

Hollowed Out:
The Traumatized Flesh of W.G. Sebald's Prose Style
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Abstract

W.G. Sebald is frequently acknowledged as a writer of trauma fiction, but when conversations veer toward *what* trauma his works refer to—the traumatic referent—critics fail to reach a consensus over what this referent comprises. This thesis denies the conflation of referent with trauma in Sebald’s prose fictions, and collapses the commonly held presumption in the field of psychoanalytic literature that if we excavate the referent, then we have elucidated the trauma. As such I provide an alternative “surface” schematic for interpreting Sebald’s works, one that sees the experience of *being traumatized*—separate entirely from the original *trauma*—as a permanent condition, a fundamental background noise that emanates from the prose style, rather than the content.

The introduction will situate the Sebaldian critical corpus as engaging in the psychoanalytic trauma theory first originated by Sigmund Freud: that trauma arises from a single, identifiable source, and finding the source will “cure” the trauma. I argue against this critical mode due to its exclusionary nature and advocate for a looser methodology that follows the “surface” of the text instead of probing its symptoms for hidden meanings, and situate my reading strategy as belonging to a family of literary techniques advocated by Stephen Marcus and Sharon Best in a 2009 issue of *Representations* called “surface reading.” Through this critical mode, I suggest that Sebald is someone less concerned with finding traumatic origins and more with the untethering of these origins from the experience of being traumatized.

Following the introduction is a chapter that utilizes Freudian trauma theory to read two passages from *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* and examine why explicit markers in the text destine that reading for failure. I suggest that though Sebald’s characters are certainly *traumatized*, their traumas possess no internal referent—at least not one that can be easily elucidated.

The second chapter examines the condition of being traumatized in relation to temporality by close reading the narrator’s analysis of the Rembrandt painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* in *The Rings of Saturn*. Through this reading, I suggest that Sebald is advocating for an analytical mode that attends to the flesh rather than dissects for hidden meanings beneath it. By drawing a comparison between the vanishing body and the vanishing text, I point out that time appears to mediate the referent’s erasure: the longer we search for the occluded referent, the less likely we are to receive it.

Chapter Three will contend with the mechanism through which the traumatic referent is initially erased from the trauma. I suggest that Ambros Adelwarth’s willing submission to electroshock therapy in *The Emigrants* acts as a metaphor for the unlinking of trauma from being traumatized for all of Sebald’s characters. I also draw attention to the geometrical similarities of the empty shell in Sebald’s traumatized characters, and provide my own ad hoc schematic for reading Sebald’s prose fictions as a function of style and media, rather than content.

The fourth and final chapter looks at a fundamental aspect of Sebald’s prose style: his photography. By focusing on a grainy image of a garden maze in *The Rings of Saturn*, I employ the schematic formed in Chapter Three and discuss how Sebald rewrites Roland Barthes’s traumatic *punctum* not as a quality of the image’s referent, but as a property of the medium. Ultimately I argue that all components of Sebald’s prose style—whether textual or visual—retain the same referent-less, “traumatized” quality.

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Introduction

In the opening chapter of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, we encounter a large painting of a body being cut open: Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, completed in 1632.



Figure 1. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*

Every January, Dr. Tulp gave anatomy lessons to the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons at the Waaggebouw amphitheater that “were not only of the greatest interest to a student of medicine” but were also of considerable fascination to a larger audience “that saw itself as emerging from the darkness into the light” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 12). Rembrandt’s painting depicts one of these public dissections. The body in this particular image was that of Adriaan Adriaanszoon, alias Aris Kindt, a petty thief who “had been hanged for his misdemeanours an hour or so earlier” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 12). In the painting, we see that Dr. Tulp holds a pair of dissecting scissors to the body’s left arm, while the seven surgeons surrounding the corpse look eagerly over Tulp’s shoulder.

At first glance, the physicians in the painting—who crane their heads toward the body with expressions of rigorous concentration—represent an epistemological shift toward seeing the body as a perfect specimen for scientific analysis, objective reasoning, and control. Yet Sebald’s narrator points to a number of inconsistencies in such a reading. To him, though the dissection can on one hand present “a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences,” the spectacle also represents the impossibility of objectively viewing the body via an established scientific dogma (12). The narrator first draws attention to the dissection’s curiously “ceremonial nature”: the surgeons are dressed “in their finest attire,” Dr. Tulp is wearing a hat on his head, and the anatomist “has not begun his dissection by opening the abdomen and removing the intestines ... but has started ... by dissecting the offending hand,” thereby reading this scene as a spectacle of retributive justice (13, 13, 16). Furthermore, the narrator asserts that not a single one of Dr. Tulp’s colleagues has noticed the greenish, prone shape of Kindt’s body, nor the fact that his neck is broken.

If we follow their gaze, we notice it is not even directed at the hand, nor indeed, at anywhere on the body; it is directed just past it to focus on the open anatomical atlas in the right corner. The narrator asserts that, in looking at the atlas, the surgeons are seeing the body as a cartographic image. In their determination to see the complex mass of organs on the table as a coherent, Cartesian system, they neglect to recognize that they are dissecting what was once a living body. This determinedly scientific reading is heightened by the fact that the hand depicted is “grotesquely” out of proportion from the rest of the body, and is anatomically inverted—the opened hand’s directionality, which ought to be the left palm, instead looks like the back of the right hand (16). “In other words,” Sebald’s narrator says, “what we are faced with is a

transposition taken from the anatomical atlas” (16). The hand on the dissecting table appears to have been supplanted by its Cartesian anatomical blueprint.

The effect of these inconsistencies, the narrator says, is that the human body—the flesh—is rendered invisible to the spectators at the dissection scene. He adds: nobody that afternoon in Amsterdam saw the ghastly, green body on the table—not the physicians participating in the dissection, not the audience members sitting in the seats of the amphitheatre, not even Sir Thomas Browne or Rene Descartes, who the narrator says were present at the exhibit. They look toward the anatomical atlas and try to make order of the disruption, but instead end up neglecting the material body—they “disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within” (13). In their attempts to compress the flesh into an easily understandable model of Cartesian rigidity, the scientists have managed to make the body vanish altogether.

I linger on this scene because I see a connection between the critical mass developing around W.G. Sebald’s prose fictions and the mass of surgeons congregated around the dissecting table. Just as the doctors determinedly look at the book when they ought to be looking at the body, many Sebaldian scholars have adopted dissection as an equivalent technique of reading, looking beyond the text in order to find a pattern—a theory—that can represent it. But to take a critical scalpel to anything is to enact a kind of violence on its corpus. In the surgeons’ zealous embrace of an anatomical atlas that ostensibly provides all the answers, they face a real risk of neglecting the material body in front of them; the same, I think, could be said about the Sebaldian “doctors.” I argue that the answer-driven, psychoanalytically-based mode of criticism typically employed while reading Sebald’s works has the reductive tendency to misrepresent the

text. This thesis reads against the critical grain and instead takes the text and prose style at face value.

Though his oeuvre encapsulates only four dizzying prose works, trauma theorists have embraced W.G. Sebald as one of the key writers of contemporary trauma fiction. The characters in his prose fictions evoke a profound sense of displacement and loss. In *The Emigrants* (1996), Sebald explores the lives of four émigrés who commit suicide, whether by lying down on a railroad track or inhaling the dust given off by a painting. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), the unnamed narrator embarks on a walk along the Suffolk coastline and finds himself repeatedly meandering from the path and losing his way; the walk ends in disaster when the narrator succumbs to paralysis and must be hospitalized.¹ In *Austerlitz* (2001), the title character, a refugee from a Czechoslovakian kindertransport who has recently unearthed his Jewish heritage, undergoes several emotional breakdowns when fragmented memories return to him in the form of old photographs and buildings. These symptoms—whether they be the paralysis of limbs, the inability to speak, or a bout of crippling melancholia—bear witness to some indescribable psychological injury. Trauma, from the Greek word for “wound,” τραῦμα, that focalizing “event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation,” has overcome the characters (Whitehead 3).

But what kind of trauma? Both culturally and medically, we have long seen psychological trauma as arising from a single, identifiable disruption. Trauma, in the fundamental, Freudian sense, has a referent: an event so destructive that it ruptures the psyche’s protective shield and sets in motion a catastrophic global reaction in the traumatized individual.

¹ We do not know for certain whether “the English pilgrimage” taken during the course of *The Rings of Saturn* was indeed responsible for the narrator’s paralysis, but this cause-and-effect scenario has been advanced by many critics, including Anne Whitehead, Deane Blackler, and J.J. Long.

