Marie… (212)

And similarly, when describing the aforementioned mental breakdown he experienced before being committed to St Clement’s, Austerlitz remarks: “I actually visualized
myself being broken up from within, so that parts of my body were scattered over a dark and distant terrain” (229-230). In both instances Sebald appeals to the sense of ruins being disorganised and multiple (broken up or crumbling), and to an issuing darkness.75 Austerlitz’s proximity to the death of those who live in his past, and to the unconsciousness that death represents, is evoked as loss of unity, a loss of identifiable difference.

It seems appropriate then that another of the patients of St Clement’s describes the voices he is haunted by as heard for the first time “over the crackling transistor” (231), and that Austerlitz is provoked to return to Prague, the city of his childhood, upon hearing voices over the radio in an antiquarian bookshop near the British Museum: “and these voices, which at first I could hardly make out but which soon became almost too distinct” (141). These indistinct voices and architectural ruins suggest a chaotic and timeless presence, synonymous with the perception of an impersonal past and non-conscious events. The process by which things are distinguished, and by which one becomes conscious of them, is metonymically realised in the events that the thinking, remembering subject encounters in the external, surrounding world. Thus, there is a sense of physical and mental events participating in the same energies—forms of organisation and disorganisation that are in excess of, but include, the human and the historical. Indeed, the environment through which Austerlitz walks in Marienbad is thick with the presences of his unconscious past, which take the form of physical sensations of being followed or brushed up against, further emphasising the interconnection of the psychic and physical realms (212).

75 Austerlitz also likens the onset of this “terrible anxiety” (228) to the presence of a dark filter or screen: “everything I looked at was veiled by a black mist” (229).
4.

THE RINGS OF SATURN:
A Question of Perspective
At one point in chapter VII of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s most ambitious and complex work, the narrator, redescribing the traversed contours of his dream, remarks:

And when I looked down from this vantage point I saw the labyrinth, the light sandy ground, the sharply delineated contours of hedges taller than a man and almost pitchblack now—a pattern simple in comparison with the tortuous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain. (173)

This passage nicely encapsulates the various tensions operating in Sebald’s prose, tensions that make his work such an interesting study concerning the relationship between perception, imagination and memory; between an embodied observer and their environment; and between the world one sees and what one translates of it through the appeal to the symbolic devices and techniques of which it is already composed. The labyrinth is an aspect of the narrator’s “vantage point”, both in the sense that he looks upon it, and in the sense that it occupies him. Sebald’s prose is composed of countless such tacks, between observed thing, abstract pattern and self-implication—and not necessarily in this sequence. While the passage is staged from the perspective of a narrator observing the contours of a maze, the more compellingly realised instance of a labyrinth is in the confusion of observed thing and thing observing. The narrator is dispersed among his surrounds and his surrounds crowd in upon him. What one finds in reading *The Rings of Saturn* is that the human and non-human continually transform according to the properties they exchange. Things exhibit their own purposeful complexity and the human becomes just another thing seen from certain perspectives, though with its own peculiar perceptual habits.

There is more to this passage that contributes to its Sebaldian nature (if we can call it that), namely, the narrator’s appeal to his dream as an object of knowing. One need not abandon rationality in order to grant dreams a place in the genealogy of truth-telling devices; one needs, rather, to come up with more interesting and more various ways of conceiving rationality. As I will come to show, the extent to which contemporary neuroscience depends on dreams bears witness to this fact. For writers, dreams often offer intimidatingly well put together, and implicitly suspenseful, sequences of incongruous events. In this chapter, I argue that Sebald conceives of perception generally to be informed by what dreams make explicit to us, though not in
the sense, or not only in the sense, that they are the products of our repressed sexual desires. Sebald’s manner of linking up apparently unrelated events and things is perhaps more interestingly dreamlike due to its formal features—that is, the way the narratives give structural meaning to a certain passage of activity by accounting for the fact that different things persist differently within each other. One is moved to describe this formal structuring as imperceptible or unfathomable, but only if one’s conception of the real is limited to certain kinds of stable, clean-edged events and things.

I interpret Sebald’s concerns to be fundamentally, yet not exclusively, aesthetic. Here again, as in the previous chapter, I am arguing for something of Whiteheadian reading of Sebald, emphasising the compositional elements of his prose. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead remarks that Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic” should play a formative rather than peripheral role in the construction of a metaphysical account of experience: “in the organic philosophy Kant’s ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ becomes a distorted fragment of what should have been his main topic” (113). Whitehead construes his philosophy of organism as “a critique of pure feeling, in the philosophical position in which Kant put his *Critique of Pure Reason*” (113). In Whitehead’s philosophy, affect precedes cognition, and encounters with aesthetic beauty expose us to the constitutive role affect plays in perception.

In his recent reading of Whitehead, Steven Shaviro emphasises the importance of aesthetics as a paradigm for perception. Shaviro notes: “In aesthetic judgment, I am not asserting anything about what is, nor am I legislating as to what ought to be. Rather, I am being lured, allured, seduced, repulsed, incited, or dissuaded. And for Whitehead—if not explicitly for Kant—this is part of the process by which I become what I am [italics in original]” (2009: 4). For Whitehead, perception is, in this sense, rooted in sympathy:

The primitive form of physical experience is emotional—blind emotion—received as felt elsewhere in another occasion and conformally appropriated as subjective passion. In the language appropriate to the higher stages of experience, the primitive element is sympathy, that is, feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another. (*Process*, 162)

Sympathy here should not be construed as identification based on a fixed, common essence, but rather based on a process of feeling determined by those contrasts that
elicit the greatest intensity. Our capacity to be changed by something is a contributing element to what we perceive as distinct from us. Concerning human perception, and the perception of organisms with sophisticated sense-detecting apparatuses, sympathy testifies to the sense by which our faculties of discrimination are always implicitly making use of nebulous feelings of connectedness, both to our environment and to the past. As Summers-Bremner remarks in her article on Sebald, “Reading, Walking, Mourning”, this nebulous connectedness between percipient and landscape is a defining characteristic of Sebald’s prose: “the narrator is more or less inseparable from the landscapes he travels through and the strange personages, living and deceased, who belong to it and who at times take over the narratorial voice” (306). Despite the fact that the narrator often seems estranged from the surrounds and objects he describes, there is the lingering and guiding sense that they have somehow moved him, that both his travels and his writing testify to this passage of felt inheritance, as welcome or unwelcome as it may be.

We can witness this also in the relationship between the narrator-writer and the characters he encounters and composes; it is a relationship determined by a sympathy apparent not through direct statement but through the careful arrangement of suggestive particulars. For example, we are never told exactly why Algernon Swinburne, Edward FitzGerald, Major George Wyndham LeStrange, the Ashbury family, and Thomas Browne (to name just a few of the human characters toward which the narrator is drawn—one might equally compose a list of things or places) provoke such a studied fondness, but we can presume, or perhaps we actively realise, that it is because of the narrator’s sympathy with them: “feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another”. As the narrator ponders in perplexed fashion while visiting fellow writer, friend and expatriate, Michael Hamburger: “Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one’s own precursor?” (182). The question of sympathy here is closely tied to transcendence (a remodelling of time and space), as well as to narcissism and to the notion of perception as inheritance. In confronting such questions, one might wonder what determines and alters one’s sympathies, and to what extent and how often they change.

Testament also to the crucial role harmonising oppositions plays in Sebald’s prose are observations such as those made by James Wood, who remarks that “the real
world gains a harsher, stronger life within a fiction because of the concentrated patterning which actual life does not exert” (275). This “concentrated patterning” is defined by its contradictory nature: “only an annulling wash of contradictory adjectives can approach the agitated density of W. G. Sebald’s writing” (273). In this sense, Sebald demands of the critic the same paradoxical comprehension his own work displays. We are compelled to describe his work in a contradictory fashion because his work makes contradictions alluring, primarily through their novel and elegant arrangement.76

With this in mind, I foreground those difficult to identify but implicitly crucial aspects of The Rings of Saturn that might be (cautiously) classified as “organic”. Those traits that seem to saturate each segment and testify to the sense that we might speak of the narrative as a working whole (though it would have to be a peculiar kind of wholeness—as I will come to explain).

If one is tempted to call Sebald a humanist, this needs to be tempered by an acknowledgment of his sustained concern with the animal and material world, with the “calamities” and forcefulness of nature (295). Indeed, Sebald’s prose is marked by its democratic inclusion of all things, animate and inanimate, living and non-living, human and animal, vegetable and mineral, material and imagined. This is nowhere more apparent than in The Rings of Saturn, where the distinction between nature and culture, human and non-human, is less important than Sebald’s unifying, variable and complex aesthetic, and his sustained interest in the traces things leave behind and the trace as an exemplary kind of order.

Returning to the initial quotation regarding the narrator’s dream, one witnesses the contrast evoked between the simplicity of a perceived pattern (the labyrinth design, apprehended from higher ground) and the lostness, or comparative perceptual impairment, one encounters inside a labyrinth, without a stable vantage, without being able to abstract oneself from the vague feeling of implication to which one is subject on occasions where consciousness begins to “dissolve at the edges” (210). It is this contrast between what one apprehends clearly, with absolute certainty, through the senses, and the relative dimness of what one feels: the blind overwhelming sense that accompanies the visual information of memories; the strange warping of disposition.

76 Mark McCulloh also singles out this aspect of Sebald’s prose when he writes of its “paradoxical effects” (2004). According to McCulloh, key among these effects is contrast between narrative progression and stasis (43–44).
that occurs during illness; and the intuition (though this may not be the right word) that events distant from each other in space-time might in fact be more closely related according to designs we may be tempted to call imperceptible, or unfathomable, but of which we nonetheless have a very real idea. What we encounter in *The Rings of Saturn* is a peculiar brand of empiricism that does not privilege the clear and distinct, immediate presentation of sense-data over our vaguer senses of happening, senses more likely to accompany perceptions of a more intimate, bodily nature.

The recurrence of the labyrinth motif exemplifies the doubleness of human perception in this sense. Richard T. Gray, whose two excellent articles on *The Rings of Saturn*, “Writing at the Roche Limit” and “From Grids to Vanishing Points”, are formative in the present analysis, notes as much when he remarks: “the image of the labyrinth serves as a model for a configuration that alternatively evinces either systematic order or chaotic disorientation” (496). Throughout his analysis, Gray notes the importance of this negotiation of contrary forces. His argument in “Writing at the Roche Limit” makes admirable use of an all but hidden detail from Sebald’s own text. The book’s second epigraph (the third in the German edition) describes the constitution of the rings of Saturn, with a concluding bracketed reference to the Roche limit, which, as Gray notes, is “the theory first propounded by French astronomer Édouard Roche in 1848 that explains, among other things, how the rings of Saturn most likely developed and why they remain in suspension a certain distance from the planet” (2010: 41). Importantly, for Gray, “The Roche limit designates a situation in which a once unitary object exists in a nether state between de-composition and re-amalgamation, between disorder and order, collapse and coalescence” (42). It is this doubleness, and the various textual and graphic motifs that enable Sebald to perform it, that I aim to pursue in my analysis in this chapter.

Along with Saturn’s rings, things such as sand, dust, gauze, clouds, lists, dreams and nebulae of all variety are prominent throughout the text. Even things which tend to appeal to permanence, such as grandiose estates, are realised in the guise of shivering matter, about to collapse. Take the house referred to by Mrs Ashbury, for instance: “The floorboards began to give, the beams of the ceilings sagged, and the panelling and staircases, long since rotten within, crumbled to a sulphurous yellow dust, at times overnight” (218). Thoughts too are not exempt from this disintegrated wholeness, with the narrator’s regular digressions weaving like a complex of fissures
through what might initially seem a simple, discrete idea or observation, making it into something else entirely.

One final point to reiterate in light of the opening quotation is the degree to which the narrator is implicated in his observations. Here it occurs explicitly, with the analogy between the perceived labyrinth and a cross-section of the narrator’s brain. Elsewhere, for example, when the narrator observes the courses the sand martins take through the air, or when he observes the cloudbank over the sea in Southwold, we witness how dependent his memory, and therefore the narrative significance of the text, is on the suggestiveness of object world. Summers-Bremner also expresses an awareness of this fact when she writes: “the ruins [the narrator] encounter[s] dictate the terms of [his] own state of mind and onward journey” (309). This has certain consequences for the way temporality works in the text, with immediate perception and distant memory seeming to exist in close proximity, bound together by mediators that resonate with the expressiveness of writing.

Section I: The Quasi-choate and Experimental Systems

Within the first few pages of *The Rings of Saturn* we are confronted with a vertiginous overlay of temporal perspectives, each contributing to the ever-elusive compositional moment of the text. Typically, beginning with the date he “set off” on his walking tour, “August 1992”, the narrator then follows by altering the perspective to “a year to the day after I began my tour” when he is admitted to hospital “in a state of almost total immobility” (3). It is during this period that the narrator began his “thoughts to write these pages” (4). After detailing his experience of pain, alienation and perspectival captivation while recovering in hospital, the narrator further complicates the “when” of the text with the register of ungrounded presentness, “now”: “Now that I begin to assemble my notes, more than a year after my discharge from hospital” (5). A year after a year after; the process of assemblage spirals before our eyes as the past is continually consumed by new beginnings. Accordingly, Gray remarks: “The narrative itself is thus constructed in the form of temporally layered, concentric rings, imitating in its temporal texture the spatial strata in the rings of Saturn named in its title” (2009: 496). Like Thomas Browne, who, as we are told later in the chapter, “[rises] higher and higher through the circles of his spiralling prose”
(19), the narrator here, as Sebald’s avatar, creates a constellation of beginnings, moving from the definite to the hazy, with each “later” incorporating the next.

It is from this perspective that the narrator grounds himself in a memory of his recently deceased colleague and friend Michael Parkinson, and subsequently the memory of the friendship shared between Michael and Janine Dakyns, who provides the narrator with an insight into the scruples that troubled Flaubert in his writing, and the information that Flaubert was fascinated by sand. The narrator describes Janine as taking an “intense personal interest” (7) in Flaubert’s writerly conundrums, among these “a fear of the false” so familiar to us in Sebald’s narratives, and which Janine attributes to a “relentless spread of stupidity [that Flaubert] believed had already invaded his own head” (7). Sand, or rather, the event of “sinking into sand” (7), forms an apt analogy with this capacity of stupidity to spread and invade:

Sand conquered all. Time and again, said Janine, vast dust clouds drifted through Flaubert’s dreams by day and by night, raised over the arid plains of the African continent and moving north across the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula till sooner or later they settled like ash from a fire on the Tuileries gardens, a suburb of Rouen or a country town in Normandy, penetrating into the tiniest crevices. In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary’s winter gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains.

