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The Lists of W. G. Sebald

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Since the late 1990s, W. G. Sebald's innovative contribution to the genre of prose fiction has been the source of much academic scrutiny. His books *Vertigo*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* have provoked interest from diverse fields of inquiry: visual communication (Kilbourn; Patt; Zadokski), trauma studies (Denham and McCulloh; Schmitz), and travel writing (Blackler; Zisselsberger). His work is also claimed to be a bastion for both modernist and postmodernist approaches to literature and history writing (Bere; Fuchs and Long; Long). This is in addition to numerous "guide to" type books, such as Mark McCulloh's *Understanding Sebald*, Long and Whitehead's *W. G. Sebald—A Critical Companion*, and the comprehensive *Saturn's Moons: A W. G. Sebald Handbook*. Here I have only mentioned works available in English. I should point out that Sebald wrote in German, the country of his birth, and as one would expect much scholarship dealing with his work is confined to this language.

In this article I focus on what is perhaps Sebald's prototypical work, *The Rings of Saturn*. Of all Sebald's prose fictional works *The Rings of Saturn* seems the example that best exhibits his innovative literary forms, including the use of lists. This book is the work of an author who is purposefully and imaginatively concerned with the nature of his vocation: *what is it to be a writer?* Crucially, he addresses this question not only from the perspective of a subject facing an existential crisis, but from the perspective of the documents created by writers. His works demonstrate a concern with the enabling role documents play in the thinking and writing process; how, for example, pen and paper are looped in with our capacity to reason in certain ways. Despite taking the form of fictional narratives, his books are as much motivated by a historical interest in how ideas and forms of organisation are transmitted, and how they evolve as part of an ecology; how humans become articulate within their surrounds, according to the contingencies of specific epochs and places. The Sebald critic J. J. Long accounts for this in some part in his description "archival consciousness," which recommends that conscious experience is not simply located in the mind of a knowing, human subject, but is rather distributed between the subject and different technologies (among which writing and archives are exemplary).

The most notable peculiarity of Sebald's books lies in their abundant use of "non-syntactical" kinds of writing or inscription. My use of the term "non-syntactical" has its origins in the anthropological work of Jack Goody, who emphasises the importance of list making and tabulation in pre-literate or barely literate cultures. In Sebald's texts, kinds of non-syntactical writing include lists, photographic images, tables, signatures, diagrams, maps, stamps, docketts and sketches. As I stress throughout this article, Sebald's shifts between syntactical and non-syntactical forms of writing allows him to build up highly complex schemes of internal reference. Massimo Leone identifies something similar, when he notes that Sebald "orchestrates a multiplicity of voices and text-types in order to produce his own coherent discourse" (91). The play between multiplicity and coherence is at once a thematic and poetic concern for Sebald. This is to say, his texts are formal experiments with these contrasting tendencies, in addition to discussing specific historical situations in which they feature.

The list is perhaps Sebald's most widely used and variable form of non-syntactical writing, a key part of his formal and stylistic peculiarity. His lengthy sentences frequently spill over into catalogues and inventories, and the entire structure of his narratives is list-like. Discrete episodes accumulate alongside each other, rather than following a narrative arc where episodes of suspenseful gravity overshadow the significance of minor events.

The Rings of Saturn details the travels of Sebald's trademark, nameless, first person narrator, who recounts his trek along the Suffolk coastline, from Lowestoft to Ditchingham, about two years after the event. From the beginning, the narrative is framed as an effort to organise a period of time that lacks a coherent and durable form, a period of time that is in pieces, fading from the narrator's memory. However, the movement from the chaos of forgetting to the comparatively distinct and stable details of the remembered present does not follow a continuum. Rather, the past and present are both constituted by the force of memory, which is continually crystallising and dissolving. Each event operates according to its own specific arrangement of emphasis and forgetting. Our experience of memory in the present, or recollective memory, is only one kind of memory. Sebald is concerned with a more pervasive kind of remembering, which includes the vectorial existence of non-conscious, non-human perceptual events; memory as expressed by crystals, tree roots, glaciers, and the nested relationship of fuel, fire, smoke, and ash.