The pleasure principle, the tendency for individuals to seek out pleasure and avoid pain, is put out of action. Traumatic neurosis surfaces; painful, compulsively repeated visual recall possesses the individual against his or her will and punctures memory and language. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud says this of shellshocked soldiers suffering from battle nightmares: “The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some ‘daemonic’ power” (Freud 15). Recovery transpires when the traumatic referent is found; psychoanalysts call a patient cured when they find out what the original disruptive event comprised of and how to successfully incorporate that event back into the psyche.

Numerous Sebaldian critics, from J.J. Long to Anne Whitehead to Wolf Lepenies, have adopted this Freudian reading of trauma and sought to find Sebald’s characters’ original traumatic referents.² These referents have ranged from the Holocaust (Whitehead) to the encroaching presence of humans on the natural world (Hawkins) to the troubles of modernity (Long) to political setbacks for the eighteenth century German bourgeoisie (Lepenies). One justification offered for this method of “reading” characters as though they were patients on a psychoanalyst’s couch is its use value in interpreting large-scale historical traumas. Many see Sebald’s fictions as offering “a possible epistemological framework for understanding the contexts in which genocides occur” (Cosgrove 110). The thinking goes that if we can historically locate Sebald as a chronicler of a particular moment of trauma, the better we can elucidate his texts. Then, once the texts are cleared up, we can utilize those analyses to deepen our

² Of course, literature is not literal, and analyzing fictional characters’ psyches doesn’t provide direct insight into the psyches of shellshocked soldiers. At the same time, the linkage between medical trauma and literary discourse seems to be of particular import to writers of trauma fiction—Sebald in particular. In an essay titled “Sebald’s Pathographies,” Martin Klebes points out that much of Sebald’s early literary criticism orbited around the pathography, the genre of criticism that saw fictional texts as symptoms of authors’ mental pathologies; though his literary works eventually cast aside such simplistic diagnostic criteria, this interest in the connecting thread between traumas of literary characters and those residing in the real world endured.

understanding of the original traumatic referent—a sort of double-sided telescope in which the trauma is used to clarify the fiction and the clarified fiction is used to reclarify the trauma.

But this cause-and-effect conceptualization of Sebald's prose fictions can be problematic, and not just because of the slightly chicken-egg chain of associations it builds. For one, the reductive either/or mentality of traumatic referent—it's *either* the Holocaust *or* a response to modernity; it's *either* entropic decay *or* post-WWII German displacement—constrains the readings. What's more, when these referents are subjected to further textual analysis, they don't hold up; they are thwarted by the text itself. Searches for the repressed material in Sebald's prose invariably come up short: In circumstances where we think we've elucidated the traumatic referent, we discover that Sebald explicitly disavows these analytical models. Therefore, I maintain that by going too deep into the theoretical realm, of adhering too strictly to preconceived notions of excavating a traumatic referent, we can lose sight of the physical intimacy of the text. Just as the surgeons glance determinedly at the anatomical atlas as a means to understand the body but ultimately end up ignoring it, the critical conversation surrounding Sebald has repeatedly tried on various theoretical referents of trauma and "*disregard[ed] the flesh*" *altogether* (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13).

To describe my alternative critical approach, I'd like to briefly return to the Rembrandt painting: Though the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* asserts quite adamantly that the body has vanished before the eyes of the Amsterdam spectators, it hasn't vanished for the reader. In a stunningly rendered rhetorical movement, Rembrandt repositions the scene so that the anatomical atlas absorbing the surgeons' attention is almost entirely cut out of the painting, and instead, the *corpse* claims center stage. Through this trick in perspective, the body is seen not as an invisible entity, but as an object at the center of our focal points, worthy of our attention. In

this way Rembrandt and Sebald urge the reader both to literally and literarily attend to the flesh, and as such the painting can provide a kind of explanatory paradigm for the reading of the “flesh” of Sebald’s own prose fictions. This thesis is an attempt to take up the challenge issued by the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*: to read the text as a kind of body, using the “flesh” of the text to figure out the text.

In some sense, engaging with the “flesh” or “body” of a written work falls in line with a new mode of literary practice advanced by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus called “surface reading.” Surface reading operates against a strain of psychoanalytic- and Marxist-based criticism first popularized by Fredrich Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* called “symptomatic reading,” which construes textual elements as something latent and concealed that must be excavated in order to get at their “true” meanings. In symptomatic readings, the reader “rewrite[s] the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code” (Jameson 60) and reveals truths that “remain unrealized in the surface of the text” (Jameson 48). Best and Marcus assert that as critics, we have been trained to utilize this “symptomatic” mode of reading, taught to believe that what we see is not what we get, and that texts must be plumbed for a hidden hermeneutic code not visible to the naked eye—for instance, a queer symptomatic reading would interpret the closet or ghosts as “surface signs of the deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted” (Best and Marcus 3). But the authors point out that in our relentless drive to seek out what is *beneath* the text, we have increasingly forgotten how to read what is literally in front of us. Surfaces have become invisible in our search for depth.

Surface readings, then, are “modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths” (Best and Marcus 1-2). The authors define “surface” as “what is

evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts: what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but not thickness, and therefore covers no depth” (9). Rather than something “we must train ourselves to see *through*,” a surface is “what insists on being looked *at*” (9). Best and Marcus advance a number of methodologies for the practice of surface reading; among them include close readings that do not seek hidden meanings but rather focus on unraveling what Samuel Otter has called the “linguistic density” and “verbal complexity” of literary texts (Otter 119), readings that locate patterns that exist within and across texts but do not assume that the patterns are clues to a deeper truth, and readings that simply indicate what the text says about itself. Anne Anlin Cheng perhaps puts it most succinctly: surface reading is “a reading practice that is willing to *follow*, rather than suppress” (Cheng 101-102). It is a methodology that posits we may learn more from our objects of analysis than we can teach them—that instead of using a theory to extract a hidden “code” from the text, we can utilize the text to extract its own form of critical theory.

The mode I employ to read Sebald’s prose fictions engages with the text in such a fashion; it reads “with the grain of the text” and seeks a form of physical intimacy with the prose that prefers to follow rather than antagonize (Bewes 4). It makes liberal use of close-reading, but a type of close-reading that, as Heather Love puts it, is “close but not deep”—“a method of textual analysis that take[s] its cue from observation-based social sciences” and that “rel[ies] on description rather than interpretation” (Love 375). It is close-reading that is not psychoanalytically bound; its purpose is not to excavate the hidden meanings of the text, but rather to describe what it says about itself. It observes patterns but doesn’t push them into the realm of theory. It looks at the style of how a text is written in conjunction with its content.

This type of reading is particularly productive when considering texts as saturated in surfaces, vulnerability, and contact as Sebald's are. While psychoanalytic trauma theorists have long been interested in grappling with questions of *why* and *how* a particular trauma came to be—employing the “symptomatic” determination that cure resides in the excavation and incorporation of the traumatic referent into the shattered psyche—I would contend that the type of trauma that captures Sebald's interest has little to do with cause or cure. Instead, Sebald's prose fictions explore the different ways individuals can come to be traumatized by the world they are born into—whether by contact (flesh touching flesh, flesh touching text, flesh touching photographic film) or by time (walking, waiting, writing). Though it's been difficult for critics to pinpoint the identity of the *traumas* from which Sebald's characters suffer, most agree that they are indeed *traumatized*. The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* passes a man wielding a knife so close that he imagines it slicing beneath his ribs. Austerlitz pushes photographs turned the wrong way over and under each other, eventually coming to be so exhausted by the activity that he must rest on the ottoman. Sebald appears to be more fascinated by the temporal progression of a traumatized *condition* rather than any investigation of how that condition came to be.

What I ultimately aim to argue is that by reading Sebald's prose fictions through their surfaces and prose styles—looking at structural repetition, breached internal boundaries, temporality, geometry, and photographic media—we can view the author as registering the experience of *being traumatized* as separate entirely from an original *traumatic event*. Being traumatized, for Sebald, is a permanent condition, a fundamental background noise that invades all parts of the world that is experienced. It lodges itself not just into psyches, but also into fortifications, objects, bodies, skin, and photographs. As such, Sebald's prose fictions allow us to

look at the universe in a different light, where being traumatized seems to be a requisite for living, rather than as attributed to some external event.

To illustrate my argument of the prose's untethering of traumatization from event, I will focus on Sebald's three most recent texts (*The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*) since their style is most emblematic of the "Sebaldian" flavor: digressive, melancholy, and ruminative. In Chapter One, I will utilize Freudian trauma theory to adopt a reading of two passages from *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* that bear remarkable similarity and examine why explicit markers in the text destine that reading for failure. I will suggest in this chapter that though Sebald's characters are certainly *traumatized*, their traumas possess no internal referent—at least not one that can be easily elucidated.