(8) Here Sebald raises the question of perspective that returns regularly throughout the book and which informs the decisions at the heart of his idiosyncratic prose form. There is the contrast between (which is simultaneously a confusion) the particularity of a single grain and a perspective that refers to a cosmological, historical vastness. Like the narrator, sand is defined by both its amorphousness and its vagrancy. It also seems fitting that sand takes the form of clouds, a similarly amorphous form often invoked by Sebald.

In this sense we might wonder whether the proximity of dreams to sand in the above quotation is due to an inherent likeness, that the dimension of Flaubert’s psychological landscape suggested by his dreams shares a formal congruence with the

77 In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, Sebald names Flaubert as “the forerunner of modern writing scruples”: after Flaubert the difficulty of writing becomes part of the activity (cited in Schwartz, 109). Judging by Sebald’s comments here, he believes that with the onset of modernity, and the types of mediated experience with which it is associated, comes an inability to express oneself in writing as though it came naturally.
features and capacities of clouds and sand. The argument I unfold over the course of this chapter is that Sebald’s prose, and *The Rings of Saturn* especially, is a fabric composed of events and materials that recommend a kind of ontological in-betweenness, and therefore, a sense of mutability.

Sand is a mediator; it finds its way into other things. It takes the shape of the things on which it settles. It is a vehicle of transmission, a vector. Of dust, a close cousin of sand, Connor remarks: “Dust can get everywhere, insinuating itself into every crevice. This makes it a medium of transformation and exchange. Almost without qualities itself, dust has the quality of qualitylessness, the virtual virtue of transmitting the virtues of other substances” (“Pulverulence”). Dust and sand are substances which seem to manifest as events, at once there and not there, defined by what they incorporate of other things and by their drift.

For Connor, sand and dust are exemplars of “quasi-choate” phenomena:

Sand belongs to the great diffuse class, undeclared, rarely described, but insistent and insinuating, of what may be called quasi-choate matters—among them mist, smoke, dust, snow, sugar, cinders, sleet, soap, syrup, mud, toffee, grit. Such pseudo-substances hover, drift and ooze between consistency and dissolution, holding together even as they come apart from themselves. (“Dust”)

What is also relevant in this context is that sand, as an instance of the quasi-choate, also recommends an order out of which life is composed and to which it will return, an ur-form that exemplifies the entwining of beginning and end. It is therefore emblematic of temporality, something Connor also highlights:

Sand is not only temporary, it is also the most temporised form of matter. It is the image or allegory of time, shifting, yet unshiftable. It seems compiling of the minced, mounded years that go into its making, and grains of sand imitate the elementary atoms of time, moment upon pattering moment. (“Dust”)

Sand, and the deserts and beaches where it tends to reside, describe a nearness to an end that is also a beginning, a mainstay of both prophecy and fiction. It is no accident then that *The Rings of Saturn* takes place on the coast, that thin and changeable strip
of land joining the earth and the ocean.\footnote{Gray draws our attention to Hans Blumenberg’s study \textit{Shipwreck with Spectator: A Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence}, which names the shore as a place of “privileged status in the Western imagination” (Gray, 2010: 44).} At one point the narrator remarks, “Doubtless it is only a matter of time before one stormy night the shingle bank is broken, and the appearance of the entire area changes” (59). In this sense the surroundings inform the micro-narratives that gradually lose their cohesion and warp into other accounts.

Like Connor, albeit in a different genre (Connor’s lyrical histories have less to do with subjective recollection and do not feature an internal narrator), Sebald is preoccupied with the material imagination: the differing forms thought takes; the differing ways materials, or things, contribute to the kind of thinking that goes on. For Flaubert, evidently, sand and its suggestions provide a perspective (and “perspective”, here, is the crucial word) on the way the world is composed. As in the initial example of the narrator’s vantage on the labyrinth, the writer’s mental landscape is formally analogous to certain perceptual events or things. The seemingly endless applicability of the form sand tends to take, the sense of vagrancy and desolation it invokes, seems also to inform or suggest thinking as its content diminishes.

It is perhaps for this reason that Santner, in his interpretation of Sebald’s work, invokes concepts such as “undeadness” and “spectral materialism”, both of which point to a philosophy that resides in the middle ground between the vital and the mechanical, the human and the animal (even the mineral and vegetable), the present and the past, the living and the dead (52). Santner notes the importance of Benjamin’s concept of “natural history” to Sebald’s literary project, and \textit{The Rings of Saturn} is exemplary among Sebald’s works with regard the realisation of this concept. According to Santner’s gloss, the Benjaminian view comes down to that fact that “we truly encounter the radical otherness of the ‘natural’ world only where it appears in the guise of historical remnant” (xv). That is to say, the significance, or intelligibility, of natural and historical realms emerges when each swap properties or indecipherably blur, when we encounter “the mute ‘thingness’ of nature” as “a piece of human history”, and similarly, when human history comes to exist as orphaned from the historical sphere that might have once endowed it with meaning (xv). Thus, decadence becomes a very interesting phenomenon—decadence as, simultaneously,
natural decay and cultural excess—and as I will come to show, for Sebald, decadence and writing exist in close proximity.

What things such as dust, ash, sand, smoke, photographs, crystals, ghosts and flayed flesh suggest to Santner is that the living is, to a large degree, paradoxically embodied by an imperceptible, or barely perceptible, excitation, a “petrified unrest”, which finds its expression in “repeated instances of compulsive thinking registered throughout Sebald’s work” (118). More exactly, Santner is concerned with how, in Sebald’s work, earthly things, and the thinking that gets does about them, participate in the violent rhythms of human history (114). Benjamin influences his criticism significantly in this regard:

…for both Benjamin and Sebald creatureliness signifies a materiality dense with “deposits” of unredeemed suffering, deposits bearing witness to contact with what Benjamin characterised as the “mythic violence” that attends to the foundation, preservation, and augmentations of institutions in the human world. (114)

My own interests stray from Santner’s emphasis here. Alternatively, I want to propose a conception of matter, or of substance or “deposits”, that accords agency (not exclusively living agency) to things other than the human, something like what Santner means by the undead, but not reducible to historical suffering in the Benjaminian sense. I want to emphasise, as Santner does, that Sebald is a writer for whom the rhythms of the organic world are important, and that these rhythms (variation, persistence) include both natural and cultural realms. What is crucial to my interpretation is Sebald’s attempt to focus on the rhythms of the organic world from a quasi-scientific perspective, and on what might be called the “phenomenological” experience of a first-person narrator.79

It isn’t only sand, however, that recommends the migratory undeadness of the object world in the first chapter of The Rings of Saturn. In fact, and this is testament to the suggestive coherence of Sebald’s narratives, the other lead Janine provides the narrator is of the whereabouts of Thomas Browne’s skull. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the skull, like Flaubert’s migratory clouds of sand, has been on the move, with the narrator at one point emphatically noting: “The question was where the thing had got...

79 In the interview with Michael Silverblatt to which I referred in my introduction, Sebald names the differing but complementary perspectives as “phenomenological” and “scientific”, as I have done here (cited in Schwartz, 81).
to” (10). Skulls too play a significant role in the allegorical imagination. Like dust they are symbols of death, death that is made into a spectacle in the dissection of Aris Kindt, which is discussed in the pages following. My interest here is in how Sebald makes room for the insistence of the non-human in the human, inviting us to consider the relatedness of different modes of existence through a gradual arrangement of their differing aspects: the material significance of the human as exposed bone; and the paradoxical liveliness of sand as a force of organised disorganisation.

The skull is our metonymic introduction to Browne, whose work is a prominent influence, both stylistically and thematically, throughout The Rings of Saturn. As the narrator notes, Browne is a polymath whose writings “defy all comparison” (9). His work features a pre-modern combination of scientific scrupulousness and speculative thinking geared to linking up disparate regions of knowledge, and to demonstrating how differing things and events come to inform each other. Described as both a “doctor and a naturalist” (273), Browne’s relentless inquisitiveness and desire to catalogue—along with his baroque fascination with death, the unseen workings of the human body, darkness, and uncertainty—make him an exemplar of Sebald’s own inclinations. In this sense, it is doubly apt that his skull features in the narrative, that the narrator seeks to identify and include Browne in the very style that Browne’s work recommends.

In the first chapter, considering the present focus on Sebald’s interest in imperceptible organising forces, it is Browne’s quincunx, at least explicitly, that is most relevant here. The quincunx is a lattice-like fabric of intersecting lines featuring five points, an “elegant geometrical design” that Browne identifies everywhere (20; 21). The quincunx is significant according to the varied phenomena it brings together in a system. Browne’s method, to which the quincunx is testament, is to a large extent representative of Sebald’s own concerns: “We study the order of things, says Browne, but we cannot grasp their innermost essence. And because it is so, it befits our philosophy to be writ small, using the short and contracted forms of transient Nature, which alone are a reflection of eternity” (19). The point here, as Bianca Theisen notes, is that Sebald, in appealing to Browne, expresses a wish to “alleviate the split…between Scientia and Sapientia, between the narrow, rationalist knowledge of specialisation and the encyclopaedic generalism that embraces wide networks of corresponding meanings” (2006: 581). Brown’s quincuncial model is just one example of the different ways of organising phenomena that are accounted for in
Sebald’s prose. In Section IV of this chapter, I discuss in greater detail the specific relationship between such forms of organisation and what Sebald’s poetic prose, by contrast, suggests as a way of simultaneously accounting for and producing difference and similarity.

It is no doubt this commitment to the “study of nature in all its forms” that informs the narrator’s observation of the paper chaos in Janine’s office shortly after we read of Flaubert’s obsession with sand: “A virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys. Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing towards the centre of the room” (8). The narrator’s observations of specific happenings quickly begin to take on the quality of other worlds, at once discrete and inclusive with regard to the greater narrative environment in which they are situated. As with the example of sand, the material world is primarily vectorial; even stasis ornaments in itself a history of transformation.

Despite the apparent disarray, however, there exists “in reality a perfect kind of order, or an order that at least tended toward perfection” (7). The qualification made here, that the order “tended toward perfection”, is important. It emphasises that, for Sebald, order is always on the move, involving partially unrealised possibilities, and because of this, it is demonstrably flexible and inclusive. Order is as much a consequence of negotiation as it is the laying down of principles. And as we find in the case of Janine’s office, it is often difficult to perceive clearly, with the narrator not quite “seeing” the organisation that enables Janine to quickly find “whatever she might be looking for” (9). As Gray notes, “One person’s chaos is another person’s system; and as proof of the method underlying her apparent madness, Janine is able to find immediately whatever she seeks in this ostensibly confused jumble” (2009: 507).

Gray names Janine’s paper universe as “another of the many labyrinths found in Sebald’s text”, and argues that “this theme of inscrutable motives, imperceptible underlying causes, or hidden unfathomable designs forms a prominent leitmotif that runs throughout this text” (507). Gray’s mention of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the imperceptible order perceived by Janine would seem to counter, or at least contrast, the way the labyrinth is apprehended in the quotation with which I began this chapter: that is, the labyrinth not as lostness, but as the absolute certainty of a pattern. This continuum between constructive freedom and the uncertainty of lostness, and the fear in the face of the unaccommodatingly ordered and the already known, forms the
substratum of Sebald’s narrative. These are concerns to do with creativity and practice. The necessary paradox, as Browne’s deployment of the quincunx makes clear, is that in order to create one must have, or is advantaged by having, some vague notion of a system in mind.

In a book that asks the question of scientific practice, “What does it mean to do experiments?”, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger locates the labyrinth as an important metaphor in describing the often difficult to articulate but essential detail of an experimental system: “[an] experimental system can readily be compared to a labyrinth, whose walls, in the course of being erected, in one and the same movement blind and guide the experimenter. In the step-by-step construction of a labyrinth the existing walls limit and orient the direction of the walls to be added” (74). This is a constructive experience of the labyrinthine that implies contact, tactility, vagueness, and a willingness to be led while in the making. According to Rheinberger, who lifts the phrase from Freud, an experimental system is a “nebulous, scarcely imaginable basic concept”, and “auxiliary organs of touch in an otherwise impalpable space of experience” (14). The metaphoric forms that populate the pages of The Rings of Saturn instance something analogous to what Rheinberger here names as constitutive in the fabrication of the facts so valued in modernity.80

For Sebald, creativity is embedded in the suggestiveness of such metaphoric forms, and the writer at his or her work walks a tightrope between the dimly compelling and the newly established. Sebald undoubtedly seeks to emphasise the value in the disorganised or becoming-organised over the overtly rational or the clearly apprehended; he is compelled by the peripheral and the irregular, the haphazard, the paradoxical, and the vague. Yet he is equally plagued by the writerly scruples that, in the notes kept by a pupil in one of his creative writing workshops, compel the writer to write about obscure things but not to write in an obscure fashion (Five Dials, 8).

80 As Rheinberger and others in the field of science studies repeatedly stress, to say that a fact is fabricated does not equate to saying it is false. The idea of fabrication aims to account for the sense by which a matter of fact emerges from multiple agencies that its discovery obscures. To include facts among the competing forces that allow for their emphasis does not, or should not, make the facts themselves any less real. Latour’s article, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, outlines the contradictions unearthed in modern metaphysics and critical epistemology when we attempt to give facts the reality-making narratives they deserve (Latour, 2004).
Section II: Dreams and Nebulousness

Dreams are a prominent feature of *The Rings of Saturn*, frequently referred to as events which take place as part of the narrative: the dream where the narrator is playing checkers with Edward Fitzgerald (208); Michael and Anne Hamburger’s dreams (179-181; 189-190); the narrator’s dream of Dunwich Heath and the Vallüla massif (173-175; 79). And perhaps more importantly, Sebald’s narrative logic or style is itself dreamlike. But what does it mean to say that something is dreamlike? And considering the other varieties of experience and being in Sebald’s book, what does the presence of dreams tell us (and prevent us from knowing) about the more general questions the author is attempting to work through and express?

In chapter IV, the narrator explicitly remarks on the curious significance of dreams:

> I suppose it is the submerged memories that give to dreams their curious air of hyper-reality. But perhaps there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer. A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience? (79-80)

This gives us a good idea of what Sebald takes to be important in dreams. Evidently, it has to do with a question of perspective. Sebald is suggesting that dreams are interesting and, in a sense, visionary, beyond their functioning as containers for repressed or submerged memories. This is supported by Bianca Theisen’s claim that the meaningful “coincidences and correspondences” that populate and indeed form the texture of *The Rings of Saturn* are “surprisingly un-Freudian” (2006: 569). In his description of the feeling of a dream, Sebald’s narrator approximates a certain formal or atmospheric quality peculiar to Sebald’s prose, but perhaps also to forms of order generally. It is a sense that can’t be located as such but facilitates in the way something is held together, and the way this held-togetherness (coherence) is also a kind of difficult to articulate expression.