The Rings of Saturn is composed of ten chapters, each of which is outlined in table form at the book's beginning. The first chapter appears as: "In hospital—Obituary—Odyssey of Thomas Browne's skull—Anatomy lecture—Levitation—Quincunx—Fabled creatures—Urn burial." *The Rings of Saturn* is of course hardly *exceptional* in its use of this device. Rather, it is *exemplary* concerning the repeated emphasis on the tension between syntactical and non-syntactical forms of writing, among which this chapter breakdown is included. Sebald continually uses the conventions of bookmarking in subtle though innovative ways. Each of these horizontally linked and divided indices might put the reader in mind of Thomas Browne's urns, time capsules from the past, the unearthing of which is discussed in the book's first chapter (25). The chapter outlines (and the urns) 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.

As I have already stressed, Sebald is a writer concerned with forms of organisation. His works account for a diverse range of organisational forms, some of which instance an overt, chronological, geometric, or metrical manipulation of space and time, such as grids, star shapes, and Greenwich Mean Time. This contrasts with comparatively suggestive, insubstantial, mutable forms, including various meteorological phenomena such as cloudbanks and fog, dust and sand, and as exemplified in narrative form by the haphazard, distracted assemblage of events featured in dreams or dream logic. The relationship between these supposedly opposing tendencies is, however, more complex and paradoxical than might at first glance appear. As Sebald warily reminds us in his essay "A Little Excursion to Ajaccio," despite our wishes to inhabit periods of complete freedom, where we follow our distractions to the fullest possible extent, we nonetheless "must all have some more or less significant design in view" (Sebald, *Campo* 4). It is not so much that we must choose, absolutely, between form and formlessness. Rather, the point is to understand that some seemingly inevitable forms are in fact subject to contingencies, which certain uses deliberately or ignorantly mask, and that simplicity and intricacy are often co-dependent.

Richard T. Gray is a Sebald critic who has picked up on the element in Sebald's work that suggests a tension between different forms of organisation. In his article "Writing at the Roche Limit," Gray notes that Sebald's tendency to emphasise

the decadent aspects of human and natural history “is continually counterbalanced by an insistence on order and by often extremely subtle forms of organization” (40). Rather than advancing the thesis that Sebald is exclusively against the idea of systematisation or order, Gray argues that *The Rings of Saturn*

models in its own textual make-up an alternative approach to the cognitive order(ing) of things, one that seeks to counter the natural tendency toward entropic decline and a fall into chaos by introducing constructive forces that inject a modicum of balance and equilibrium into the system as a whole. (Gray 41)

Sebald’s concern with the contrasting energies exemplified by different forms extends to his play with syntactical and non-syntactical forms of writing. He uses lists to add contrast to his flowing, syntactically intricate sentences. The achievement of his work is not the exclusive privileging of either the list form or the well-composed sentence, but in providing contexts whereby the reader can appreciate subtle modulations between the two, thus experiencing a more dynamic and complex kind of narrative time. His works exhibit an astute awareness of the fact that different textual devices command different experiences of temporality, and our experience of temporality in good part determines our metaphysics.

Here I consider two lists featured in *The Rings of Saturn*, one from the first chapter, and one from the last. Each shows contrasting tendencies concerning systems of organisation. Both are attributable to the work of Thomas Browne, “who practiced as a doctor in Norwich in the seventeenth century and had left a number of writings that defy all comparison” (Sebald, *Rings* 9). *The Rings of Saturn* is in part a dialogue across epochs with the sentiments expressed in Browne’s works, which, according to Bianca Theisen, preserve a kind of reasoning that is lost in “the rationalist and scientific embrace of a devalued world of facts” (Theisen 563).