Chapter Two will further examine the condition of being traumatized by embarking on an analysis of Sebald's narrator's reading of the aforementioned Rembrandt painting in *The Rings of Saturn*. I will mark a division between the plausible and implausible aspects of the narrator's argument and suggest that Sebald is advocating for a reading that attends to the flesh rather than dissects for hidden meanings beneath it. By drawing a comparison between the vanishing body and the vanishing text, I will point out that time appears to mediate the erasure of the referent: the longer we search for the occluded referent, the less likely we are to receive it, regardless if we are speaking of text or trauma.

Chapter Three will contend with the mechanism through which the traumatic referent is initially erased from the trauma through a reading of Ambros Adelwarth's electroshock therapy in *The Emigrants*. I will suggest that though Adelwarth's traumatized condition is one of few episodes that can actually be mapped onto a psychoanalytic model of trauma, a more productive analysis can be unearthed by adopting a "close but not deep" surface reading. Through this

analysis I will draw attention to the geometrical similarities of the empty shell in Sebald's traumatized characters, and provide my own ad hoc schematic for reading Sebald's prose fictions as a function of style and media, rather than content. Ultimately I suggest that Adelwarth's willing submission to electroshock therapy acts as a metaphor for the unlinking of trauma from being traumatized for all of Sebald's characters.

My fourth and final chapter will look toward a fundamental property of Sebald's prose style: his photography. I will turn my focus to a grainy photograph of a garden maze in *The Rings of Saturn* by utilizing the schematic developed in Chapter Three, and discuss how Sebald contends with Roland Barthes's traumatic *punctum* not as a quality of the image's referent, but as a property of the medium—photographic film. Ultimately, I suggest in this chapter that all components of Sebald's prose style, whether textual or visual, retain the same referent-less, "traumatized" quality.

In *Traumatic Realism*, Michael Rothberg argues that trauma fiction's import derives from its search "for a new mode of realism in order to express or articulate a new form of reality" (Rothberg 14). Because the trauma of real life often escapes normal representation, trauma fiction can provide a kind of substituted "traumatic realism" that better encapsulates the experience of being traumatized for an individual. What Sebald's alternative model of trauma provides is a way to read a particular *type* of traumatized individual: the kind that cannot easily identify a site of trauma responsible for his or her condition. There are those in the real world who feel a surge of emotion after witnessing a devastating event, and though trauma theorists still struggle to find therapeutic models for these individuals, at least it's evident what referents they suffer from: they are shellshocked because they were actually "shelled." But there are those in the world who feel a comparable surge of emotion but can't identify any causative event that

could have brought the condition on; we don't know what to do with these cases because they don't seem to fit in with the standard paradigm. What Sebald's traumatized prose style provides is a literary way of thinking through the phenomenon of an individual being traumatized without justifiable cause. He allows us to see the condition of being traumatized not as a problem that deviates from the norm, but rather *as* the norm—trauma as a diffusive property of the world, trauma as a natural part of human existence.

The author Walter de la Mare describes trauma like so: “The human brain works slowly: first the blow, hours afterwards the bruise” (De la Mare 22). In Sebald's prose fictions, the bruise *is* the blow. After initial contact, it spreads, seeping gradually through all parts of the body. The text of this thesis is embroidered in a similar fashion: my description of the condition of being traumatized is an accretive one; it doesn't puncture, as Freud's trauma does, but bruises, gaining more depth and nuance as the chapters slide forward. I found that this at times digressive methodology was the only way I could do justice to Sebald's trembling, insomniac—and many times maddening—bramble of a prose style. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the author chastises the surgeons in *The Anatomy Lesson* for “disregard[ing] the flesh” and instead “attend[ing] to the machine within” (13). I do not want to disregard the flesh in favor of attending to the machine within. I prefer to disregard the machine within in order to attend to the flesh.

Chapter 1: The Referent

A pre-amble

Of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida wrote: "The very procedure of the text itself is diabolical. It mimes walking, does not cease walking without advancing, regularly sketching out one step more without gaining an inch of ground" (Derrida 269). Derrida's deconstructionist reading of Freud's classic text sees the author's literary style as one that mirrors the theories of repetitive motion he is advancing. As Freud speaks of the psychic world's irresistible tendency for reproduction in the wake of a traumatic event, Derrida sees the author's prose style as equally repetitive, inscribing a kind of infernal movement without movement.

A similar observation could be made about W.G. Sebald's ambulatory prose style—the content at times seems to resemble the technique used to describe it. In "Prose of the World," Bianca Theisen calls attention to the relatively contained nature of Sebald's travel itineraries: when characters travel to new places seeking some terra incognita, they merely circle back to areas that have already been charted such as museums, libraries, or maps. Thus, to Theisen, a character's search for an unmarked territory or "origin" outside of the bounds of his universe is "a highly staged event" that only ever seems to lead to places that are extra-mediated by graphs and charts (Theisen, "Prose of the World" 172). "Paradoxically, the search for a terra incognita, for the as yet unmarked or uninscribed, for an authentic perception of the foreign or for unmediated experience has to resort to a textualized world" (Theisen, "Prose of the World" 164). Though the world appears to open up for characters to explore new territories as they wish, their end journeys merely circle back to areas that are already familiar to them.

In this chapter, I would like to argue that as readers, we engage with stylistic features of the text in a similar fashion to the way Sebald's characters do with geographical landmarks. At first, it seems as if Sebald's prose style invites its own kind of extratextual, "symptomatic" analysis: his works, which engage in and repeat a series of wild comparisons, encourage us to draw together a collection of traumatic leitmotifs—a Chinese silkworm with the son of a silk merchant, vapors drifting through the mind with the vapor from a dead body, a topiary garden outside a mute major's estate with a garden maze of the mind—and trail them to an underlying referent. But once we physically begin this attempt of origin-tracing, our motions are continually denied, pushed back by explicit markers in the text. The "walk" that the reader takes alongside the text can be said to simultaneously invite interpretation and suspend it; once we think we've traced the string of associations to a tentative origin, we are immediately pulled back into the confines of the text.

To illustrate this stylistic phenomenon I will analyze two scenes from Sebald's most recent novels that, despite their disparate content, share remarkable structural similarity—in *Austerlitz*, when the narrator visits the fortifications of Breendonk in order to view the torture chamber, and in *The Rings of Saturn*, when the narrator enters a decrepit hotel and sits down to eat a frozen fish. In both of these episodes, we witness a descent into an interior, a dissolution of boundaries, an eruption of bodily ailments, and an authorial disavowal upon arrival at the center. Their events, punctuated by a series of shocks and startles, suggest that Sebald is talking about trauma. But what was the cause of the trauma? Is there one at all? The more we read the passages through a Freudian lens and attempt to find a traumatic referent, the more we realize we can't locate one. Attempts to understand the greater significance of these patterns are thwarted by the surface of the text.

Yet instead of symptomatically writing off these features as repressed signifiers that must be further excavated for meaning, I argue that this stalled epiphany is a hallmark feature of Sebald's prose style. Ultimately I would like to propose in this chapter and the ones following that Sebald has developed an alternative theory of trauma in his writings, one that absorbs repeated events into its corpus but doesn't necessarily point to an origin. Sebald's texts seem to view being traumatized as a permanent condition, whose referent remains elusive because the trauma lodges itself into the vertebral structuring of scenes, rather than the content within them.

The torture chamber of Breendonk

In this section I would like to identify a classic narrative strategy that Sebald employs when leading his readers through a character's itinerary. As the characters in his prose fictions set off on journeys, "journeys which travel backwards into the past as much as they trace itineraries across the earth and across the page," Sebald leaves certain gaps in the text that invite the reader to excavate for hidden meanings (Blackler 104). In *Reading W.G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience*, Deane Blackler advocates for an interpretative mode that "licens[es] the reader ... to step outside the elided or effaced textual boundaries into [his or] her own empirical otherness" and fill in these discontinuities with [his or] her own associative linkages (Blackler ix). I argue, however, that this critical mode does not award the reader with as much agency as Blackler would have us believe. Right when an association between a condition and the event that could have brought it on is tentatively made, we find that it comes to be explicitly repudiated by the narrator. I will illustrate this structural patterning of venture, linkage, physical trace, near-epiphany, and deferral by reading a passage from *Austerlitz*, where the narrator ventures into the Breendonk fortress to find the torture chamber occupied by the Nazis in WWII.

When the narrator of *Austerlitz* meets Jacques Austerlitz for the first time in a train station waiting room, Austerlitz speaks at length about the history of the fortress of Breendonk, a former military stronghold in the 1800s that doubled as a penal camp for the Nazis during WWII. The narrator grows interested in learning about the torture the Jewish prisoners endured at Breendonk, and attempts to retrace these historical movements by penetrating the fortress's core.