What interests Sebald is an alternate ordering of reality in which the illusory and the fantastic are part of the same library or encyclopaedia as the factual. He wishes to convey the idea that unrealised schemes and perverse counterparts always inform
great discoveries, and that oblivion is the only destination for humans systems of knowing. In this context dreams play the role of discrete worlds, instancing their own peculiar ordering of aspects and emotions. A dream is a paradigmatic example of a perceptual filter, of an event with its own internally specific rules. Dreams join the genealogy of borderline phenomena that exhibit a twin sense of order and unpredictability.

The formal features of dreams, such as vivid visual detail, ontological uncertainty, and feelings of levity, describe well the peculiarities of the Sebaldian prose-fictional experience. Dreams also make apparent the paucity of memory. More so than waking experiences, the memories of our dreams fade away, leaving us with impossibly delicate traces of something we are tempted to say both did and didn’t happen.

Similarly, the physiological specifics of writing and dreaming are comparable: each involves a turning inward of perception. During dreams, the sleeping body is subject to far fewer sense stimuli than in waking experience—as when we are ill, our senses become muffled, we lose our sense of taste and smell, possibly we hallucinate. Yet at the same time we consciously experience a heightened internal awareness, and as Sebald suggests in the above quotation, this might make for a paradoxical clarity. Dreams can offer us visionary experiences through sensory inhibition, in the same way that Leone suggests that vertigo might be actively sought so that the human body (including an active brain) might “develop a full awareness of itself” (92). What persists during dreams, and likewise during illness, are our emotive memories, draughts of the past, certain vague resonances. All these seem to overcome us and direct us in unique, mildly surprising, and sometimes disturbing ways.

Robert Stickgold is a prominent neurophysiologist whose primary area of research is the nature of sleep mentation. Stickgold proposes that “across the millennia and across cultures, dreams arguably represent the ur-literature of our species” (88). Dreams are to the narrative form what quasi-choate substances, such as dust, are to the material world. Considering the continual mixing of the ancient and the modern in Sebald’s prose, it seems appropriate that dreams exhibit an emblematic relationship with his work.

Depending on one’s perspective, dreams can be conceived as truth-telling devices, essentially mendacious, or, my preference, both. They are at once private and impersonal. They are private in the sense that no one else directly experiences our dreams, and impersonal in the sense that it is not only the speaking subject that has
agency in describing the contents of a dream: the dream itself contributes partially, albeit significantly, to the telling of the story. In this sense, they testify to the duplicity and multiplicity of a supposedly complete or singular subject. We are subject to the specificity of our dreams involuntarily, yet they perhaps account for our emotional consistency more accurately than our best efforts to describe our feelings. Dreams are thus organic documents, or instances of what J. J. Long calls “archival consciousness” (2007). We might describe dreams as photographs or inscriptions of the unseen goings-on of thought. They are mediums without matter, writing before we write about them.

There is no more fitting example of Sebald’s prose operating through dream logic than in chapter VII of The Rings of Saturn, when the narrator visits the house of Michael Hamburger, a friend, fellow expatriate, and erstwhile translator of Sebald’s work. Three dreams are explicitly referred to in this chapter. As tends to be the case, Sebald pre-empts his narrator’s realtime arrival at Michael’s house with a lengthy digression, lifted in part from Hamburger’s memoirs. Like the narrator, and like Sebald, Michael’s emigration is equated with a “new identity” and the loss of a stable connection to his “Berlin Childhood” (177). Writing and dreaming each participates in the simultaneous blurring and retrieval of this becoming-forgotten past, a forgetting which is exacerbated, in the case of Hamburger, by the actual destruction of his native city, and the loss of his grandmother, Antonia, in World War II. As mnemonic devices, dreams and their recollection emphasise the passive, or receptive, aspect of remembering. That is to say, when we dream, we are subject to our memories being selected and arranged by forces we do not control. However, the passive nature of dreams is perhaps overemphasised due to the myopia of a knowing subject that refuses to grant the dream its own internal creativity as an event. It is this perspective that Sebald resolutely counters in his prose-fictional homage to dreams and the dreamy. In referring to dreams and regularly deploying dream logic, Sebald commits himself to the creative capacity of the resting brain, and to memory as active within unconscious thought.

Hamburger’s dreams and hallucinations, much like the narrator’s Suffolk pilgrimage, feature a dreaming point of view that wanders through dimness in search of an answer to an unclear question:
For instance, I may be standing at the window on the upper floor of my house, but what I see is not the familiar marshes and the willows thrashing as they always do, but rather, from several hundred yards up, acres and acres of allotment gardens bisected by a road, straight as an arrow, down which black taxi cabs speed out of the city in the direction of the Wannsee. Or I am returning at dusk from a long journey. With my rucksack over my shoulder… (180)

Like the narrator’s dream in chapter IV, and like his dream of disorientation on Dunwich Heath, what is preserved in the vagueness of this setting is the trace feeling of being on a journey, of travelling and foreignness as a nexus of arrival and departure, and of the ontological instability this subtends. This is further emphasised as the dream continues and Hamburger enters his now unfamiliar house: “Under their watchful eyes I hesitantly cross the threshold, and as I do so I no longer know where I am” (180). This description is suggestively applicable to the content of a specific dream and to the difference between waking consciousness and dream consciousness more generally. The regularity with which Sebald’s descriptions approach this level of suggestive applicability is a defining feature of his prose.

We might also note, as Christopher Gregory-Guider does in his article “The ‘Sixth Emigrant’: Travelling Places in the Works of W. G. Sebald”, that places are disturbingly mobile in such dreamscapes, dreamscapes which for Sebald inform our deeper connections with landscapes and cityscapes (2005). Gregory-Guider remarks, “In the narrator’s subjective perception, times and places flow together, merge, and coexist in ever-shifting configurations” (429). As exemplified in the above quotation, perception in dreams is a matter of layered memories arranged in surprising architectural configurations. Windows do not reveal their usual aspects but become screens displaying other, often distant, irretrievable locations. At the conclusion of this particular dream account, the window frames an incongruous “Silesian landscape”, which is a kind of portal to further, rapturous, elaboration: “A golden cupola glints from the depth of a valley enclosed by blue forested hills. This is Myslowitz, a place somewhere in Poland, I hear my father say, and as I turn I see the white vapour that carried his words lingering in the ice cold air” (181). Interestingly, considering my earlier discussion of nebulousness, both vapour and dusk feature in this dream, as if their transitory eventhood spoke of alternate dimensions, present but barely manifest. The vapour that lingers after the words of Hamburger’s father is the mediated manifestation of the insubstantial expressiveness of speech.
When the narrator arrives at Hamburger’s house, it is tempting, and no doubt this is a purposeful strategy employed by Sebald, to equate his arrival with those featured in the dream accounts taken from Hamburger’s memoirs. Sebald maintains the ongoing sense that we are at once in familiar and unfamiliar territory, and that memories and their mediated forms possess their own agency, swarming in a kind of pre-individual mix of resonances and refractions. It is almost as though Sebald is posing the question as to whether his narrator has been dreaming Hamburger’s dreams. And indeed, it is the expert reproduction of dream logic accomplished by writers such as Sebald that makes such questions seem reasonable.

Perhaps more than thematic congruence, it is the homologous formal structure of dreams that makes one feel psychologically and physiologically connected to other individuals. For instance, in light of the above example, feelings of foreignness, and of arrival and departure, are essential to our more primary thought processes, the ur-literature of the brain. The point isn’t only to outline a story with specific narrative detail, but to maintain a sense of continually arriving in the midst detail that is at once significant and unknown, of being on the threshold of certainty and uncertainty, of being on ground dispersed within the nebulousness of clouds.

During the narrator’s visit, Hamburger’s wife, Anne, recounts her own dream. Anne’s dream speaks directly to the narrator’s question to do with the paradoxical clarity of dreams and the peculiar way point of view works in them. While being driven in a “large gleaming limousine”, Anne remarks that “She saw the forest…with absolute clarity and in meticulous detail impossible to put into words, as it slid past outside” (189). After listing, in emphatic detail, the various layers of forest life, Anne then adds that she is unable to describe “the feeling of being driven in that limousine that appeared to have no one at the wheel. It was not really like driving at all, it was more like floating, in a way I have not experienced since my childhood” (190). In Anne’s description of her dream there is a correlation between a certain rapt evocation of detail (both seemingly from a distance and close-up) and a perspectival instability, the ungroundedness we associate with floating. Everything becomes much clearer in

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81 The narrator identifies that he is referring to Hamburger’s memoirs with the discursive formulation, “Michael later wrote” (176). This is typical of Sebald’s having other things speak for or through his narrator, and of his creating a fabric where already mediated objects and human interlocutors participate in a scheme of enunciative equivalence.

82 Cultural geographer and Sebald critic John Wylie, in his article “The Spectral Geographies of W. G. Sebald”, identifies this mode with “parlous loftiness” (179). Referring to Sebald’s invocation of Browne’s “spiralling prose” (179), Wylie remarks: “these lines might equally describe elements of
a dream because the “I” of the dream does not behave in the same way as the “I” of waking consciousness. In a dream, the object and subject of perception to some extent coincide; being is undifferentiated from its surrounds. If something “higher” becomes apparent in a dream, like the “clusters of mistletoe, mimosa and lobelia” Anne describes (190), then one becomes higher, in the same manner the narrator speaks of a pond becoming a lake, or a breeze becoming a storm.

In addition to the characterisation of the dream experience as “like floating”, Anne also remarks, “The atmosphere through which the car moved was denser than air and somewhat resembled streaming currents of deep silent water” (189). We might deduce that the atmosphere is denser due to the feeling of comparative lightness and dispersal (nebulosity) experienced by the percipient or narrating “I”, an experience that is also suggested by floating: internal lightness, external density. Leone, referring to the work on dreams and water by philosopher-phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, notes that the “important physical features (of water) such as transparency, shapelessness and mobility, perfectly convey the idea of a different reality, contiguous to the reality of dry land, and sometimes visible from it, but governed by completely different rules” (98).

Were we presently in search of a scientific explanation for the correlation between dreaming, floating, fluidity and paradoxical clarity, and more broadly, the reason why dreams can be equally bizarre and revealing—as J. Allan Hobson is in his book *Dreaming: An Introduction to the Science of Sleep*—we might settle for the fact that during sleep mentation select areas of the brain are active, and therefore, the inhibitory experience produces hallucinogenic results. Hobson, unlike Freud, isn’t interested in dreams as hiding mysterious urges, and thus isn’t in need of symbolic interpretation—in dream content—but instead considers dreams to be expressive, in an explicit though distorted fashion, of the brain processes—“physiological mechanisms”—that lead to consciousness (22; 31-2). Dreams thus become vital “quasi-objects” for scientists attempting to locate the neural substrate of consciousness. To once again appeal to the example of Connor’s to which I referred in my introduction, dreams are to consciousness what bubbles are to air, they are documents that make the relationship between consciousness and itself intelligible; in the sense that a bubble is both air and not air, dreams are both conscious and not

Sebald’s own prose, in particular its dream-like, epiphanic passages, with their recurrent deployment of “vertiginous perspectives” (179).
conscious. The apparent irrationality of dreams is essential to understanding, from a rationalist perspective, the way consciousness comes about in the cosmos.

From the perspective of a writer such as Sebald, or of the dreamer on the dream, that which underpins the logic of the dream (whether this logic be content-based or formal, to do with repressed desire or neurophysiology) isn’t its most interesting facet. From Sebald’s perspective, the narrator or dreamer is ontologically equivalent to the dream. There is no perspective outside the dream, no stable ground from which to start or to which you can return. Writing and dreaming thus perform their own investigations into what consciousness is, only the answers (or rather, the ambiguities) they produce aren’t the same as those of empirical, scientific investigations. Instead, writing and dreams, at least potentially, as I am claiming for Sebald, both describe and perform states of altered consciousness. They enable us to exercise and refresh our ideas, and they make it apparent that certain ideas have crystallised within us.

Concerning the perceptual modality of the dreamer and its relationship to writing, we might recall the insight offered by Stanley Kerry, a colleague of both the narrator and Michael Hamburger. Kerry, who is practising writing Japanese characters “on immense sheets of paper”, remarks, “that one of the chief difficulties in writing consisted in thinking with the tip of the pen, solely of the word to be written, whilst banishing from one’s mind the reality of what one intends to describe” (186). This is hardly the kind of thinking to which one accedes all the time if one wishes to write interestingly about specific things. However, it does provide a useful insight the idea that writing is a specific kind of concentration that solicits a reading of the way a thinking body might entertain its energy.

Meyer’s study again provides a perspicacious example with regard to non-representational writing, or writing conceived as being implicated in the internal rhythms and vibrations of an embodied percipient. In a footnote to the concluding chapter of *Irresistible Dictation*, Meyer refers to E. O. Wilson’s book *Consilience*, in particular a section that likens “the brain’s iconic language to Chinese calligraphy”, and hypothesises a form of script that facilitates the immediate transfer of emotional experience among human subjects (2001: 398, fn. 25). Meyer lifts the following citation from Wilson’s study, which quotes from Simon Leys’ review of Jean Francois Billeter’s *The Chinese Art of Writing* (I ask the reader to forgive the labyrinthine trail of proper names leading to this quotation):
The silk on paper used for calligraphy has an absorbent quality: the lightest touch of the brush, the slightest drop of ink, registers at once—irretrievably and indelibly. The brush acts like a seismograph of the mind, answering every pressure, every turn of the wrist. Like painting, Chinese calligraphy addresses the eye and is an art of space; like music it unfolds in time; like dance, it develops in a dynamic sequence of movements pulsating in rhythm. (cited in Meyer, 398)

In light of this quotation, one might begin to imagine a hypothetical isomorphism between dreams as “seismograph[s] of the mind” and writing conceived as a form of voluntary, focused mindlessness. Dreams are situated in between writing and consciousness, not yet either but participating in both. Similarly, the models of written activity Sebald often appeals to in his narratives suggest a half-dream quality in their connectedness to embodied, cognitive experience. Conceived in such a way, writing and dreams are homologous opposites, the spirit beings or ancestors of each other.