The first list names the varied “animate and inanimate matter” in which Browne identifies the quincunx structure, a lattice like arrangement of five points and intersecting lines. The following phenomena are enumerated in the text:

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. (Sebald, *Rings* 20-21)

Ostensibly quoting from Browne, Sebald begins the next sentence, “Examples might be multiplied without end” (21). The compulsion to list, or the compulsiveness expressed by listing, is expressed here in a relationship of dual utility with another, dominant or overt, kind of organisational form: the quincunx. It is not the utility or expressiveness of the list itself that is at issue—at least in the version of Browne’s work preserved here by Sebald.

In *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, Long notes the historical correspondences and divergences between Sebald and Michel Foucault (2007). Long interprets Browne’s quincunx as exemplifying a “hermeneutics of resemblance,” whereby similarities among diverse phenomena are seen as providing proof of “the universal oneness of all things” (33). This contrasts with the idea of a “pathological nature, autonomous from God,” which, according to Long, informs Sebald’s transformation of Browne into “an avatar of distinctly modern epistemology” (38). Long follows Foucault in noting the distinction between Renaissance and modern epistemology, a distinction in good part due to the experimental, inductive method, the availability of statistical data, and probabilistic reasoning championed in the latter epoch (Whitehead; Hacking).

In the book’s final chapter, Sebald includes a list from Browne’s imaginary library, the “Musæum Clausium.” In contrast to the above list, here Sebald seems to deliberately problematise any efforts to suggest an abstract uniting principle. There is no evident reason for the togetherness of the discrete things, beyond the mere fact that they happen to be gathered, hypothetically, in the text (Sebald, *Rings* 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 coast 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. (Sebald, *Rings* 272-73)

Unlike the previous example attributed to Browne, here the list coheres according to the tensions of its own coincidences. Sebald uses the list to create spontaneous organisations in which history is exhibited as a complex mix of fact and fantasy. 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 excluded from, this process.

Lists move us to puzzle over the criteria that their togetherness implies. They might be used in the service of a specific paradigm, or they might suggest an imaginable but as yet unknown kind of systematisation; a

specific kind of relationship, or simply the possibility of a relationship. Take, for example, the list-like accumulation of architectural details in the following description of the decadent Sommerleyton Hall, featured in chapter II:

There were drawing rooms and winter gardens, spacious halls and verandas. A corridor might end in a ferny grotto where fountains ceaselessly plashed, and bowered passages criss-crossed beneath the dome of a fantastic mosque. Windows could be lowered to open the interior onto the outside, and inside the landscape was replicated on the mirror walls. Palm houses and orangeries, the lawn like green velvet, the baize on the billiard tables, the bouquets of flowers in the morning and retiring rooms and in the majolica vases on the terrace, the birds of paradise and the golden peasants on the silken tapestries, the goldfinches in the aviaries and the nightingales in the garden, the arabesques in the carpets and the box-edged flower beds—all of it interacted in such a way that one had the illusion of complete harmony between the natural and the manufactured. (Sebald, *Rings* 33-34)

This list shifts emphasis away from preconceived distinctions between the natural and the manufactured through the creation of its own unlikely harmony. It tells us something important about the way perception and knowledge is ordered in Sebald's prose. Each encounter, or historically specific situation, is considered as though it were its own microworld, its own discrete, synecdochic realisation of history. Rather than starting from the universal or the meta-level and scaling down to the local, Sebald arranges historically peculiar examples that suggest a variable, contrasting and dynamic metaphysics, a motley arrangement of ordering systems that each aspire to but do not command universal applicability.