As time slides forward, the narrator's walking tour increasingly starts to resemble a journey through an animal's body. The narrator progresses through the fortress and draws several comparisons of the encampment's ground plan to "the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature"—bastions at the front of the building resembling eyes, the outgrowths of casemates like claws and pincers, and a "stumpy projection at the back of its body" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 21-22). When he makes his way inside the torture chamber, the dark, measured progression through the distended passageways is reminiscent of an inward movement through an organism's digestive system. The walls are described as "covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calcareous streaks" (21). The use of the word "ulcer" is of particular significance. An ulcer is a discontinuity or break in a bodily membrane that impedes the organ from normal function. Ulcers form as the body processes turn against themselves, pointing to a breach in the boundary between inside and outside; the body "inverts," as the insides bubble outward and erupt into open sores and the outer epidermal tissue disintegrates into the body's lymphatic system. Taken metaphorically, an "ulcer" forming within the walls of Breendonk projects an image of the heavy fortifications undergoing an organic breakdown: as the narrator journeys through the fortress, he witnesses the manmade stone walls disintegrating into the natural environment. The fortress

seems to attack itself as the structures rise out of their composed internal organization and fuse with the outer world.

The boundary breached by the ulcer doesn't just exist just between stone and air; it also represents a breach between stone and body. As we continue to read the scene, the characterizations of building and body increasingly bleed into each other. Through Sebald's metaphorical representations of the fortified structure as a crab-like creature, we begin to see the building as the exoskeleton of a shelled animal. Like a hologram that changes depending on how it catches the light, the image displays both building and creature, external and internal, inorganic and organic.

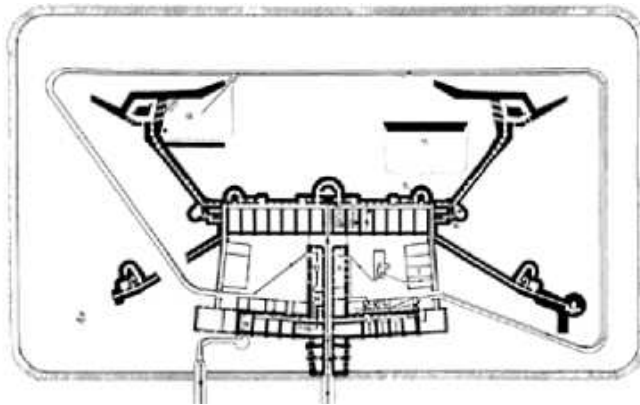


Figure 2. The “crab-like creature”

This breakdown positions the reader to expect some sort of an epiphany, the ulceritic “sore” that erupts from the narrative. Sebald's attempts to dissolve the boundary between the geographic and physiologic, we sense, prepare us for some climactic scene that will get to the epicenter of the narrator's quest—that is, the mystery of the torture chamber. And we *do* get it, to an extent. Once the narrator finally arrives at the center of the fortress, his encounter with the former torture chamber elicits a severe reaction: a crippling bout of nausea. He begins to anthropomorphize the wall of the fortified structure, drawing a comparison to his mental state: “I

had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered in bluish spots, and seemed to me to be perspiring with cold beads of sweat” (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 25-26). The narrator’s deliberate attempt to connect with the tortured core of Breendonk’s history results in a sort of breakdown on the physical register, to the point that he transfers his discomfort to the walls in which he is residing—he appears to be so discombobulated that he ends up describing the wall as “bluish” and “perspiring,” rather than himself.

The nausea experienced at the torture chamber elicits something else in the narrator: soap. Right after the narrator encounters the torturer’s cell within the casement, hook still visible on the ceiling, the scent of soft soap wafts across his nostrils, and a memory from his childhood surfaces—namely, “the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favorite of my father’s and which I had always disliked” (32). Might this word bear some relation to the torture chamber and the experience the Jews endured many decades ago? The narrative breakdown invites the reader to “transform the patterns into memories and associations of their own” (Blackler 106) and to draw connections between the soap smell to the Holocaust. It’s possible that Sebald is pointing us obliquely toward the Stutthof concentration camp, where human corpses were emulsified and degraded into bars of soap. In his book *Russia at War, 1941 to 1945*, Alexander Werth reports that while visiting Gdansk in 1945, he saw “a nightmarish sight”: an experimental factory “with its vats full of human heads and torsoes pickled in some liquid, and its pails full of a flakey substance—human soap” (Werth 1019). It is certainly possible that the climax of Sebald’s buildup occurs here in this memory of the German scrubbing brush; the key to the epiphany of the torture chamber is, for the narrator, the smell of soap. Perhaps the narrator can connect with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust through this childhood

memory of the German scrubbing brush, and the nausea that overcomes both him and the building in which he resides stands for the disgust he feels upon reaching such an epiphany.

It turns out there is no such epiphany. The longer we venture past the textual markers of the narrative into our own exploratory associations, we find that the receptivity advocated by Blackler's disobedient reading strategy "is increasingly foreclosed" (Duttlinger, "A Wrong Turn of the Wheel" 108). Immediately after this memory of soap surfaces, we get a puzzling literary clarification. The narrator clearly states: "It is *not* that as the nausea rose in me that I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted" there (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 26, emphasis mine). The narrator casts aspersions on the idea that his childhood memories of the German scrubbing brush could bear any relation to the torture endured by the Jews in the fortress of Breendonk, and in this rhetorical movement of statement through negation, he manages to "curb any genuine moments of epiphany" (Duttlinger, "A Wrong Turn of the Wheel" 108).

In essence, the suffering of the victims is so beyond the narrator's ability to comprehend that he finds himself "unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 20). In "The Anatomy of Torture," Christian Moser remarks upon the incommensurability of the scrubbing brush-induced nausea to the plight of the tortured Jews—the childhood memory evoked, he says, is "a scenario of paternal punishment," which is an act "as grossly out of proportion with the torture performed at Breendonk as the relationship between the scrubbing-brush and the instruments of torture wielded by the henchmen of the SS" (Moser, "The Anatomy of Torture" 70). It's evident that the reader's attempt to draw connections between soap, the Holocaust, an insider's view of torture, and the narrator's nausea has failed to achieve its aim, since tentative associations are brusquely obstructed with the narrator's conspicuous use of "*not*." This episode began with the narrator's quest to locate some connection

to the Holocaust victims imprisoned in the torture chamber that implicated the reader in the search for a referent, but ended, by way of statement through negation, with that connection blocked off.

The fish in Lowestoft

Though the Breendonk episode is seemingly an isolated incident, its structure links it formally with other scenes of Sebald's prose fictions. I would like to suggest that the simple action of eating a fish in a Lowestoft hotel in *The Rings of Saturn* mirrors the pattern exhibited by the narrator's venture into Breendonk in *Austerlitz*: again, we see the utilization of language that merges body and building; again, we see the boundaries between interiors and exteriors collapse; and again, we see the deferral of the epiphany right at the place where we think we're going to get it. I argue that this pattern comes to be emblematic of how Sebald chooses to portray the experience of being traumatized.

The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* has just arrived at Lowestoft and journeys into the center of town to find a place to sleep. He comes across an establishment called the Albion Hotel and resolves to spend the night there. As he enters the building and sits down to eat, he encounters a startled young woman sitting at the front desk who brings him a plate of fish "that had doubtless lain entombed in the deep-freeze for years" (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 43). He remarks upon the "breadcrumb armour-plating" encrusted on the surface and describes the maneuvering he must undertake with the prongs of his fork in order to penetrate the hardened coating (43). Upon succeeding, the uneaten fish on his plate is described as a "sorry wreck," the "sooty" breadcrumbs strewn across the wreckage alongside the "grass-green peas" and soggy chips "that gleamed with fat" (43).

During these uneventful hours, all the narrator has really done is check himself into a hotel room and eaten a stale fish, but something has clearly been disturbed in the air. A pervasive aura of doom charges the scene—illustrated by the frequent gestures to death with the use of the words “entombed” and the violence the narrator must perform as he hacks at the fish—tinting this simple event with a significance that extends past the reality of the literal.

There is something to be said about the specificity of the imagery, the extended metaphor that Sebald employs: it is unmistakably militarized in nature. The fish emerges out of “armour plating” and manifests itself as nothing but a “sorry wreck” once it has been punctured by the tines of a fork (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 43). It becomes increasingly evident that the act of eating the fish has taken on the extra significance of a strategic war maneuver—Sebald even describes the action of puncturing the fish as a military “operation” (43). Once the fish’s breadcrumb armor has been destroyed, the only things that remain from these fortifications are the fragments of crumbs that are described as “sooty” (43). The “grass-green” peas rolling around the plate even evoke a topographical image of a patch of grass that lies untouched from the wreckage (43). Hence, there is a deliberate attempt to have the reader view the consumption of the fish as an undertaking of military activity.