In his essay on Nabokov, which is an essay about memory and writerly craft, and appropriately called, in this context, “Dream Textures”, Sebald refers to the proximity of disembodiment to a certain kind of description: “A short sequence of words often needed hours of work before the rhythm was right, down to the last cadence, before the gravity of the earth had been overcome and the author, now as it were disembodied himself, could reach the opposite bank across his precarious bridge of written characters” (Campo Santo, 152). It is tempting to equate what is being described here with the mindless concentration to which Kerry appeals in The Rings of Saturn. One also might be reminded of the narrator’s description, which is really a self-description, of Thomas Browne’s prose in the first chapter:

It is true that, because of the immense weight of the impediments he is carrying, Browne’s writing can be held back by the force of gravitation, but when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiralling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation. (19)

Sebald’s own sentences frequently achieve the elaborate syntactic balance he values in the work of Browne and Nabokov. It’s a balance which is further intensified by the sense that each discrete description resonates with other discrete descriptions to varying degrees, and in varying grammatical and graphic manifestations (from sentence to micro-narrative, from photographic image to pictured letter). This gives his prose a poetic recursiveness which invites comparison with the most complex and
mysterious part of the cosmos, the human brain—and not, it needs to be specified, as in the narrator’s dream of Dunwich Heath, from the perspective of a cross-section.

There are many dreamlike episodes within *The Rings of Saturn* beyond the explicit references to dreams. Exemplary among these is the narrator’s encounter with the Ashbury family in chapter VIII. What stands out in this particular episode is a sense of the bizarre and the incongruous contributing to the narrative that unfolds.

The narrator’s account of his stay with the Ashburys is, in one sense, the continuation of a dream that begins with his playing dominoes with Edward FitzGerald (208). After detailing the circumstances of the dream, the narrator segues into a memory: “In my dream I could make out far off in the distance the three-storey ivy-covered house where the Ashburys presumably still lead their secluded lives to this day; at least, it was a very secluded and indeed quite bizarre life at the time when I met them” (208). The border between dreamt and remembered reality is, in this instance, a porous one. It is the narrator’s dream that refers to a more substantial history (largely to do with the Troubles in Northern Ireland), and we are never told explicitly that we have moved from the narration of the dream to that of the narrator’s original experience. Both dream and reality merge together here in the event of writing.

The proximity of this introduction (to the Ashburys) to a dream is fitting considering the dreamlike quality of the descriptions that follow. Mrs Ashbury, her three daughters, Catherine, Clarissa and Christina, and her son Edmund, are the remains of the British landowning class in Northern Ireland. Burdened by a gratuitous and worthless (at least in terms of the market) estate, and “ill-equipped for life” (220), each of the Ashburys is a time-waster in the most emphatic sense. Edmund is building a fat-bellied boat he plans never to launch, Mrs Ashbury collects and stores seedlings in an impossibly complex, and perhaps pointless, network in the abandoned library, and the girls spend their days sewing and subsequently unpicking creations of needle and thread (211-212).83

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83 Here we might be reminded of Benjamin’s essay on Proust. Benjamin uses the metaphor of weaving to define Proust’s memory work, pondering: “Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as looked for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting” (Benjamin, 1999: 198). A Benjamin scholar of some repute, Sebald is certain to have read this essay.
Gray notes that the weaving of the daughters in particular instils in the narrator “a peculiar anxiety about the fleeting pace of time” (2010: 48). The narrator remarks: “The movement they made as they drew the thread sideways and upwards with every stitch reminded me of things so far back in the past that I felt my heart sink at the thought of how little time remained” (212). Although the narrator is in a sense observing the weaving in the present, he is also looking back in time, as though the gestures of the sisters were deliberate invocations of a distant, forgotten history. The sense of the past as lost is illusory, but no less real because of this fact. It is the very action of the sisters in the present that gives the narrator the feeling that something is lost. The weaving of the sisters displays a paradox concerning the question of eternity that informs Sebald’s metaphysics more broadly. Transient happenings and eternity depend upon and continually refer to each other. Like the “velvety layer of dust” which covers the floorboards (210), the sewing of the sisters signals an intimacy between distant beginnings and near ends, as though time, were it to be construed as circular, existed in a continuous condition of almost being completed, of approaching what it suggests but never coinciding with it, of spiralling, like Browne’s prose.

Despite being the very embodiment of unrealised potential, the Ashburys, perhaps not too surprisingly, provoke a response of sympathy and awe in the narrator who, upon leaving, expresses his regret at having to move on: “When Mrs Ashbury finished her story, I felt that its significance for me lay in an unspoken invitation to stay there with them and share in a life that was becoming more and more innocent with every day that passed” (220). Like many of the characters that populate the pages of The Rings of Saturn, the Ashburys suggest the narrator’s own inclination, without this being explicitly expressed.

In Gray’s reading he interprets the weaving practice of the sisters as an instance of creativity operating at the Roche limit: “at the liminal space formed by the tension between the countervailing principles of destruction and creation” (2010: 50). He notes that the “aesthetic accomplishment” of the sisters’ surviving work (a bridal gown that the narrator is shown on one of his visits to their workshop) is analogous to the ideal that we might suppose motivates the narrator, and similarly, Sebald himself:

and to have been familiar with the above quotation. Considering the thematic of the Ashbury sisters and the Ashbury household is largely to do with remembering and forgetting, and the concomitant creation and destruction of significance, and that weaving is the metaphor by which this process speaks, one suspects that this citation is the key intertext informing the narrative.
Not only does this work approach the vitality of empirical reality in the vibrancy of its colours, but it also seems to approximate that imaginary ideal of aesthetic perfection that the narrator supposes to be the sisters’ aim. As one of the few instances in the text where the narrator actually records and documents an experience of aesthetic reception, it is difficult not to view this as the ideal he holds out for readers of his own work. (50)

Sebald’s conception of an empirical reality is informed by the presence of contingent, aesthetically perfect worlds—here emphasising that aesthetic perfection relates to a certain precarious harmony. There is not a singular world or singular conception of unity to which all others refer, but multiple instances of unity that emerge from within each other. We might also think of the “model of the Temple of Solomon” from Ferber’s dream in *The Emigrants*, which is described as perfect in its detailed reference to the real temple (176), or similarly of Thomas Abrams’ efforts in chapter IX of *The Rings of Saturn* to build a miniature replica of the Temple of Jerusalem; of the impossible mansion, Somerleyton, in chapter II, or of the pattern book in the final chapter, which the narrator describes as “the only true book” (286). What I want to stress here is that the aesthetically perfect is defined less by its unattainability than by its internal complexity. Through our dreams we gain access to perfectly composed little worlds that emerge from within and contribute to our own. The grandiose and the impossibly intricate are instances of aesthetic harmony that might be wondrous or horrific.

The notion of multiple, discrete, often parasitic orders of reality similarly informs the narrator’s interest in Borges’ story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, which he describes as “a tale which deals with our attempts to invent secondary or tertiary worlds” (69). This reference is yet another instance of Sebald invoking his own compositional scruples through an aesthetically sympathetic document: “the writing of a novel that would fly in the face of palpable facts and become entangled in contradictions in such a way that few readers—very few readers—would be able to grasp the hidden, horrific, yet at the same time quite meaningless point of the narrative” (69-70). The task of the writer, according to this characterisation, relates to the question of acquiring a perspective on reality that is not subject to its intuitive conditions. This perspective is necessarily motivated by obscurity, contradiction and perversity. It might be “meaningless”, but it is still expressive, the instancing of a potential otherness that is just one example among many.
Section III: Lists

Although much is made of Sebald’s formal innovativeness regarding the graphics in his texts, his prose fiction also deploys varieties of textual difference that contribute, in a perhaps less obvious fashion, to the refractory system of references familiar to us in his fiction. Lists stand out among these textual devices. Not only does The Rings of Saturn feature numerous lists as part of its fabric, the book as a whole is list-like in its realisation of the narrative form. The book’s title page, composed of ten hyper-condensed chapter outlines, is an instance of this. The first chapter appears as: “In hospital—Obituary—Odyssey of Thomas Browne’s skull—Anatomy lecture—Levitation—Quincunx—Fabled creatures—Urn burial”. Each of these horizontally linked and divided indices might indeed put the reader in mind of Browne’s urns, the unearthing of which is discussed in the first chapter (25). They are containers that preserve a fragmentary and suggestive history. Each is a perspective on the narrator’s travels that abstracts, arranges, and uniquely refers to the narrative elaborations to come. In a manner of speaking, such lists are a way of photographing the contents of each chapter. In a similar fashion to the photographs, the lists we encounter throughout the book slow the onward march of the narrative, a fact Long also points out: “[lists] represent a degree zero of story time while facilitating the potentially infinite extension of discourse time” (140). Lists provoke in the reader a different temporal and spatial experiencing of narrative contents, contents that are always affected by the way in which they are transmitted. Thus, we read Sebald’s lists both within and on the surface of the narrative, in the same way that in viewing a photograph, one recognises both the scene it represents and its peculiar photographic quality.

Within the context of a narrative such as The Rings of Saturn (or, for that matter, in a literary context more generally), lists can be read as instances of textual-graphic expressiveness or excitability. We are moved to express our experience in the form of a list when we feel ourselves particularly affected by the thing or the event about which a list is composed. It is as though in doing away with the syntagmatic aspects of language, one can better account for the transience of their expressive desires. Paradoxically perhaps, it is the sense that a list might continue infinitely which makes
it such an apt device to capture this feeling of fleetingness. Like an image, a list almost immediately conveys a discrete, internally defined world within a world.

Although Long construes the high concentration of lists in *The Rings of Saturn* as symptomatic of Western modernity and the pathological tendency to archive with which it is identified, he also considers (and rejects) the proposition that, concerning Sebald’s intertextual treatment of Browne’s “Musæum Clausium”, “This expenditure of textual energy is ostensibly unmotivated beyond the desire to communicate the narrator’s or protagonist’s own sense of wonder and fascination” (38). In this sense, lists transmit something of the writer’s experience that is in excess of the information conveyed in its contents. As Robert Morris Oxley suggests in his dissertation on lists in the writing of Homer, Walt Whitman, James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges, “The contagious power of naming allows the enumeration to evoke or even to conjure. It does not simply describe a world; it creates a world” (57). Exemplifications of this “contagious power” might include the “electric energy” that “convulsed” Algernon Swinburne “flitting about his library”; “The enthusiasm which seized him as he was thus engaged in rhapsodic declamations about his favourite poets” (165). Or of Beyle, in *Vertigo*, who, in the presence of Angela Pietragrua, displays what Sebald describes as an “insane loquacity” (13). Lists are direct evidence of the experience of creativity indexed by the different worlds and systems of reference that inscribe the walls of writers in their solipsism.

Lists are also well suited to account for the manifestation of nascent and mutable happenings. If something is continually becoming something else, the barely organised structure of a list can quickly capture and evolve according to each suggestion of difference. The mythical Baldanders, for instance, is a being defined by its capacity to morph into other things (22-23). Baldanders is a creature that belongs to Borges’ *Libro de los seres imaginarios*, originally from Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen’s *Der Abenteurliche Simplicissimus Teutsch*. In Sebald’s narrative, his cameo coincides with his changing initially from “a stone sculpture lying in a forest”, into a scribe, who writes the lines Sebald includes as an image in the narrative, “and then into a mighty oak, a sow, a sausage, a piece of excrement, a field of clover, a white flower, a mulberry tree, and a silk carpet” (23). In a sense, Baldanders is a list. As Theisen notes, he embodies “the mutability of all worldly

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84 Santner has also identified the list as “one of [Sebald’s] most favoured literary devices”, enabling him to capture the “excessive magnitudes” of the historical real (162).
concerns” (2006: 564). It seems significant that a scribe is among the different things Baldanders transforms into, and that within Sebald’s narrative he performs the function of writing to which the image of his words testifies. Like Swinburne, the writer likened to the similarly transformative silkworm (165), Baldanders is the exhibition of a certain generative quality coextensive both with the vocation of the writer and the textual body in which his legend appears.

In his book on lists, *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing*, Robert E. Belknap notes of the list-like lines in the poetry of Walt Whitman: “In their motions, their inclusions, and their exclusions, they seem to be continuously in play, tumbling about but controlled” (1). Belknap also comments on the “generative qualities” of listing, and that “because it can be considered shapeless it has the capacity to spark endless connections and inclusions in a multiplicity of forms—the list is a device that writers have frequently employed to display the pleasurable infinitude of language” (1-2). The restrictions we place on lists demand that they make intelligible a relationship—not a particular relationship, but merely that they exemplify the idea of a relationship. Sebald’s use of the list in discussing generative and entropic forms is thus self-descriptive, as lists seem to be both the condition for creativity, and what one is left with in the absence of another system.

Sebald’s use of the list, in *The Rings of Saturn* especially, fits into what Long has called a “poetics of digression” (137-142), whereby paradigmatic rather than hierarchical relations obtain—that is, the relationship between things beside each other rather than from the top down (according to the word’s Greek origins, paradigm means to “show side by side”). In Sebald’s narratives, we do not so much follow a definitive arc but move sideways through episodes of equivalent significance. As Oxley notes of lists, they are “nearly always made of substantives”, and therefore are “grammatically equivalent” (54). In Sebald’s texts this grammatical equivalence informs both the serial movement of the narrative—episodes of dramatic significance are difficult to identify—and the ontological equivalence with which different beings or things (imaginary, real, animate, inanimate, animal, human, document, living, dead, and so on) are regarded.

Two lists in *The Rings of Saturn*, one from the first chapter and one from the last, instance contrasting tendencies concerning systems of classification. Both are attributable to the work of Browne. The first names the varied “animate and inanimate matter” in which Browne identifies the quincuncial structure:
...in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins, in the vertebrae of mammals and the
backbones of birds and fish, in the skins of various species of snake, in the crosswise prints left by
quadrupeds, in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies, silkworms and moths, in the root of
the water fern, in the seed husks of the sunflower and the Caledonian pine, within young oak shoots
or the stem of the horse tail; and in the creations of mankind, in the pyramids of Egypt and the
mausoleum of Augustus as in the garden of King Solomon, which was planted with mathematical
precision with pomegranate trees and white lilies. (20-21)

Here the list functions in the service of a representational structure (the quincunx).
Although Sebald begins the next sentence, ostensibly quoting from Browne,
“Examples might be multiplied without end” (21), the enumerative compulsion is less
about inhabiting that compulsion than it is about distinguishing it as part of an
organised arrangement of things from which the author remains separate.