In a comparable sense, Browne's sepulchral urns of his 1658 work *Urn Burial*, which feature in chapter I, are time capsules that seem to create their own internally specific kind of organisation:

The cremated remains in the urns are examined closely: the ash, the loose teeth, some long roots of quitch, or dog's grass wreathed about the bones, and the coin intended for the Elysian ferryman. Browne records other objects known to have been placed with the dead, whether as ornament or utensil. His catalogue includes a variety of curiosities: the circumcision knives of Joshua, the ring which belonged to the mistress of Propertius, an ape of agate, a grasshopper, three-hundred golden bees, a blue opal, silver belt buckles and clasps, combs, iron pins, brass plates and brazen nippers to pull away hair, and a brass Jews harp that last sounded on the crossing over black water. (Sebald, *Rings* 25-26)

Regardless of our beliefs concerning the afterlife, these items, preserved across epochs, solicit a sense of wonder as we consider what we might choose for company on our "last journey" (25). In death, the human body is reduced to a condition of an object or thing, while the objects that accompany the corpse seem to acquire a degree of potency as remnants that transcend living time. Life is no longer the paradigm through which to understand purpose. In their very difference from living things these objects command our fascination. Eric Santner coins the term "undeadness" to name the significance of this non-living agency in Sebald's prose (Santner xx). Santner's study places Sebald in a lineage of German-Jewish writers, including Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and Paul Celan, whose understanding of "the human" depends crucially on the concept of "the creature" or "creatureliness" (Santner 38-41).

Like the list of items contained within Sommerleyton Hall, the above list accounts for a context in which ornament and utensil, nature and culture, are read according to their differentiated togetherness, rather than opposition. Death, it seems, is a universal leveller, or at least a different dimension in which symbol and function appear to coincide.

Perhaps it is the unassuming and convenient nature of lists that make them enduring objects of historical interest. Lists are a form of writing to which we appeal for immediate mnemonic assistance. They lack the artifice of a sentence. While perhaps not as interesting in the present that is contemporary with their usefulness (a trip to the supermarket), with time lists acquire credibility due to the intimacy they share with mundane, diurnal concerns—due to the fact that they were, once upon a time, so useful. The significance of lists arrives anachronistically, when we look back and wonder *what people were really up to*, or what our own concerns were, relatively free from fanciful, stylistic adornment.

Sebald's democratic approach to different forms of writing means that lists sit alongside the esteemed poetic and literary efforts of Joseph Conrad, Algernon Swinburne, Edward Fitzgerald, and François René de Chateaubriand, all of whom feature in *The Rings of Saturn*. His books make the exclusive differences between literary and non-literary kinds of writing less important than the sense of dynamism that is elicited through a play of contrasting kinds of syntactical and non-syntactical writing.

The book's closing chapter includes a revealing example that expresses these sentiments. After tracing over a natural history of silk, with a particular focus on human greed and naivety, the narrative arrives at a "pattern book" that features strips of colourful silk kept in "the small museum of Strangers Hall" (Sebald, *Rings* 283). The narrator notes that the silks arranged in this book "were of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds" (283). This effervescent declamation continues after a double page photograph of the pattern book, which is described as a "catalogue of samples" and "leaves from the only true book which none of our textual and pictorial works can even begin to rival" (286). Here we witness Sebald's inclusive and variable understanding as to *the kinds of thing a book, and writing, can be*. The fraying strips of silk featured in the photograph are arranged one below the other, in the form of a list. They are surrounded by ornate handwriting that, like the strips of silk, seems to fray at the edges, suggesting the specific gestural event that occasioned the moment of their inscription—something which tends to be excluded in printed prose.

Sebald's remarks here are not without a characteristic irony ("the only true book"). However, in the greater context of the narrative, this comment suggests an important inclination. Namely, that there is much scope yet for innovative literary forms that capture the nuances and complexity of collective and individual histories. And that writing always includes, though to varying degrees obscures, contrasting tensions shared among syntactical and non-syntactical elements, including material and gestural contingencies. Sebald's works remind us of what potentials might lay ahead for books if the question of *what writing can be* is asked continually as part of a writer's enterprise.

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