Once again, we witness a movement to dissolve the boundaries between the interior of the fish and exterior of the breadcrumb armor as the separate spaces coalesce. Just as the comparisons to the crab-like creature acted as the trigger for viewing the fortress of Breendonk as the body of a shelled animal, the fork that punctures the frozen fish in this scene exposes the internal body to the external environment. This physical opening of the fish forecasts an opening of both literal and literary space: firstly, that the narrator will get to eat the fish; and secondly, that the reason for the metaphorical movement of fish as building will be revealed. Yet in both

accounts, the epiphanies are not provided—just as the narrator’s mission to discover the truth of the torture chamber in Breendonk is repudiated.

First, let’s address the consumption of the fish: The natural expectation for the narrator painstakingly hacking away at the breadcrumb armor is that he will be able to eat the fish. But this doesn’t happen; there is no fish to be found after the defense is penetrated. We keenly sense the narrator’s disappointment when he says: “Indeed it was so difficult to penetrate what eventually proved to be nothing but an empty shell that my plate was a hideous mess once the operation was over” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 43). The climax of the scene—silly as it is—is infinitely deferred.

We can take this sense of disappointment and transfer it toward the second question—that is, what is the fish supposed to represent? The scene is reminiscent of an extended meditation on herring that occurs in the third chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, where the narrator describes how technological advances in the industry of commercial fishing led to an overzealous capture of the species and subsequently resulted in the danger of their extinction. Immediately following this, Sebald inserts, without comment, a double-sided photograph that depicts the heaps of corpses that the liberators of the Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen discovered when entering the encampment (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 60-61).



Fig. 3. The bodies at Bergen-Belsen

This image returns us back to another photograph presented shortly before that depicts heaps of dead herrings (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 54).



Fig. 4. Heaps of herring

Thus, retroactively, the natural history of the herring seems to be an allegory for the extermination of European Jews by Nazi Germany. In a symptomatic reading, Moser even offers a reason for such a metaphorical displacement, arguing that animals are used in place of real human bodies because they are “familiar enough to arouse our empathy, but they are also alien enough to prevent our empathy from triggering the psychological mechanism of repression” (Moser, “The Anatomy of Torture” 68). It’s possible that the narrator, what with all the violence he employs to slash through the breadcrumb plating of his frozen fish, is reenacting the same type of siege witnessed at battles like at Bergen-Belsen. Thus, in both these instances, the text points to the possibility of the fish as being analogous to a human body.

But just as we entertained the idea of soap opening the door to a wider discussion about the Holocaust, the metaphor of fish as body doesn’t entirely adhere. Again, just as we think the epiphany is about to come, Sebald directly addresses this possibility and tells us explicitly that our assumptions are wrong: the narrator discovers that there is *no* fish inside the frozen breadcrumbs; it is merely an empty shell. The breadcrumb fortification that developed around the

food turned out to be protecting nothing. The herring passage in Chapter Three similarly mimics this false assumption: just when we think we know for certain that the herring ought to represent the corpses found in Bergen-Belsen, the narrator comes out and raises his own questions about the metaphor, admitting to us that “the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 57). Sebald seems to be telling us: perhaps the fish is just a fish and the corpse is just a corpse, with the two bearing little relation to one another. The moment we believe we’re about to trace the link between the genocide of fish and the Holocaust, we are thwarted by what’s overtly said inside the narrative.

These are two things that I take to be a hallmark of Sebald’s prose style: it allows the reader the freedom to make linkages between adjacent events, but then goes on to stall these epiphanies. Right as we follow the thread of connections embedded throughout his texts, Sebald just stops short of consolidating that long-desired association. These “authorial asides,” as Sara Friedrichsmeyer astutely characterizes, “are ... intended to cast aspersions on the affinities” (Friedrichsmeyer 81). But this does not make our analysis of the scene worthless. At some unidentified moment after the absence of fish on the plate, the aforementioned startled young woman emerges from the shadows to clear the table, and the narrator says: “All I can remember are the scarlet blotches which appeared from the neckline of her blouse and crept up her throat as she bent for my plate” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 43). This mysterious note of bodily eruption calls to mind the bluish spots of the Breendonk wall in *Austerlitz*. Both of them serve as physical manifestations of some kind of emotional perturbation, visible signs of something being traumatized.

The similarity in structure between two disparate passages in two separate books reveals a rather striking pattern. As I have shown, the fish is seen not just as something that needs to be

consumed, but also as a fortified structure that literally must be penetrated, opened up, and obliterated. Again we see an almost complete collapse of the architectural and physiological registers. Again, once the narrator breaches the center point, our hope for an epiphanic climax that solves the “mystery” is shut down from within the text. And again, we find that a skin condition has inexplicably erupted onto a character’s physiognomy. In this way, the *patterns* within the text take the place of resolution or epiphany. Ross Posnock observes that “the very act of patterning” is what concerns Sebald most when crafting his prose narratives; “his commitment is less to content than to relationality itself as a structural principle” (Posnock 112). In this way style gains primacy over content: the ways that events are staged and presented to us are more important than the events that actually transpire (i.e. a fish being eaten, or a walk through a fortress). What defines Sebald as a writer is the way he takes seemingly mundane events and links their structures together like wrapping threads.

The psychology of fortification

Sebald’s engagement in structural repetition demonstrates his interest in investigating trauma, for which structural repetition is also a vital component. According to leading trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, the pathology of post-traumatic stress disorder “consists ... solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 4). For Caruth, trauma exists as a mode of haunting; she believes that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 4-5). This theory is reminiscent of the shellshocked soldiers that Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* who suffer from battle nightmares; again and again they revisit the original scenes of trauma in their dreams, attempting

to understand and master their broken psyches. According to Freud, we gravitate toward things that bring us pleasure, and avoid those things that do not—even constructing a sort of mental “shield” as a means of ego self-preservation (Freud 21). “Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli,” he writes (Freud 21). However, when a particular disturbance carries too much weight, the mental shield collapses and the traumatic neurosis breaks through. This results in the death drive. Building on his 1914 article “Recollecting, Repeating and Working Through,” Freud highlights how the “patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and ... is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience” (Freud 22).

Critic Anne Whitehead attempts to recruit Freud’s theoretical lens in explaining how Sebald structures his works. Pointing toward the various instances where Sebaldian motifs repeat and oscillate, Whitehead asserts that Sebald’s characters respond to shocks and startles—a shock, Freud states, “being the direct damage to the molecular structure or ... to the histological structure of the elements of the nervous system” (Freud 25)—with a series of defensive measures. When those defensive measures fail, Whitehead maintains that the events and motifs repeat as an attempt for the characters to create retrospective mastery, a hypothesis which accords with Freud’s referent-based theory of trauma. Whitehead draws attention to Austerlitz’s fascination with architectural structures of defense, and believes that “the fortress forms an objective correlative for Austerlitz’s trauma, mirroring the internal defensive walls that he has constructed in order to protect himself from anything connected with his own early history” (Whitehead 119). The second part of a traumatic experience—repetition—is exemplified to Whitehead in the repeated engagement of motifs, whether they be a butterfly collector, a birth date, a swath of silk, or dust. Whitehead believes that tracing these repeated symbols will reveal

a “concealed order” that will eventually point to a traumatic origin, a origin that Whitehead believes, ultimately, is the Holocaust (136). By reading Sebald, Whitehead asserts that we can find out “the extent to which the Holocaust permeates our everyday lives and consciousness” (86).

In concordance with Whitehead’s argument, both scenes I have discussed involve moments of shocks, defenses, and structural similarity. At Lowestoft, when the narrator opens the door to the Albion Hotel and catches the young woman at the front desk by surprise, she is “startled.” Mentally, the narrator has inflicted an emotional perturbation upon the scene, dissolving the boundaries between the inside of the hotel room and the outside environment. Another shock occurs at the moment when the prongs of the fork puncture the “battle armour” of the fish and break apart the breadcrumb defense. We can see a similar sort of situation arise at Breendonk. Upon entering the fortress, the narrator is struck by the ulcers erupting from the walls, marks of some internal penetrative force that broke through the body’s boundaries: impressions of past traumas inflicted upon the building. The second shock occurs at the center of the fortress right where the narrator encounters the torture chamber and is struck by a wave of nausea that brings him to his knees. Both scenes—with their repeated series of shocks, responses to shocks, breakdown of defenses, and repetitive structures—bear a great deal of evidence that Sebald is speaking about trauma.