By contrast, in the final chapter, Sebald includes a list from Browne’s imaginary
library, the “Musæum Clausium”, which deliberately problematises any efforts to
abstract a uniting principle from the miscellany, beyond the mere fact that they
happen to be gathered, hypothetically, in the text (271-273). Among the library’s
supposed contents are:

...an account by the ancient traveller Pytheas of Marseilles, referred to in Strabo, according to
which all the air beyond thule is thick, condensed and gellied, looking just like sea lungs...a dream
image showing a prairie or sea meadow at the bottom of the Mediterranean, off the coat of
Provence...and a glass of spirits made of æthereal salt, hermetically sealed up, of so volatile a
nature that it will not endure by daylight, and therefore shown only in winter or by the light of a
carbuncle or Bononian stone. (272-273)

Unlike the previous list attributed to Browne, which refers to the endlessly realisable
form of the quincunx, the list here lacks any intelligible abstract criteria beyond its
own coincidences. Thus, Sebald uses the list—and here we presume he does so in a
kind of homage to Browne and Borges—to create spontaneous organisations in which
history is both fantastical and factual. More important than the distinction between the
imaginary and the real is the effort to account for the way things uniquely incorporate
aspects of the world in order to be what they are. Human knowledge is a perspective
that is implicated in, rather than exclusive from, this process.
Section IV: Processes, Things, Creatures and Perception

*The Rings of Saturn* is an investigation into the relationship between humanity and the natural, creaturely, non-human world. This investigation is staged as a narrative that speaks significantly to ideas dealing with perception, knowledge, aesthetics and representation. In focusing on different processes (combustion and erosion), creatures (herring and silk worms), and things or materials (trees, silk, skulls), Sebald traces a genealogy that, through narrative, philosophical and poetic devices, shows how differing things participate in similar processes, and how processes are differentiated by things. This leads to a conception of reality that negotiates the supposedly antagonistic alternatives of heterogeneity and unity, with Sebald enabling us to appreciate an oscillation between the two.

A question that crucially informs much of Sebald’s prose poetics relates to how any perceiving subject accounts for something that is perceptibly different or separate from it. This also broaches a related question as to how feeling, expression and knowledge interact. In what follows I will consider how Sebald emphasises the perceptual potencies of the non-human world, providing us with an insight into how humans might better account for the complexity of the environments they require in order to exist.

During the narrator’s journey from Lowestoft to Southwold in chapter III, we are presented with a discourse on the natural history of herring. After making some general comments about the decline of the fishing industry, with reference to a film made in 1936, its accompanying pamphlet, and “a volume on the natural history of the North Sea published in Vienna in 1857” (54-55), the narrator evocatively conjures a grim picture of the natural world, where “ritual patterns of courtship are now no more than a dance of death, the exact opposite of the notion of the wondrous increase and perpetuation of life with which we grew up” (53). The idea of nature as motivated by rational self-interest and geared to the “perpetuation of life” is tempered by a characterisation of productivity that looks backwards and is consumed by itself. Commenting on the “truly catastrophic glut of herring” to which the fishing industry was at one point exposed, the narrator remarks on “the terrible sight of Nature suffering on its own surfeit” (55). Unlike the Aristotelian perspective, whereby nature
is characterised as thrifty or economical, the view or the tone of Sebald’s narrator here is touched by a lugubrious, baroque pessimism.  

This tone similarly informs the characterisation of human knowledge with regard to the herring: “the routes herring take through the sea have not been ascertained to this day…For this reason, those who go in pursuit of herring have always relied on their traditional knowledge, which draws upon legend, and is based on their own observation of facts” (55). Here Sebald is suggesting that the acquaintance struck between civilisation and the environment is based on the contingency of local encounters and the inheritance of ideas that have been shaped by long stretches of time. The laws that govern certain happenings take the form of evolving, esoteric stories that recognise the fish as, in some sense, transcending human knowledge. It’s important not to read Sebald here as advancing a particular theory. Rather, he is accounting for the sense by which history and knowledge might exhibit a certain temper, with contradictions permitted. Through his narrator, he is drawing attention to the artifice not merely of human forms of order, but to the way a sense of humour or a disposition might equally be kind of order, a certain style. He creates panoramas or readings of history that account for character, style, knowledge, and an exchange of perceptual potencies among different beings.

Perhaps this understanding of the natural world speaks to the earlier observation, attributed to Browne:

...we are occupied above all with the abnormalities of creation, be they the deformities produced by sickness or the grotesqueries with which Nature, with an inventiveness scarcely less diseased, fills every vacant space in her atlas. And indeed, while on the one hand the study of Nature today aims to describe a system governed by immutable laws, on the other it delights in drawing our attention to creatures noteworthy for their bizarre physical form or behaviour. (21)

There is a pronounced hesitation here between “a system governed by immutable laws” and bizarreness, uncertainty, unpredictability and the grotesque. One approach

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85 According to Pierre Hadot, in his book *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, Aristotle characterised nature as inherently thrifty. “A prudent man”, and a “good housekeeper” are some of the metaphors used by Aristotle (191). Continuing to appeal to the Aristotelian perspective, Hadot writes, “[nature] knows how to take advantage of leftovers ‘to make bones, tendons, hair, and hooves’, and how to compensate for an excess with a deficit, or vice versa, since she cannot distribute the excess to several points at the same time” (192). “Ultimately”, writes Hadot, “the Aristotelian formulas can all be reduced to the principle of economy, which expresses the ideal of perfectly rational action that sets means and ends in precise proportion” (192).
construes nature as operating according to higher, unchanging principles of organisation, and the other emphasises contingency, mutability, heterogeneity, perplexity, novelty and darkness.

In his analysis of this passage, Long interprets Sebald as “turning Browne into an avatar of a distinctly modern epistemology” (38). According to Long, Browne’s move from the quincuncial pattern, whereby a certain divine order is apprehended among heterogeneous beings and materials, to the sense of a natural world in which singular events take place without reason, is comparable to the move from the Renaissance to the modern episteme (34). While Long’s remarks here are indeed apt, and his analysis is compelling, he neglects the idea that Sebald, Browne, and certain aspects or trends within modern science might each differently participate in a baroque proclivity for the making of multiple, internally defined worlds. Long expresses an awareness of what his own interpretation is defined negatively in relation to when he considers the possibility that “Sebald’s texts illustrate the persistence in the present of pre-modern forms of organising and representing nature” (38). However, contrary to this, he recommends that Sebald’s worldview is essentially modern, and that the persistence of pre-modern sensibilities within this worldview is secondary to the radical break between modern and Renaissance epistemes, defined primarily by the developments of modern science and the experimental-inductive method which it champions.86

Long is indeed on unassailable ground when he draws attention to the fact that Sebald’s use of the word “abnormality”, which “post-dates Browne by at least a century and a half”, is testament to “a distinctly modern epistemology”, and that Sebald has construed “Browne’s cosmology [as] a negative secular metaphysics” (37-38). While this side of the argument recommends that Sebald’s reading of Browne is informed by his markedly different historical and cultural context, my interest here, and what I take to be of value in Sebald’s peculiar brand of historical metaphysics, is in the sense by which each writer decides their own antecedents, and that the written event to which their activity bears witness might be closer to some periods and more distant from others, according to shared stylistic or poetic inclinations. Historical proximity thus depends on the examples on which we confer the agency to measure. Moreover, while epistemological breaks might appear emphatic and frequent, the problems of metaphysics persist in a far more slow-moving fashion—which isn’t, of

86 For the influence of the method of induction as favoured in modern science, see Whitehead’s Science in The Modern World (52-56) and Ian Hacking’s The Emergence of Probability.
course, to say that metaphysics and the questions available to metaphysicists remain unaffected by the developments of science.

What I wish to emphasise here, rather than the radical epistemological break between the different periods identified, is their contiguity concerning certain metaphysical and ontological assumptions. The paradigms of baroque and romantic complexity, as identified in Chunglin Kwa’s essay, “Romantic and Baroque Conceptions of Complex Wholes in the Sciences”, offer an alternative way of theorising the relationships between diverse phenomena. Kwa notes that the romantic conception of complexity, inherited from the time of Rousseau, posits an underlying unity in the natural world at the expense of the heterogeneity of singular phenomena—“heterogeneous individuals at a phenomenological level are integrated into higher orders of complexity” (25)—whereas the baroque understanding of complexity favours “the mundane crawling and swarming of matter” and the sense that “materiality flows in many directions, blurring the distinction between individual and environment” (26). Exemplars of romantic complexity include Alexander von Humboldt and evolutionary theorist Herbert Spencer, while exemplars of the neobaroque include Darwin, Whitehead, Benjamin and Leibniz—a revealing set of names concerning the focus of the present study (31).

To be sure, there is much crossover between these two ways of structuring reality. Darwinian evolution, for example, exhibits, according to Kwa, tendencies that are both baroque and romantic. On the one hand, there is the Darwinian idea that “evolutionary change on the level of the individual organisms does have a direction toward a greater complexity in nature” (31-32)—the hypothetical teleology of this direction (toward “greater complexity”) is what makes it a romantic idea. While on the other hand, “greater complexity” does not necessarily equate to a singular end. Rather, the interactions among organisms are messy, contingent and mutable. Evolution in this sense might instance a spread with frayed edges rather than a hierarchical tree.

The connectedness of individual and environment is, of course, not only a baroque idea. As Whitehead argues in *Science and The Modern World*, the romantic poets, principally Wordsworth and Shelley, also sought to express the sense by which poetry might be regarded as an activity that testifies to an event that is at once greater than and inclusive of the poet as subject (93-118). What is perhaps unique to Whitehead’s putatively romantic appeal to a greater unity—greater, that is, than what is
apprehended clearly by the phenomenological subject—is its inherent transitoriness. Whitehead’s conception of romantic unity embodies the baroque idea that perceptual unity is contingent and defined by its continuous fluctuations, departures and returns from equilibrium, and by the creation of new equilibria or micro-worlds. Whitehead’s conception of the “event” as constitutive of reality emphasises this transitoriness (116). Perception involves the attainment of unity that is the specific achievement of a particular, physical happening. Appealing to the idea of nature as “a theatre for interrelations of activities” and the post-Newtonian, non-Euclidian concepts of modern physics, Whitehead writes of “the notion of forms of process” as opposed to the Aristotelian notion of a “procession of forms” (Modes, 140).

Similarly, we can determine sensibilities present within The Rings of Saturn that testify to an interest in the efficacy of forms of order as well as their contingency, excess and frustration. What Whitehead identifies as the romantic tendency to construe experience as defined by aesthetic value (SMW, 116-118) is coupled with the baroque appreciation of each thing instancing a world unto itself. For example, Browne’s quincunx, surely a romantic idea according to Kwa’s definition, is removed from its epistemological context and construed as equivalent to one of Sebald’s many literary lists. Thus, the varieties of being linked together by the quincuncial pattern are no more commanding in their appeal to a universal order than any of the hypothetical catalogues that appear throughout the narrative—Browne’s urns and his “Musæum Clausium” among them. It isn’t that these lists and catalogues are the instances of a kind of free association. Rather, Sebald enables us to appreciate how the apparently random might be implicitly ordered according to the constraints and affordances of narrative convention—albeit in a syncopated approach to the genre.

Sebald’s uncertainty with regard to what we know of the herring is coextensive with an appreciation of its marvellousness. In addition to humans not yet knowing why the shoals of herring move where they do, they similarly cannot account for the poetic value evidenced in the colouration of the fishes’ scales: “The herring’s dorsal area is of a bluish-green colour. The individual scales on its flanks and belly shimmer a golden orange, but taken together they present a metallic, pure white gleam. Held against the light, the rearwards parts of the fish appear a dark green of a beauty one sees nowhere else” (57-58). The other noted idiosyncratic feature of the herring—that, upon death it begins to glow—provoked the “eccentric undertaking” of two English scientists who hoped “that the luminous substance exuded by dead herrings would
lead to a formula for an organic source of light that had the capacity to regenerate itself” (58-59). The perspectives of both scientific and poetic value are here demonstrated as being congruent according to the specificity of the objects with which they are preoccupied. Whether accounted for scientifically or phenomenologically, it is the herring’s luminescence (at once material and insubstantial) that provokes the fancy of human endeavour.

This sense of valuing an unfathomable, but expressive, specificity appears elsewhere in The Rings of Saturn. We might think, for example, of Thomas Abrams’ remarks in chapter IX regarding the company of ducks: “I have always kept ducks, he said, even as a child, and the colours of their plumage, in particular the dark green and snow white, seemed to me the only possible answer to the questions on my mind” (248). Or of the “unfathomable green” attributable to the palm fronds in Anne’s dream, in chapter VII (190). Or of the question that seems to float, significantly, at the end of the first chapter, in response to the contents of the burial urns catalogued by Browne: “That purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus—what does it mean?” (26). The inexplicability and aptness which marks these propositions relates to the fact that, as Shaviro notes, our aesthetic judgements are defined primarily by affect rather than cognition (4). According to Shaviro:

A subject does not cognize the beauty of an object. Rather, the object lures the subject while remaining indifferent to it; and the subject feels the object without knowing it or possessing it or even caring about it. The object touches me, but for my part I cannot grasp it or lay hold of it, or make it last. I cannot dispel its otherness, its alien splendor. If I could, I would no longer find it beautiful; I would, alas, merely find it useful. (2009: 5)

While reinstating such a divide between beauty and usefulness has unfavourable implications, Shaviro’s insight is revealing in light of Sebald’s emphasis on the “otherness” and “alien splendor” of natural-cultural worlds, as exhibited throughout The Rings of Saturn. It is an otherness with which Sebald’s narrator sympathises but doesn’t completely comprehend. He is continuously lured by things, but often for reasons that remain impossible to abstract from his descriptions of them.

This sense of aesthetic appreciation similarly informs Sebald’s stance apropos the perceptual life of other creatures and things. As the narrator comments, with regard to human knowledge of the herring, “But the truth is we do not know what the herring
feels” (57). This isn’t, however, to suggest that our lack of knowledge concerning what, exactly, the herring feels, is equivalent to its lack of feeling. Quite the opposite seems to be the case. Sebald’s hesitation regarding the “what the herring feels” attests to his sympathy with its otherness as an individual with an obscure (internal) perceptual existence.

Sebald’s speculative sensibility concerning the sentience, or internal constitution, of diverse beings is similarly conveyed in a remark attributed to Austerlitz’s Great-Uncle Alphonso (a keen naturalist):

…there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life. We are not alone in dreaming at night for, quite apart from dogs and other domestic creatures whose emotions have been bound up with ours for many thousands of years, the smaller mammals such as mice and moles also live in a world that exists only in their minds whilst they are asleep, as we can detect from their eye movements, and who knows, said Austerlitz, perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams it looks up at the moon by night. (94)

Here, Austerlitz appeals to a pervasive emotional realm that includes human, animal, and even vegetable feeling. The idea that the world is made up of multiple minds in which other worlds are preserved recalls the Leibnizian conception of monadic perception, where each separate thing is connected to the universe through its internal representation of the world or its soul. Antiquated and audacious as this might sound, the attribution of an inner lyricism to things and creatures might have some minor advantages. For one it might compel us to make our descriptions of such things more specific, and more like greetings, forms of praise or celebration, rather than exhibitions of human dominance.

Sebald’s use of the word “mind” clearly shouldn’t be equated with cognition or consciousness. Rather, that mentality is primarily constituted as an emotive, organising force, as the constitutive experience of difference: if something is, then it is a form of experience, and this form of experience is constituted by the capacity of something to be distinct from other things. This distinction is a matter of feeling before it is a matter of consciousness. Shaviro writes, appealing to Whitehead’s metaphysics, “A falling rock ‘feels’, or ‘perceives’, the gravitational field of the earth. The rock isn’t conscious, of course; but it is affected by the earth, and this being affected is its experience” (13). Shaviro also notes Whitehead’s direct appeal to Leibniz’s conception of monads when he refers to a remark from Adventures of Ideas:
“The term ‘monad’ also expresses this essential unity at the decisive moment, which stands between its birth and its perishing” (Adventures, 177). All forms of experience are the instancing of organised worlds within worlds. The image of a lettuce dreaming, while it might appear unintuitive, argues for a metaphysics and an ontology wherein things, in addition to being in the world, that is, externally related to the world, also incorporate and unify aspects of the world in their own uniqueness as events. To suggest that a lettuce might dream is to respect the possibility that the relatedness of the lettuce to the world is irreducible to conceptions of materiality that lopsidedly posit human consciousness as defining experience.

What characterises Sebald’s regard for the natural world, or the world of things, is an imperative by which human consciousness does not assume an exclusive position such that other varieties of experience are defined negatively in relation to it. On the one hand, the category of the human is unique, but on the other hand, this uniqueness is not itself unique concerning the different kinds of being that populate the natural-historical world.

This imperative no doubt informs the sympathetic characterisations of cockatoos in Austerlitz. Austerlitz describes these birds, in addition to the plants and unique climate, as making Andromeda Lodge feel like “another world” (81). He notes the “wonderful” “dexterity” and “acrobatic feats” of the birds, and that they are “always active” and seemingly “intent on some purpose or other” (81). It is this exhibition of purposefulness, whether embodied in the growth of tree roots, a crystal, or the movements of a bird, that Sebald emphasises in his descriptions of things. It follows that Sebald’s characterisation of intent is not to be reductively equated with human intentionality, but is defining of both non-human and even non-living forms. The cockatoos express a diverse range of purposeful activities, and are notably “alert, scheming, mischievous and sly, deceitful, malicious, vindictive and quarrelsome” (81). Although Austerlitz remarks on the likeness of birds to humans, this is not an anthropomorphism that is blind to the peculiarity of the cockatoos. Rather, one gets the sense that Sebald’s sympathy is synonymous with the realisation that humans and cockatoos each participate in similar though different rhythms and energies, and that the human is less an exclusive category than something that shares its aspects with the

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87 These observations, and my argument concerning Sebald’s characterisations of the non-human world generally, might be read in relation to the recent collection of articles, Cognition and Decision in Non-Human Biological Organisms, edited by Steven Shaviro. These articles variously approach the question of cognition and decision-making in bacteria, viruses, fruit flies and slim moulds.
surrounds, things and creatures that give it (the human animal) meaning and inform its expressiveness.

One might also think here of Gerald Fitzpatrick’s admiration of homing pigeons, in particular, “their navigational abilities” (113). Gerald remarks, “To this day no one knows how these birds, sent off on their journey into so menacing a void, their hearts surely almost breaking with fear in their presentiment of the vast distances they must cover, make straight for their place of origin” (114). In the context of the narrative this resounds with Austerlitz’s recurrent, despairing efforts to discover his own origins—efforts which are marked by a far greater uncertainty, concerning the arrival at a destination, than those of the pigeon. Considered in relation to the characterisation of the herring in Sebald’s earlier book, we can see how the preservation of a certain unknowing is coextensive with awe.

Sebald’s characterisation of silk also testifies to the sense by which the specificity of things solicits equally specific and various responses from their human interlocutors. In *The Rings of Saturn*, silk, both as a substance and an idea, is configured in relation to splendour, transformation, death, and to the substantial-insubstantial coincidence of writing. Like writing, it seems to suggest more than it is, and one comes to know it through the excesses of its suggestion. It calls forth a response, and commits one’s activity to certain, often undesirable, strictures.

In chapter VI, the narrator tells the story of the Dowager Empress Tz’u-hsi, who was renowned for both her extreme conservatism and her decadence. “She took the greatest pleasure in lifeless things”, and upon observing the “tiny figures of gardeners in the distant lily fields”, she thought not of “the natural occupations and feelings of human kind”, but rather of “the wanton power of death” (150). The Dowager Empress also feels a deep affinity for silkworms: “Of all living creatures, these curious insects alone aroused a strong affection in her” (151). For the Empress, the worms are the very antithesis to human beings, and in their absolute obedience and productivity, she sees them as “her true loyal followers” (151). The silk produced by these worms is an index of the decadence so compulsively valued by the Dowager Empress. Although she may posit the utter difference of the silkworms from humans, it is they who arouse in her the feelings of sympathy that accord with her own disposition.

Death here, as Santner recommends in his conception of undeadness, shouldn’t be thought of as static, unproductive and without potency. While not exactly reducible to
life, death, or non-life, does share some of the energies we tend to attribute to life, such that, as argued in the second chapter of this thesis, it might be described as similar to Meyer’s conception of “liveliness”, or Whitehead’s “organic mechanism” (to which Meyer’s concept refers).

The decadence of silk exists in an indexical relationship to a transformative, energetic process. Silk is the constitutive trace of this process, and is part of a metaphorical and metonymic complex that suggests things about the textual and graphic production that is the author’s exemplary mode of acquaintance. In the final chapter, after making the link between weavers and writers, and therefore between the activity of the worms and the humans, the narrator comments on a pattern book that catalogues “marvellous strips of colour”, the edges of which are “filled with mysterious figures and symbols” (283). A photograph of the book takes up a double-page spread, featuring the lists of silk fraying at the ends, surrounded by curling, indecipherable text that similarly trails off into nothingness. Due to the layout of the photograph, it appears as though the pages of the original book were before us, only now in trace form, washed of colour. The narrator describes the “catalogue of samples” as “leaves from the only true book which none of our textual or pictorial works can even begin to rival” (286). Here Sebald invites us to consider the question of what writing and pictures are by providing an example of a book in which the material and the symbolic coincide. Like the garments produced by the Ashbury sisters, also made of silk, the pattern book instances a kind of perfect aesthetic object, comparable to the complexity and liveliness of “Nature itself”, and which the narrator associates with “the plumage of birds” (283).

Silk is both a thing of beauty and a thing of death. It gives people the ideas by which they attempt to identify it. Sebald emphasises aesthetic singularity and the power to change in his characterisation of silk. It draws from human endeavour a certain compulsiveness, and it is the exemplification of a comparable compulsiveness that is definitive of the natural world. The formal mutability and splendour of silk is part of what enables it to carry the ideas or the forms of other things.

The book’s closing pages include an image of three Indian men, presumably of Amritsar (the Amritsar massacre is listed among the “calamities” that have occurred over the course of history on the 13th of April (295)), standing behind three “Chandrika” that feature the spiral form on which silkworms spin their cocoons. This image is confronting on a number of interconnected levels. The narrative context for
the image is indeed tragic; although swiftly treated, it resonates with a more general thematic that draws attention to the thoughtless and blundering efforts of colonialism, and the equally stupefying and unsuccessful enterprises of men and civilisations to obtain and manufacture desirable things. The presence of the spirals in the photograph seems to repel the efforts of our glance to enter the image, and at the same time draw it in. We might recall the characterisation of Thomas Browne’s prose as “spiralling” in the first chapter (19), which suggests that stylistic and poetic forms inhabit writing in a manner that does not coincide with the medium as a vehicle for representation. Writing can spiral without depicting or discussing spirals. As is the case in the pattern book, Sebald invites us to consider the differing and complementary forms which traces might take. The proximity of nature and ornament, and of matter and sign, and likewise, of the book’s key themes, are all instanced commandingly in this image.

Among the things that Sebald is inviting us to consider is how humans, throughout history, have sought to perceive and understand death. Death is never something we conceptualise without first feeling it, yet it is also something that we never experience as such, not at least as conscious individuals. An emotional need to come to terms with death, whether overt or tacit, links modern and archaic civilisations. We require symbols and rituals, costumes and customs in order to inhabit and allow for the presence of death in our lives. The customs and rituals through which previous, “non-modern” civilisations have sought to understand death are not simply symbolic representations, devalued in comparison to a factual, biological understanding of death. Customs are things we perceive with, gestures that are at once material and embodied. The intricate, highly aware, affect-based convulsions of dance, for example, or the commitment of oneself to a certain routine involving non-human interlocutors, brings the living and the dead closer together, or makes apparent a togetherness that is latent though perhaps not manifest. A ritual or a dance is a living through of the idea of death, an experience of implication in active, undead, rhythms or processes. The scientific perspective on death as the end of life is one way of proposing knowledge about death; obeying a ritual also represents a kind of knowledge, a resignation that is itself complex and mindful of the persistence of death within life, and life within death.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, death is paradoxically abundant, as though our habit of associating experience with life were turned inside out. But for Sebald, the relationship between life and death is less an opposition than a contrast, which is to
say that life is positively inhabited by death, by the non-living, and which lustrous materials such as silk, and objects such as skulls, both symbolise and exemplify.

Sebald’s focus on material events such as erosion and combustion further highlights the mutual implication of living and non-living processes in the narrative. Settlements such as Dunwich bear witness to an inherent corruptibility of both natural and manmade forms, and the idea that seemingly stable forms are inhabited by empty space and the timeless process of energy as decay: “Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air. If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea towards where the town must once have been, you can sense the immense power of emptiness” (159). Here Sebald describes the very principle by which the suggestiveness of his prose poetics operates. What we comprehend of his meaning is what we cannot quite make out—the imperceptible forms of order suggested by patterns and rhythms. As Mark McCulloh notes:

…the hidden patterns of order remain—another paradox—inexplicit and unexpressed in Sebald’s work. We perceive only their “kaleidoscopic” results. This suggestion of structure inside what [Geoff] Dyer calls a “yawning chasm” of infinite regress contributes to the impression, arising again and again throughout Sebald’s prose, that characters and things—indeed, the readers themselves—are “on the verge,” or “on the brink” of something. (38)

McCulloh identifies the two fused modes of perception Whitehead claims as characteristic of Symbolic Reference. One the one hand, there are the “‘kaleidoscopic’ results” of presentational immediacy, and on the other, the weighty and haunting feelings of causal efficacy which, when reading, we experience through the text’s suggestiveness.

In addition to the persistent and invisible corruption caused by erosion, Sebald invokes the similarly destructive and attractive force of combustion: “Just as the woods had once colonised the earth in irregular patterns, gradually growing together, so ever more extensive fields of ash and cinders now ate their way into the green leafed world in similarly haphazard fashion” (169). Human destruction and natural growth are thus not exclusive forces, instead they mimic each other, are part of the same perspective. The mention here of “irregular patterns” also appeals to Gray’s theory of the Roche limit, which characterises the simultaneous or oscillatory mix of chaos and order instanced in Sebald’s prose.
According to the narrator, human civilisation, from prehistoric to modern times, participates in a parasitic tradition of realising a built future by “incessantly burning whatever would burn” (170). For Sebald, in the characteristically pessimistic voice of his narrator, we are bound, at once, by what we can do with our surrounds and what they do to us: “Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create. The making of a fish hook, manufacture of a china cup, or production of a television programme, all depend on the same process of combustion” (170). Here again Sebald emphasises a “hidden principle” or process that connects varied events and artefacts. Humans are not exceptions in this regard: “Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers” (170). This perhaps calls to thought the narrator’s comment in the final chapter apropos the vocational ills, melancholy among them, shared by weavers and writers: “we are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented” (283). Or, similarly, the narrator’s view from the aeroplane from Amsterdam to Norwich:

Nowhere, however, was a single human being to be seen…One sees the places where they live and the roads that link them, one sees the smoke rising from the their houses and factories, one sees the vehicles in which they sit, but one sees not the people themselves. And yet they are present everywhere upon the face of the earth, extending their dominion by the hour, moving around the honeycombs of towering buildings and tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine… (91)

Sebald appears uninterested in making a categorical distinction between physical and physiological processes (the temperament of the human organism included) and the cultural manipulation of them. Although human civilisation is the focus of the above passage, what that focus recommends is that civilisation is part of a process that exceeds it, a process in which our machines, techniques, and their “networks of complexity” are similarly implicated. The human, and the forms of intelligence with which we associate the human, writing paradigmatic among them, does not stand outside this process, but, as I have repeatedly argued, exemplifies it.

Combustion is also invoked in chapter I when the narrator, referring to Thomas Browne’s Urn Burial, draws our attention to the pre-Christian practice of cremation, noting the somewhat disquieting fact that “contrary to general belief, it is not difficult to burn a human body: a piece of an old boat burnt Pompey, and the King of Castile
burnt large numbers of Saracens with next to no fuel, the fire being visible far and wide” (25). We obtain here a morbid sense of the non-living manifestation of the human in an event that is at once a natural process and a cultural convention.

Santner has noted that both *Vertigo* and *Austerlitz* feature instances where the destructive force of excess heat defines the relationship between humanity and its surroundings (104-105). In chapter II of *Vertigo*, the narrator meets a character named Malachio who takes him on brief boat ride out on the open water to get a different perspective on the city of Venice. Staring back at the “fading lustre of our world”, Malachio remarks: “The miracle of life born of carbon…going up in flames” (61). Then Malachio points to the municipal incinerators: “A deathly silent concrete shell beneath a white pall of smoke. I asked whether the burning went on through the night, and Malachio replied: *Sí, di continuo. Brucia continuamente.* The fires never go out” (61).