Yet it is when these trauma readings are subjected to closer analysis that such an interpretation becomes problematic—Sebald’s notion of trauma is not quite as structured as Whitehead and Freud would have us believe. Freud contends that a traumatic event is something so annihilating that it breaches the defensive barriers in an individual’s psyche; the breakdown of the “shield” ends up provoking a “disturbance ... in the functioning” of that individual’s energy

(23). But what is it about the narrator opening the door to a hotel that constitutes a “disturbance ... in the functioning” in someone’s energy (23)? It does not seem to warrant such an extreme reaction. The same could be said about the ulcerous walls of Breendonk, the violent penetration of a frozen fish, or a memory of a German scrubbing brush. Furthermore, when Sebald’s characters start developing defensive mechanisms to these shocks, we are never sure which shocks they’re responding to. For instance, the hotelkeeper’s scarlet blotches: are these skin conditions a response to the narrator opening the door, to the penetration of the fish, to the absence of the fish, or a different sort of trauma altogether? Why is the woman even displaying marks of trauma—shouldn’t it be the *narrator* that is affected by the penetration and subsequent lack of fish? Similarly, what should we take the narrator’s nausea at Breendonk as a response to: the ulcers on the outside fortress walls, the memory of the German scrubbing brush, the smell of soap, the lack of association with the torture victims of the Holocaust, or something else? These are not questions we can readily answer with the surface of the text; all we can state is that these things exist—shocks, defenses, breakdowns—but in what order they progress is not particularly evident. Whitehead’s attempt to corral such relationships into Freudian cause-and-effect risks oversimplifying the text and our interpretations of Sebald’s style.

What’s more, we cannot neglect the dual deferment of epiphany in each of these scenes, the lack of resolution upon reaching the center. Freud’s interpretation of trauma pushes the reader to find a central referent for the cognitive wound, something that the repetitive structures revolve around. And while we certainly make attempts to discover that traumatic referent, recall that both attempts in the texts fail. Each scene in Breendonk and Lowestoft presents a sort of artificial probing toward the center of a building or an organism, and a physical staging for an epiphany that never comes—whether that takes form in a bout of nausea unrelated to a torture

scene or a nonexistent fish. Attempts on the reader's end are made to discover what these initial circumstances of trauma might have been, but each are explicitly shunted by the narrator by way of statement through negation. He tells us: "It is *not* that as the nausea rose in me that I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted there" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 26). And instead of providing further elaboration on what he means, the narrative just telescopes further outward, drawing on more wild comparisons, more rings of digression. It is because we are overtly forbidden by the author to read these passages through a Freudian lens that we realize a symptomatic analysis colored by excavation for hidden meanings is ultimately fruitless.

And yet: We are still speaking about characters being traumatized, but perhaps trauma in a different sense than the one Freud articulates. Perhaps Sebald is developing his own theory of being traumatized, one where defenses spontaneously arise not in response to shock, but in response to *time*. Unlike Freud's shellshocked soldiers, who encounter a single shock and are instantly derailed, Sebald's characters deteriorate temporally. They descend into the interiors of fortresses; they probe the fish; they walk, first along the outside perimeter and then toward the center. It seems that the longer they engage in these activities, the more nauseated they feel, and the more the boundaries between physiological body and physical space collapse. When the breadcrumbs of the fish in the Lowestoft hotel take on the metaphorical appearance of battle armor and the blueprint of Breendonk more and more resembles the body of a crab-like creature, this mutual exchange of qualities between animal and landmark increases as the narrators progress deeper into their stories. Action and time seem to mediate the erasure of boundaries, rather than one derauling shock.

What this means about the relationship between collapse of space and temporality is that the longer the reader searches for a referent to explain away the trauma, the more unlikely it

becomes that the referent will materialize. Like the characters, we exhibit our own form of mental “nausea” for not receiving the answers we want; and as a result, we seek an alternative mode of reading that attends more to the surface of the text rather than whatever we can probe beneath its depths. This idea of simultaneous descent into a text and the disappearance of the text itself is a pervasive aspect of Sebald’s work and the subject of my next chapter, in which I continue the investigation of the search for a referent in a close reading of Sebald’s analysis of *The Anatomy Lesson of Nicolaes Tulp* in *The Rings of Saturn*.

Chapter 2: Dissection

Probing the surface

In the previous chapter I utilized a psychoanalytic model of trauma to read two structurally similar scenes that set up an expectation of epiphany, and demonstrated how, stylistically, the text explicitly repudiated these symptomatic readings. In place of the referent-based trauma model, I advocated for a reading that attended to the traumatized surface of the prose style. In this chapter I argue that Sebald appears to be aware of the consequences that arise when we disappear too deeply into a theory in his narrator's analysis of the Rembrandt painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* in *The Rings of Saturn*. I return to a point I alluded to earlier in the introduction: that to gaze too determinedly at a theory risks doing violence to the body of the text.

Though the narrator begins his analysis of *The Anatomy Lesson* as a straightforward explication of what Rembrandt was trying to capture in order to get the viewer to identify with the body on the dissecting table, a strange shift from surface reading to symptomatic reading occurs when he starts to literally recreate the dissection scene on that day in Amsterdam, 1632. As the narrator moves his analysis to features that are beyond the scope of the painting, his interpretative lens becomes less and less plausible, demonstrating that even *he* is not immune to the dangers of symptomatic theory-making and dissection as an equivalent technique of reading. I argue that as Sebald's narrator moves from an analysis that attends to the surface features of the painting to one that tries to prove for hidden causes, this shift in critical mode exemplifies the hazards of adopting a technique that probes beneath the surface rather than attend to the flesh.

What ends up happening as a theory is advanced to explain a particular object—whether this might be a text, body, or painting—is that this object will simultaneously vanish.

I suggest that the text's understanding of trauma operates in a similar fashion to the way Sebald handles issues of answer-driven literary practices: just as the text can disappear as a consequence of reading too deeply for symptoms, the longer we search for a referent that will explain away the characters' traumas, the more elusive that referent becomes. Sebald's response to the critical confusion evoked by a symptomatic reading is to show the painting again, this time without verbal commentary. For this reason I, too, will reproduce the painting and repeat portions of my own analysis from the introduction of this thesis. In exhibiting a body being traumatized but not making attempts to explain it away, the text appears to resign itself to the irretrievability of its traumatic referent. Ultimately, I argue that the text serves as an entreaty for us to pay attention to its own traumatized nature—as something that illustrates rather than elucidates.

Rectification through focalization

At the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator finds himself fascinated by a painting called *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and begins a fairly straightforward surface analysis of the features of the painting and the artist's rhetorical strategies. The narrator describes how the image shows the body of a thief, Aris Kindt, being dissected at the center of an anatomical amphitheater. He goes on to mention that the corpse is surrounded by the demonstrator, Dr. Tulp, who holds the dissecting scissors to the body's left forearm, and seven curious surgeons, who all crane their necks to gaze at the anatomical atlas found in the bottom right corner of the painting.



Figure 1. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*

To Sebald’s narrator, this painting does not only represent a demonstration of a new zeal in the sciences; it also bears witness to the horrors of dismembering a corpse, of “harrowing the flesh” of someone beyond death (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 12). As evidence, the narrator points out that Dr. Tulp has not, “contrary to normal practice,” begun the dissection by taking out the intestines, but rather has started by dissecting the hand with which Kindt had previously used to steal things (16). Furthermore, the surgeons are dressed in their finest clothes, and the narrator imagines they all plan to attend a banquet after the dissection, which adds to the gruesomely celebratory nature of the scene.

The narrator points out that if we trace the eyelines of the seven surgeons, they seem not to see the body at all, instead deigning to look toward the anatomical atlas in the bottom right corner of the canvas. And it is because of the onlookers’ curious visual relationship to the atlas that we notice something else awry: the “doctoring” of the left hand of the corpse. We come to realize that Rembrandt has taken an anatomical picture from the atlas and superimposed it directly on the left hand—“the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand” (16). Communicating

Rembrandt's purposeful intentionality of the hand's backwardness seems to be the narrator's "thesis statement," since he says at the end of his analysis that "I believe that there was deliberate intent behind this flaw in the composition. ... It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies" (17). It appears to Sebald's narrator that Rembrandt's flaw acts as the painter's own visual commentary on the violence performed on the corpse. Rembrandt might have intentionally drawn the hand the wrong way around as an attempt to represent the wrongheaded "Cartesian rigidity" that guides the gaze of Tulp and his audience (16). According to Christina Kraenzle, "the discussion of Rembrandt's painting therefore questions the notion of vision as an objective source of knowledge or truth" (Kraenzle 137).

It's clear that focalization is situated as an important trope in the narrator's analysis. According to Christian Moser in "Peripatetic Liminality," "the painting is also, in a self-referential turn, about the act of seeing" (Moser, "Peripatetic Liminality" 51). For one thing, though the anatomical atlas is the center point of focus for the surgeons at the dissecting table, the book is conspicuously cut out of the reader's perspective. Rather, *our* central point of reference is the corpse of Aris Kindt, which highlights an operative difference between what Rembrandt wants us to see and what actually happened that day in Amsterdam: "The map, which is of central importance to the surgeons, is placed at the painting's margin, whereas the victim's body, which is marginal to them, is transferred to the painting's center" (Moser, "Peripatetic Liminality" 51). Furthermore, the narrator points out that Rembrandt does not represent Kindt's suffering condition by showing the corpse as it really is with all of its bodily wounds and cuts. Instead, he covers the wounds up and opts to *cut up the atlas*. The painter clips out—*dissects*—one of the illustrations from the atlas and superimposes the clip on the site of the bodily wound.

Therefore, the narrator asserts that we, as viewers, are able to simultaneously identify with the suffering body due to its central placement in the frame of the painting *and* perceive, in the cartographic representation of the hand, what the surgeons at the dissecting table saw. He further points out that the wrongness of the scene is highlighted by Rembrandt's purposeful enlargement of the cartographic hand disproportional to the one that is not being dissected. The purposefully schematic portrayal of the hand on the table has the simultaneous effect of disrupting the verisimilitude of the scene and of ironically reiterating its own criticism of the Cartesian tendency to replace the real by its abstract representation.

Though the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* is merely a fictional character whose interpretative models we have no reason to trust, his understanding of the painting thus far appears to make sense. This is because, as Timothy Bewes puts it, the narrator is "reading with the grain" of the painting (Bewes 4). He is consciously trying to figure out whom the painter identifies with, taking all of its features into account and not ignoring portions that don't appear to fit with a pre-established theory. At the opening session of his 1985 seminar on Michel Foucault, the critic Gilles Deleuze was reported to have given the following advice: "You must trust the author you are studying. Proceed by feeling your way. One must ruminate, gathering and regathering the notions. You must silence the voices of objection within you. You must let him speak for himself, analyze the frequency of his words, the style of his own obsessions. His thought invents its own coordinates and develops along its own axes" (Colombat 204). The narrator is pursuing a mode of reading that puts trust in the painting and the individual who authored it. It doesn't antagonize the text by offering an alternative strategy of interpretation. As a result, we as readers receive a better understanding of the work and its authorial intentionality;

this is because, in his analysis, the narrator opens up a critical space so that we, too, can read alongside the work, “with the grain” (Bewes 4).

The narrator’s “theory”

However, when the narrator’s analysis of the painting progresses a shade deeper, the interpretation starts to become problematic. As the narrator moves beyond a descriptive surface reading and begins to impose his own critique of Enlightenment thinking onto his explanation of the painting, his analysis begins to lose credibility. It becomes evident that Sebald is patterning the scene after the same sort of stalled epiphany that structures the other two episodes I have examined: deliberately subverting his own narrator’s critique of subjection that “one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within” by means of his own text (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13).

I would first like to address the narrator’s insistence that the viewer alone can see the painting from all perspectives possible, and point out that such a perspective is, in fact, impossible to obtain. As readers receiving secondhand information from multiple biased mediators, we can never occupy the type of privileged space where we can see *everything*. It’s true that we can see the horrors enacted upon the tortured, greenish body because we’re not focused on learning the anatomy (as the surgeons are), but we are also trapped within the confines of the interpretive frame provided by the narrator. After all, it’s important to recognize that the narrator is imposing his *own* particular theory of subjection regarding the painting on the readers, setting up the scene as if he were staging a critical argument. He takes on the tone of an academic scholar, engaging us mostly in the third person but occasionally dipping into the first person plural when he particularly wishes to guide us through his gaze: “*we* believe;” “*our*

comprehension;” “we are faced” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13, 13, 16). These rhetorical stagings serve the larger purpose of advancing a particular theory of the painting: that one should pay attention to the flesh, instead of “attend[ing] to the machine within” (13).

Here is where theoretical constructs become a little sticky. Because we’ve already read the narrator’s textual analysis that accompanies the Rembrandt painting, we can no longer go “back” to viewing the figures in an unbiased sense. For instance, when we gaze upon the body of Aris Kindt, it seems to us “greenish” and “annihilated” (17). But “greenish” and “annihilated” aren’t adjectives evident from a mere glance at the body on the surgical table; they’re descriptors we’ve appropriated from the theory Sebald’s narrator advances. Our perceptions of the dissected corpse, which itself appears secondhand³ in a painting, are forever informed by this theory of subjection. And this theory is not without its own emotional baggage—as Jim Bernstein puts it, “there is a more than casual fierceness to [the narrator’s] critique of Cartesianism” (Bernstein 35). For all of his attempts to adopt the tone of a practiced scholar, the narrator struggles to maintain neutrality—his disgust is evident in particular areas when he utilizes adjectives like “crass” and “grotesquely” to describe the scene (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 16). All of these factors nullify the argument that we alone can see the dissection scene with 100 percent clarity. Yes, we aren’t looking mistakenly at the anatomical atlas believing that it holds all the answers to the flesh, but we also can’t view the body in the neutral, untainted way that the narrator upholds as the ideal way of gazing, “free of Cartesian rigidity” (17).

In fact, it seems that the longer the narrator engages with the painting, the more he appears to be practicing the kind of meaning-excavation characteristic of symptomatic reading. He performs certain stylistic oddities: at one point, it becomes apparent that the narrator is co-

³ What’s more, we can never really know what was truly going on at the dissection scene because we weren’t present at the anatomical amphitheater on that day in 1632; we are merely making judgments from a photocopied painting inside a book published in 1998.

opting Rembrandt's painterly aspirations to show the body from all perspectives in his verbal analysis of the painting. Muriel Pic remarks that the narrator looks at the painting "in terms of a montage of points of view," similar to the montaged manner that Rembrandt depicts the anatomically backwards hand (Pic 8). Flipping through various focalizations as if he were the narrator in a Jane Austen novel, the narrator wonders in one sentence how Rembrandt would have looked upon the scene, in another how Descartes would have viewed it, in yet another, Thomas Browne. But neither Rembrandt, Descartes, nor Browne are present in the actual painting reproduced for us in the text. Even so, though "we have no definite evidence for this," the narrator asserts quite aggressively that Browne had been present at this dissection (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 11). Why or how he has come to this conclusion is not apparent; he merely takes this hypothesis as fact and continues, "we have no evidence to tell us from which angle Thomas Browne watched the dissection" (17), as if this were a more pertinent point than whether he were even present in the first place. And then there is the bewildering addition of fog to the scene. Perhaps Browne could not see the body as it really was, the narrator muses, because of "the white mist that rises from within a body ... which during our lifetime ... clouds our brain when asleep and dreaming" (17). All of this diminishes the image we have built of the narrator as an authority; as readers, we are not sure what to believe. On the one hand, his reasoning behind the inverted hand in the painting appears to make logical sense. On the other, what do we make of the ridiculous claims he formulates of the presence of Thomas Browne and the fog that supposedly obscured his view of the tortured body?

To make sense of these contradictions, we must bear in mind that, at this point, the narrator's analysis isn't a surface reading anymore—his comments aren't spontaneous emissions uninformed by prior knowledge that deal exclusively with features of the painting. They are

consistently deformed and informed by a metatextual cloud of historical reenactment; he is quite literally trying to recreate the scene of that day in Amsterdam, January 1632. He talks about what Rembrandt might have seen from his vantage point, what the paying public or Descartes or Browne viewed on their end. But what happens as the analysis progresses deeper is that these spectators take on an increasingly diagrammatic role—as shown in the example of Thomas Browne, it doesn't even matter that “we have no definite evidence” for whether he was present at the dissection; what's more important is what Browne *represents* about proto-Enlightenment thinking (12). These historical figures serve no other purpose than to service the argument Sebald's narrator is advancing about the medieval nature of the dissection and his claims about the disappearance of the body. Knowing this, we realize that the analysis of the painting is no longer really about the painting. It's about the anger that Sebald's narrator feels toward Renaissance ideals of dissection, his fears about how the anatomy of the body could be reduced to the schema of a grid. Once that metatextual cloud of historical re-creation takes full form, there is no possibility of returning to the “it,” the painting untainted by the critical gaze. As the theory becomes more developed, the painting effectively vanishes before our eyes.