In *Austerlitz* we hear from Great-Uncle Alphonso, the naturalist, who provides the insight, during a discourse on the naïve decadence of moths, that the ideal body temperature, shared by moths, all mammals, dolphins and tunny fish, was thirty-six degrees, and “that all mankind’s misfortunes were connected with its departure at some point in time from that norm, and with the slightly feverish condition in which we constantly found ourselves” (92). For Santner, this excess of heat has a correlate in the perversity of human sexuality, in “the fact that the life of man is defined by *drive destiny* rather than *instinct*” (105). I do not interpret this example as having the same consequences as Santner, despite the fact that Sebald clearly invites such an interpretation by describing the human condition as a departure from a norm. However, the more compelling aspect of Sebald’s prose, with regard to the treatment of humans and non-humans, relates to the sympathy that exists between them (recalling Whitehead’s definition of “sympathy”: “feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another”). This sympathy need not be ethical or cognitive. In fact, the history traced in *The Rings of Saturn* often instances decidedly unethical and unthinking aspects of sympathy. What interests me, and what I think constitutes Sebald’s preoccupation, is the idea that we can perceive what Alphonso Lingis calls the “inner spaces” of things and creatures (55): that we might feel, be changed, or be convulsed by emotional warmth or energy without perceiving it as something exclusively outside of us. The comfort Thomas Abrams derives from ducks is to do with just such a kind of inexplicable sympathy, which frustrates our efforts to
determine, through thinking, exactly what it is. Despite their autonomy, the ducks are as much part of him as anything else. Likewise, the fires lit long ago still persist within the artefacts we create and continue to use today—a fact which makes little sense from an empirical perspective that equates perception with what is clearly and controllably present to the senses. It is this metaphysical perspective that informs the narrator’s wondering at the “nebulous” dream reality in which all things are, in some sense, related.

**Section V: Clouds and Bird Flight, a Question of Perspective**

Sebald investigates the way things and events change as we describe them. We are familiar with this sense of continual change as we attempt to hold still the fading fragments of a dream or a distant memory. This sense is crucially tied to questions around temporality and perspective. *The Rings of Saturn* is populated by beings and episodes defined by transience and mutability. These might include naturally occurring forms, such as cloudbanks and bird flight, creatures such as the silkworm and the *Bombyx mori*, in addition to mythical or quasi-mythical beings, such as Baldanders (23) and the demons who possess the mad Gadarene (66-67).

There is also a more general, non-specific sense of the world characterised by perpetual change. When the narrator makes an observation, for example, he follows it into a partially different past, and then, as though continuing to describe the past, moves back to describing the present, which has now altered slightly. This gives the reader a sense by which they can appreciate the way different events and things (events being merely time-filled things) emerge from each other.

An instructive example of Sebald’s synchronising a series amorphous events with the suggestive movement of thought comes in chapter IV, while the narrator is staring out to sea in Southwold:

> I gazed farther and farther out to sea, to where the darkness was thickest and where there extended a cloudbank of the most curious shape, which I could barely make out any longer, the rearward view, I presume, of the storm that had broken over Southwold in the late afternoon. For a while, the topmost summit regions of this massif, dark as ink, glistened like the icefields of the Caucasus, and
as I watched the glare fade I remembered that years before, in a dream, I had once walked the length of a mountain range just as remote and just as unfamiliar.88 (79)

Sebald’s description of the cloudbank is the externalisation of the perceptual processes proper to the standpoint of the narrator, and of the event which includes both the narrator and the cloudbank. The cloudbank is barely perceptible and of a “most curious shape”, and in this sense suggests multiple other forms. Similarly, the cloudbank contains aspects of the past. Its obscure “rearward view” refers to and incorporates an earlier storm that broke over Southwold. The narrator orients himself in the world through appealing to the articulate nature of his surrounds. The reticence he often seems to exhibit regarding his own story is supplemented through detailed and suggestive descriptions of where the things get to.

The suggestiveness of the cloudbank, in addition to encapsulating the evolving recent past of which the narrator has been a part, provokes the recollection of a more distant past through its reference to a mountain form that the narrator experienced in a dream. There is a layering of perceptual filters here, each seemingly autonomous from and connected to the narrator. The cloud refers to a dream that refers to the narrators past, which refers back to the present perceptual event, of which it is already part. As with dreams and dream logic, clouds and cloudiness are attributable to both the content of the narrative and the perceptual principle that defines what the narrator feels more generally and the way we, the readers, respond to Sebald’s prose.

The narrator’s past persists in the forms of trace organisation present in his surrounds. This gives Sebald’s memory work a spontaneous, immediate feel. As I discussed in chapter 2, Long attributes this to the narrator’s “archival consciousness” (93). What Long highlights is how private, subjective memories (of the narrator or, in the case of Austerlitz, the protagonist) are substituted by external forms of organisation. For Long, these forms tend to be coextensive with Western modernity: things like museums, collections, libraries, and documents of all kinds, photographs

88 In the first chapter of The Emigrants, the narrator refers to the Caucasus, as seen in Werner Herzog’s film Kaspar Hauser, where the continuum between dream world and reality is also invoked: “Kaspar, to the delight of his mentor, was distinguishing for the first time between dream and reality, beginning his account with the words: I was in a dream, and in my dream I saw the Caucasus” (The Emigrants, 17). In the context of the narrative, the dream’s difference from reality seems secondary; after all, the narrator is remembering a film which depicts an image which in turn reminds him of something (“the sails of those wind pumps of Lasithi”), “which in reality” he has never seen (18). The point being that our notion of reality is informed by dreams, imaginings, documents and so on, and only through a move of abstraction do we separate these realms.
being the most prominent. While Long’s interpretation is certainly apt, he pays little heed to the forms of organisation named in this chapter, primarily dreams, clouds, labyrinths and flight-paths, forms less to do with historical specificity than with a kind of metaphysical creativity.

What Long does discern, in his chapter on *Austerlitz*, is that Sebald is attuned to the “radically relative nature of temporality” (154); that events produce their own temporal coordinates; and that as the writer-percipient accounts for or traces these coordinates, they become inexorably implicated in their observations. There is thus no hard and fast distinction between observer and observed.

This is abundantly clear in chapter III, when the narrator, yet again taking pause to look out over the ocean, finds himself being led into his past by the flight-paths of sand martins:

As these things were going through my mind I was watching the sand martins darting to and fro over the sea. Ceaselessly emitting their tiny cries they sped along their flight-paths faster than my eyes could follow them. At earlier times, in the summer evenings during my childhood when I had watched from the valley as swallows circled in the last night, still in great numbers in those days, I would imagine that the world was still held together by the courses they flew through the air. (67)

The observed world and the world of the mind are suggestive of each other. The allusive characterisation of the thoughts going through the narrator’s mind as “these things” resonates with the description of the sand martins “darting to and fro”, “Ceaselessly emitting their tiny cries”. As with the cloudbank in the previous example, the narrator’s mind, or his dream, is actually contained within, and occupied by, the external world he is moved to describe. Rather than tell us the specificity of his childhood memories, rather than locate himself in a time and place and provide his memories with a context, the narrator prefers to emphasise certain suggestive aspects of his perceived surrounds. We get the sense that the immediately perceived world is defined by its reference to other places not accessible in any clear and distinct fashion. Events contain the distributions of other events which manifest as traces, and from these we arrive at our sense of the temporal. As in the previous example, it seems that without the chance observation the narrator would have lacked the necessary means to produce the memory. Not unlike the amorphous cloud form, which contains the similarly amorphous memory of the dream, the unseen traces of the birds here provide
the narrator with a temporal continuity which, nonetheless, is always on the verge of disappearing, of being consumed by some other form, perhaps even the emptiness of the sky.

James Wood cites this passage as representative of Sebald’s memory work, distinct from that of Proust. Wood claims that:

The narrator mourns not only for what is lost (the swallows), but for what he has had to leave out of his narrative. All that has disappeared from his life is what has also disappeared from the narrative. This is why neither we, nor he, can make sense of these backward glances. Reticence becomes the very stutter of mourning. This resembles a careful attenuation, almost a reversal, of Proustian retrospect: in Sebald, we are defined by the terrible abundance of our lacunae. And so the narrator who tells us that as a child he believed that the world was held together by the courses the birds took through the air, is now simply holding his life together by the strange courses his sentences take. [italics in original] (Wood, 1999: 280)

The immediacy of the written word is essential in Sebald conveying a sense of coherence—whether that be of a distant memory, or a presently observed happening, the important thing is the capacity of the medium to elicit a world “held together”, or more exactly, to elicit the process by which the world becomes “held together” and then breaks apart. Wood is suggesting that Sebald’s narrator exhibits an awareness of his own ontological fictionality, which is confronting considering the nearness of Sebald’s books to autobiography. The opacity and suggestiveness of the medium in which we experience the narrator’s memories defines, in part, the content of his memories.

In his reading of Vertigo, Massimo Leone remarks on the “juxtaposition of different planes of the framework of narrative enunciation”, and the “multiplicity of exterior objects and personae” which crowd Sebald’s narratives, creating “complex hierarchies of narrative levels” (94). Each different plane of reference, through what Marina Warner describes as “inherent synecdoche” (14), functions as something like a proof. What is interpreted thematically as amnesia functions formally to produce an internal reference, which, in a sense, ends up becoming a thematic aim of the narrative: the narrator, like all narrators in some sense, writes in order to prove his existence—not as a human but as a narrator. What we discover in reading Sebald is

89 As Leone points out: “Enunciation is the theoretical framework of space, time and actors constructed by a text (for example, through the choice of adverbs, the morphology of verbs, the use of pronouns)” (101, fn. 6).
that such a task equates with attending to the existence, or the internal complexity, of other events or things.

The narrator’s observation of the sand martins, an exemplary digression, continues beyond his appeal—their appeal—to a childhood memory:

The sand martins, I now saw, were flying solely at the level that extended from the top of the cliff where I was sitting out into empty space. Not one of them climbed higher or dived lower, to the water below them. Whenever they came towards me, fast as bullets, some seemed to vanish right beneath my feet, as if into the very ground. I went to the edge of the cliff and saw that they had dug their nesting holes in the topmost layer of clay, one beside the other. I was thus standing on perforated ground, as it were, which might have given way at any moment. (67-68)

The initial space or atmosphere that the sand martins occupied has now shifted from the narrator’s past, where swallows darted about in a similar way, back to the present—“I now saw”—to an obscure perspective on which the narrator stands. Sebald invokes the importance of solid ground with regard to what is essential for a stable observation. What we discover is that the supposedly stable standpoint of the narrator is in fact “perforated”, shifty, inhabited by other perspectives.

Certain of Sebald’s narrative peculiarities can be illuminated when read alongside the remarks of artist and architect Herb Greene, whose recently published book *Painting the Mental Continuum: Perception and Meaning in the Making*, deploys Whiteheadian concepts in order to makes sense of the complexities of image-making and interpretation. Greene recounts his experience of visiting Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unity Temple and Coonley House, noting how these “seminal works” capture a sense of space extending “beyond what the viewer can see in one position” (45). According to Greene, “This suggests a sense of immanence in which the seen is charged with causality stemming from the unseen, as if the meaning of the forms in sight depends on continuity and elaboration from implied features in the extensive space beyond immediate view” (45). Greene’s mention of “implied features” and of the causal efficacy of “the unseen” speaks to the way Sebald characterises the relationship between his narrator and the perceived things that continually and constitutively unsettle his perspective.

While the thematic staples of Sebald’s narratives receive much focus from critics, what perhaps deserves more attention is the unique way he uses the conventions of a first-person narrator to create a reading experience that performs the interaction
between percipient and event. As suggested by the prominence of the labyrinth motif within, and the labyrinthine poetics of, *The Rings of Saturn*, the enunciative position, or suggested conceit, is always situated within a thicket of equivalent competing possibilities, and is perennially disoriented in this sense.

The narrator is continually looking for things with which to situate his account or his standpoint. An obvious example occurs just prior to the episode involving the sand martins, when the narrator notes the presence of a single sailing boat out on the ocean: “Out on the leaden-coloured sea a sailing boat kept me company, or rather, it seemed to me as if it were motionless and I myself, step by step, were making as little progress as that invisible spirit aboard his unmoving barque” (65-66). After he gets distracted by a herd of swine gathered in a paddock nearby, the narrator again looks out to sea and notes: “All of a sudden, the boat, which for so long had not moved, was gone” (66). This reminds us of the different temporal trajectories by which things operate, and that each perspective, paradigmatically here the narrator’s, is constituted in reference to other events and things that are continually appearing and disappearing.

Something similar happens in chapter VII when the narrator becomes entangled in the labyrinthine gorse of Dunwich Heath. He notes the presence, in retrospect, of “a most peculiar glass-domed observation tower” that “presented itself time and again from a quite different angle, now close to, now further off, now to my left and now to my right, and indeed”, continues the narrator, “at one point the lookout tower, in a sort of castling move had got itself, in no time at all, from one side of the building to the other, so that instead of seeing the actual villa I was seeing its mirror image” (172). In such a way, Sebald frequently evokes the feeling that it is the narrator who is subject to the gaze, or the perceptual potency, of his surrounding environment. The narrator’s lostness, which is beautifully evoked in this episode, is coextensive with an onrush of multiple perspectives that he attempts to arrange into a meaningful map. Due to the confusing terrain and his physically experienced loss of stability, the narrator remarks that he is forced to “make mental notes of even the slightest shift in perspective” (172). Although Sebald here dramatises the narrator’s experience of lostness, what the reader is presented with in his prose is a subtle account of the way these slight shifts are incorporated, giving us an intricate and evolving sense of how perceptual events both imperceptibly organise, and become organised by, our conscious experience.
The narrator’s perceptual instability is identifiable by a specific experience of the surrounding landscape: “In the end I was overcome by a feeling of panic. The low, leaden sky; the sickly violet hue of the heath clouding the eye; the silence, which rushed in the ears like the sound of the sea in a shell; the flies buzzing about me—all this became oppressive and unnerving” (172). The perceptual dimness is, at the same time, an experience of multiplicity and disorganisation; the paradoxical “rush” of the silence and “the flies buzzing” give us a sense of the narrator losing his sense of internal coherence, and becoming dispersed within his seemingly chaotic surrounds. What is important here is the way the narrator becomes implicated in the perspectives on which he attempts to gain a stable vantage. He becomes bogged down in the ground in which internal and external precepts are entrained. He is variously pulled down by, and dispersed through, what he distinguishes.

The book’s closing image, which refers to a mourning ritual in seventeenth-century Holland, reminds us of the central role questions to do with perspective play in Sebald’s prose fiction:

…it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all the canvasses depicting landscapes or people or fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever. (296)

In response to this, the reader might be provoked to wonder whether they have been seeing things from the perspective of this migratory soul all along. Only, perhaps the mourning ritual has not been obeyed, and, rather like the hunter Gracchus in Vertigo, the soul or the undead perspective with which we are presented in The Rings of Saturn is defined by its distraction: sequenced glimpses that instance the paradoxical sense of them being “lost for ever” and continually repeated.

Sebald’s reference to the soul here might seem slightly incongruous considering the secular sentiments that tend to inform his insights elsewhere. How should we read the narrator’s tone here? What is the nature of his interest? Is it ironic? As with so many of Sebald historical observations, this example exhibits a compelling, though vague, analogical resemblance to several other observations. The previously

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90 We might think, for instance, of the acerbic remarks regarding St Mark’s story of the Gadarene in chapter III (66-67).
mentioned reference to the “invisible spirit aboard his unmoving barque” is one example. Perhaps the soul functions for Sebald in the same sense as the other formless forms that populate the pages of *The Rings of Saturn*? Perhaps writing of the soul is a way to invoke the presence of something that is at once constitutive and capricious? While the soul might depart the body, it is unthinkable without some notion of a substrate and always implicates other rituals and objects (silk and mirrors), which in this instance seem to speak of it.

The question of the soul is a way to consider the notion of perspective in a particular way. It invites certain questions and activates a range of potential responses. In referring to the soul, Sebald establishes continuity between modern and non-modern settlements regarding representations of insubstantial and essential forces. He also invites us to consider the sense by which myths continue to inform history, despite the limitations of fact-based characterisations of efficacy. Here we might also think of the remarks at the conclusion of chapter IV, which describe the no less unlikely story of the recorded voice of a “young Viennese lawyer”: “And reportedly it was in this last capacity that he spoke onto 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” (99). As always the choice of detail is clever and the tonal register ambiguous. It’s difficult to determine the extent to which the narrator is committed to the system of ideas in which such activities remain meaningful. However, if irony serves a purpose here it isn’t primarily to devalue one way of accounting for the world in the face of another. Instead, Sebald manages to fulfil the storying telling imperative of capturing things moving on, and the perhaps more puzzling and terrifying sense that they never change.
CONCLUSION
Recently I was beset by an illness of a kind I had not previously experienced. To call it an illness is perhaps misleading, because whenever I listed the symptoms to those who cared to listen, they regarded me with disbelief: “it doesn’t sound like you’re sick to me, it sounds like you’re getting older”, one friend advised. Nonetheless, I remained convinced that the suddenness of these changes in my constitution could only mean that I was sick. I supposed that I’d caught something, my immune system had been breached by some variety of pathogen. The symptoms included a light pain behind the eyes and tiredness throughout the day, but most severe in the evenings and mornings (usually an early riser, I became given to sleeping in). I lacked the desire that I previously possessed to exercise in the evenings; I was increasingly prone to dizzy spells when I stood up; and a host of old injuries (a sore ankle, a broken finger, a ruptured disk in my spine) again resonated with dull pain. And yet I wasn’t experiencing many of the symptoms I associated with the common cold or the flu, which this illness most closely resembled. I was able to concentrate just as well on my work, I had my usual appetite, and I continued to drink and enjoy coffee.

I could, after a fashion, manipulate the presence of the illness through acting in a certain way, doing certain things. Although I didn’t feel like exercising, if I did exercise it would seem, for a while, that I was no longer ill. This characterised my energy levels more generally: it wasn’t that I lacked energy itself, but that I lacked the initial capacity to motivate myself to become energised. I knew what was best for me but no longer thought of it as imperative.

I tested various abstractions that I hoped would best express this anomalous malady. Rather than tell people I was sick (which they would argue against anyway), I thought it more truthful to suggest that I simply didn’t feel myself, or that I was half the man I used to be.

On three occasions over the period of a month the strange feeling all but entirely vanished, only to return again after a day or so.

I began to think about the vast complexity of the human immune system, and the great number of its organs that must be operating smoothly so that we might feel ourselves to be *who we are*, so the expression goes. I began to think about the difference between my internal disturbance and the variety of moods for which we are not inclined to seek a pathological explanation. Indeed, I recalled one occasion while on a solitary holiday in Tunisia, when I began to smoke cigarettes due to the absence of a certain dear acquaintance who was meant to accompany me. I remember that
during this period I felt so unlike myself, intoxicated by this utterly unfamiliar environment, by indulgent feelings of yearning and by my new addiction, that I might as well have been ill or inhabiting a dream. The texture of my experience over the course of that month in Tunisia, like the strange illness to which I was more recently subject, made it seem to me as though I were apprehending the world through an intervening medium, but paradoxically perhaps, this medium emphasised that what I considered to be my normal experience was, in fact, less resonant due to poor training on my part. As the Old General allusively though revealingly remarks to Dr K. in the third chapter of *Vertigo*, it is a “question of specific gravity” (157). In their altered consistency, these slight departures from the norm register something that exemplifies the often unaccounted for happenings, or sense of happening, for which we are continually compelled to seek new forms of expression. As soon as we become preoccupied with anything, we are in a sense changed by it, to the extent that I felt changed by my mysterious illness. I could not escape the idea that my existence testified to the presence of my illness, rather than the other way around. And that I, in a perverse sense, had the duty of singing its praises.

I began to wonder about hypochondria and coenaesthesia, and the extent to which our experience is composed of potentially infinite minor disturbances. How one can never quite predict the complete and sudden change one undergoes as they dive into water and begin to experience that feeling of immersion, as though an entirely new genealogy of thought-object is made available once one experiences that physical change. That the content of one’s thinking might change according to whether one is kneeling or lying down. I also wondered about whether or not any bodily breach had actually occurred. Perhaps something latent within me had become activated due to particular circumstances, its own decisiveness, or both. If so the notion of a pathogenic invader wouldn’t make as much sense. Maybe something had departed my body?

It is perhaps the *having* of an illness that tempts one to construct a mythology or reason concerning its presence. Why me? How has this happened? What does it mean now that I am sick? These questions are felt as part of the illness. I recall undertaking some fanciful speculation regarding an untimely outbreak of seborrheic dermatitis, which I experienced during what I saw as a period crucial to the longer-term prospects of a particular romance. In the wake of my failure, I entertained various reasons for the misfortune: maybe the illness was necessary so as to prevent what
would in the end have been a far greater disaster? With precarious conviction, I thought I might be living out a message designed to preserve my solitude.

No matter the absurdity of the reasons one concocts in the face of bad luck, the point remains that pathological explanations are one style amid many. Accounting for the pathological presence of some physically experienced change in one’s constitution does indeed do a great deal of good work. But this does not therefore nullify the other kinds of concern that might develop. In addition to being an experience of difference, illness enables us to appreciate an imperceptible wholeness or unity. This is why, after falling ill, it often seems impossible that one was ever anything else. Of course we know and remember ourselves as healthy, and we suspect a return to health, but nonetheless we receive information from somewhere that this is in fact not the case. The experience of illness is so impeccably complete that our convictions, regarding who we are beyond the present, seem not to matter.

As I have argued on several occasions throughout this thesis, illness is a way of gaining a certain insight into the internal workings of the body. It is a proposition that invites a certain kind of questioning—or the illness itself might be thought of as a question that invites certain propositional responses. If Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) provides us with pictures of the inside of bones that look like oddly formed sponges, our experience of illness might also offer a certain way of imagining the body’s internal workings. An illness might be regarded as something that comes in-between subject and object, something which facilitates a particular perceptual capacity; unfolds a system that grasps and modifies vague emotional undercurrents and rarely distinguished aspects. An illness might be an image, not in the invasive visual form, familiar to us in scans and x-rays, but something in the manner of an “experimental system”—as proposed by Rheinberger in the study from which I quoted in the previous chapter.

I continued to regard my illness as kind of conceit for which it was my responsibility to obtain an outline: perhaps my existence would be forever altered, perhaps I would no longer desire to exercise to the point of exhaustion or joke with friends well into the evening. Perhaps my sense of humour would be forever changed, and perhaps I would seek out a different variety of acquaintance that appealed to this more subdued but no less aware variety of myself. I thought about alternate worlds, or alternate genealogies of event, in which the experience of a sickness and the experience of a dream might share the same conceptual matrix—how a dream or a
nightmare might persist within us the next day such that we might account for its presence as altering our constitution to the same degree as an illness does. I also thought about words like ‘vitality’, ‘spirit’, ‘demeanour’, ‘inclination’, ‘energy’, ‘fitness’, and the extent to which these forces were constants in our lives, or how they underwent subtle, often imperceptible modification. I recalled a poet who described how something within him immediately changed when his father died, how without even thinking he inhabited the idea that he was next in line, and how this had irrevocably changed his way of experiencing the world. For some reason confusing ancestoral legend with a physical disturbance enabled me to better understand the different efficacious presences of which experience is composed.

I thought of Austerlitz’s insight, to which I have already referred: “We take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious” (134). Or, as Whitehead remarks, apropos of perception in the mode of causal efficacy:

Those periods in our lives—when the perception of the pressure from a world of things with characters in their own right, characters mysteriously moulding our own natures, becomes strongest—those periods are the product of a reversion to some primitive state. Such a reversion occurs when either some primitive functioning of the human organism is unusually heightened, or some considerable part of our habitual sense perception is unusually enfeebled. (Symbolism, 44)

The above comments should not be taken to mean that the experience of illness and its relationship to our “primitive functioning” are necessarily without intellectual awareness. Nor do I wish to recommend that the activity of the human organism is necessarily best accounted for as pathological. But the characteristics of illness, of a particular experience of illness, might awaken one to a way of sensing things that tends to be neglected when we direct our perceptual energy simply outwards, rather than outwards and inwards.91

There is a reason why sicknesses, grief, love and travel are all suggestive experiences concerning our inclination to tell stories, and it is attributable to the particular kind of knowledge they transfer to us. As I have explicated throughout this thesis, it is a mistake to limit perceptual experience to what we are able to distinguish consciously through our senses. Our bodies connect us to a more fundamental variety

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91 On this score see, in particular, Meyer on Wordsworth’s poetry, which I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis (2001: 34-40).
of perception that remains overlooked each time we make the mistake of equating experience with its clearly definable aspects.

Although we do not identify ourselves by an illness, it might provide an outline of who we are as a kind of activity. The way a mild illness or a new place reconfigures our sense of the real is attributable to the feeling of a significant change in our internal activity. When we become sick, or when we experience anything such that we might be struck by an unfathomable change within ourselves, we gain an understanding of what an event might be—at once contingent, complete and in excess of those things we are tempted to describe ourselves as possessing. As Stengers suggests in her book on Whitehead: “the standpoint does not belong to you unless it is in your quality as occupant, but it is what occupies you, much more than you occupy it” (65). We become what we are preoccupied with, and this constitutes the experimental ground on which we experience the world as creative. Unattended to regions become vivid as we follow the haze of our illness, the suggestive outline of a fossil, our befuddled love, the movement of honey, particular addiction, an eroding coastline, apprehensive foreignness, the outline of a cloud…

To conclude, I want to make what might seem like a few incongruous comparisons, which relate to the way activity is conceptualised and expressed. One example is non-specific in terms of its narrative detail and relates to the poetics of a particular phrase. Another is an observation to which Sebald refers in an essay. The way the observation is framed in the essay suggests it was important for Sebald. The final example is from another essay—perhaps the unfinished beginning to what might have been a larger Seballdian project. Due to the fact that “activity” is a potentially vague notion it’s easy to lose one’s way; the comparisons can become trivial.

I titled this thesis “At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied” because I take this to be more than just a phatic expression that links up substantial narrative detail. The phrase occurs at the beginning of The Rings of Saturn. It encapsulates the equivocal purposefulness that characterises what Sebald’s narrator notices in many different contexts: in the growth of crystals, the naughtiness of cockatoos, the loquaciousness and excitability of certain poets, and the virtuous tricks of circus performers and cooks. Thus the phrase bears witness to a correspondence between poetic expression and narrative detail. This correspondence is significant in itself. As I have stressed often, Sebald achieves a remarkable coherence between the poetic,
graphic and semantic aspects of his prose. “At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied” is a phrase that is at once reticent, obstinate and mannered. It suggests that all prior happenings are in a sense equivalent to this particular moment of speech or of emphasis around which one presently condenses. At all events: whatever may have happened is presently exemplified by such and such. Sebald’s tense structure here testifies to a kind of warped coherence. One might read this as: one perspective having moved on from another that now establishes its difference; I was preoccupied then, now I am not. Or, by contrast, it is the event of looking back that fosters the preoccupation: I am preoccupied with or in looking back. The ambiguity here is instructive regarding the forms of order we create so as to account for a sense of time having moved on and still persisting, and the relationship between modes of focus and activity.

The second example might seem a deranged outgrowth of the first. In his essay “Campo Santo”, Sebald refers to the mourning rituals of the Corsican voceratrici, noting what anthropologists often identify as a paradoxical overlap between the seeming lack of “genuine emotion” and the trance-like convulsions and passions peculiar to these rituals (26-28). However, as Sebald notes, this apparent paradox is perhaps not all that exceptional:

In truth, of course, there is no discrepancy between such calculation and a genuine grief which actually makes the mourners seem beside themselves, for fluctuation between the expression of a deeply felt sorrow, which can sound like a choking fit, and the aesthetically—even cunningly—modulated manipulation of the audience to whom that grief is displayed, has perhaps been the most typical characteristic of our severely disturbed species at every stage of civilisation. (27)

Typically, Sebald invokes the spectre of human suffering, that of a pathological condition, in order to identify something that is perhaps common to the relationship between thinking (here, “calculation”) and the activity it exemplifies. The dance of the voceratrici is a technique that testifies to the implication of trickery and truthfulness. It is a sympathetic and delusional connectedness to the recently departed. I propose that there is a certain homology between what is expressed in this anthropological observation and the previously mentioned phrase that I’m claiming as something of a Sebaldian signature. The recently departed are the ghosts of the dead and one’s recent, continuing past. In writing “at all events, in retrospect I became
preoccupied”, Sebald is establishing his connectedness to what the anthropologists name as both calculated and deeply felt, the sense by which purposefulness and perception are found together in a dynamic relation. We thus recognise, the truthfulness of one’s feelings cannot be measured by the extent to which one is passive in the experience of them. Writers make use of grammatical, graphic and lexical forms that testify to a fusion of passivity and activity. Phrases become little rituals, the presence of which we invoke in order to dance or sing along to them.

The last example, taken from the essay “A Little Excursion to Ajaccio”, features the Sebaldian narrator on “a two-week holiday on the island of Corsica” (*Campo Santo*, 3). He wanders the streets, imagining what it might be like to live in the surrounding houses, “occupied to my life’s end solely with the study of time past and passing” (4). I’m content to leave the following remark free from analysis, it seems a fitting place to farewell the Sebald with which I have, at all events, in retrospect become preoccupied:

But since we can none of us really live entirely withdrawn into ourselves, and must all have some more or less significant design in view, my wishful thinking about a few last years with no duties of any kind soon gave way to a need to fill the present afternoon somehow, and so I found myself, hardly knowing how I came there, in the entrance hall to the Musée Fesch, with notebook and pencil and ticket in my hand. (4)
List of Works Cited


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