Taken further, we can draw an analogy between the painting's reception and the body's dissection. In its medical sense, a dissection suggests the methodical division of an animal body for the purposes of “critical examination” (“dissection,” n.). Through his own critical examination, Sebald's narrator is “dissecting” the Rembrandt painting: he divides each of the spectators into their own constituent points of view; he probes deeper into the intentions of the artist. But it seems that the more he dissects it, the less it resembles a painting and the more it resembles a theory. In *The Body Emblazoned*, Jonathan Sawday draws a similar parallel to medical dissection: “anatomization takes place so that, in lieu of a formerly complete ‘body’, a

new ‘body’ of knowledge and understanding can be created. As the physical body is fragmented, so the body of understanding is held to be shaped and formed” (Sawday 2). Sawday sees the act of cutting up of a body as a portal into the development of new “body”: a “body” of knowledge. Yet, Sawday adds, “the ‘thing’—the secret place, the core of bodily pleasure or knowledge of the body—always escapes representation” (Sawday 12). We can never really “know” the interiors of a body intimately; that information is always encountered secondhand, whether through an X-ray, a photograph, or an anatomical demonstration (Sawday 7). To bring this back to the Rembrandt painting, Sebald’s narrator argues quite insistently that the surgeons are neglecting the physical flesh in favor of the theoretical realm, to the point that they even mentally superimpose the drawing from the anatomical atlas onto the left forearm of the corpse on the table. But isn’t the narrator doing the same thing with his analysis? As he moves further and further away from the painting, attempting to probe the scene for figures that are not there, the more his carefully excavated interpretation breaks down. His determinedly theoretical view of what the painting represents devolves into hypothetical suppositions and fabrications; it is, in itself, a type of superimposing.

In this scene, Sebald ingeniously nests the failure of reading too deeply into a text by means of a theory in a scene that purports to be attending to the flesh. When his narrator performs the same search for a hidden referent that concerns the reader in the first chapter of this thesis, he too is denied the connective epiphany that will explain away the painting. Though he does make some progress in advancing a reading of Rembrandt’s intentionality in his portrayal of the dissection, this progress is stalled as soon as the analysis devolves into a discussion of what Thomas Browne saw or didn’t see at the scene. This is how the corporality of the body acts

as the mirror for which we engage with the corpus of the text. As one thing (the theory) materializes, the other one (the body, the painting, the text) will disappear.⁴

The traumatized flesh

We now have a more nuanced way of viewing the absence of the traumatic referent in Sebald's works. Conventional trauma theory begins with the conviction that there must be a referent to the traumatic experience, and that once the referent becomes visible, the patient can begin to be cured; this is what psychoanalysis is for. But as I have shown in three separate instances—in the scene with the torture chamber at Breendonk, the probing of the breadcrumb-armored fish at Lowestoft, and now in an enveloped dissection of a Rembrandt painting about dissection—the longer we search for the traumatic referent that supposedly explains away the symptoms, the more elusive that referent becomes. It appears to be a methodological problem: Sebald seems to be saying that engaging in an answer-driven literary practice that aims to retrieve a traumatic referent ends up becoming the very thing that hinders us from accessing that referent. The narrator's extended analysis of the Rembrandt painting and our own analysis of the narrator's analysis is emblematic of the unavoidable barrier between theory and practice. Exact observance of a theory, whether a theory of trauma or something else—will lead to the inevitable disappearance of whatever we are searching for. The referent seems to slip away the moment we get too close to the theory, collapsing the presumption that if we have a referent, then we have elucidated the trauma.

So where does that leave us? With the flesh. William Heckscher astutely points out that the Rembrandt painting represents the difference between *elucidare*—to explain, represented by

⁴ This is something typically characteristic of literary analysis. The closer you dig, the more the text falls apart and dissolves. This is why the more plausible a theory becomes, the less related to the text it is.

the surgeons gazing determinedly at the anatomical atlas as a way to unlock the “machine within”—and *illustrare*—to illuminate, represented by the traumatized body taking center stage on the dissecting table (Heckscher 62). Sebald appears to be urging for an interpretative methodology that *illustrates* rather than *elucidates*. This idea is confirmed by the fact that the most evocative portrayals of what it means to be traumatized lie not with academic analyses, but with two visual images. The first is a description of the first time the narrator lays eyes upon *The Anatomy Lesson*, after a man wielding a kitchen knife passes so close to the narrator that he imagines he feels it on his own ribs (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 82). And upon encountering the Rembrandt painting at the Hague after this frightening incident, the narrator is “so out of sorts,” “so affected by the painting that later it took [him] a full hour to recover” (82-83). This scene of contact without contact, colored by an attentiveness to knives, vulnerability, and bodily wounds, powerfully evokes what it means to be traumatized by diffusion, rather than lengthy engagements of elucidation. The narrator is experiencing a condition of being traumatized without even having been wounded; instead, he receives a kind of trauma by adjacency, an adjacency that vertiginously translates across to the reader in a way that requires no explanation.

The second image shows up when the author displays the painting again after his fugue on Browne, this time without commentary. The reproduction simultaneously zooms outward and crops Dr. Tulp and the rest of the surgeons out of the image, as if the spectator had taken a step backward and narrowed the viewfinder on his camera.



Figure 5. *The Anatomy Lesson*, cropped

The body, now reduced in size, is the only thing that remains in our field of vision. This time, the book is completely cut out, as are the faces of most of the doctors. Such a movement, which recalls the narrator's paraphrase of a Thomas Browne quote a few pages afterward: "the greater the distance, the clearer the view," could not be a clearer entreaty for us to focus exclusively on the body (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 19). Though we see the body from a further vantage point, the distance somehow puts everything in focus. Sebald seems to suggest that in order to understand the experience of being traumatized, we don't need to look for the answer in the text, theory, or even a close-up of the painting. All we need is a small rectangle of a suffering body being sliced open by a pair of dissecting scissors.

Chapter 3: Shocks and Shells

The excision of referent

In the previous chapters I have argued that Sebald's representations of trauma contain no referent—though leitmotifs repeat and characters manifest symptoms of being traumatized, no simple cause-and-effect relationship between initial event and subsequent traumatized state can be extracted through a psychoanalytic reading. But how is the effect of origin-less trauma produced? In this chapter I would like turn my focus on a particular scene in *The Emigrants*—Ambros Adelwarth's electroshock treatment—that offers a window into how this end condition originates. Unlike all the rest of the episodes I have examined, Adelwarth's initial encounter with trauma following the death of his best friend, Cosmo Solomon, actually adheres to a standard Freudian symptomatic reading. However, once Adelwarth leaves mysteriously for a sanatorium with the intention of undergoing electroshock therapy, this symptomatic reading degrades into a slightly more slippery surface reading of shells and paralysis that shares features with episodes from Breendonk, Lowestoft, and others.

I point out that through a surface reading of Sebald's traumatized prose style—a reading, literally, of surfaces, in the form of hollowed-out husks—we can discover an interpretative model that aligns more closely with the author's literary aesthetic, a model that I refer to as Sebald's "geometric" model of being traumatized. This ad hoc schematic, informed in part by the observations of psychiatrist Judith Herman and largely based on the flesh of Sebald's texts, identifies the numerous points of contact that Adelwarth's condition has with those of other characters we've encountered. From this reading I suggest that Adelwarth's singleminded willingness to submit to electroshock treatment acts as a metaphor for how all traumatized

characters reach their referent-less states. In the fourth and final chapter, I will go on to utilize this geometric schematic to examine another component of Sebald's prose style: his photography.

Signs and symptoms

The Emigrants acts as a container for four separate narratives, each of which handles the biography of a character that bears some distant relation to the narrator. The third of these chapters, "Ambros Adelwarth," recounts the tale of the narrator's great uncle Ambros, who dies in a sanatorium after being subjected to too many bouts of electroshock treatment. The narrative telescopes from the present to the past, exploring in great detail the relationship "of the other persuasion" between Adelwarth and Cosmo Solomon, for whom Adelwarth worked as valet and traveling companion (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 88). The two are so close that Solomon refuses to dine with anyone but Adelwarth; when they check into a hotel together, Solomon signs the register as *frères*—brothers.

Though most critics turn toward the relationship between Adelwarth and Solomon in order to examine the author's handling of queer sociality, I am particularly interested in this scene because it contains what doesn't usually surface in Sebald's works: a stable traumatic referent. I argued in the first chapter that attempts to discover the central referent for a character's psychological wound largely led to stalled epiphany by means of the text, but it is in the Adelwarth story where such a search comes to fruition—there is a viable cause-and-effect relationship between the death of Cosmo Solomon and Adelwarth's suffering condition. Solomon succumbs to death after war breaks out in Europe. Shortly thereafter, Adelwarth departs from his home in Mamaroneck, leaving only a cryptic message on a visiting card stuck to

the mirror of his apartment: “Have gone to Ithaca. Yours ever—Ambrose” (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 103).

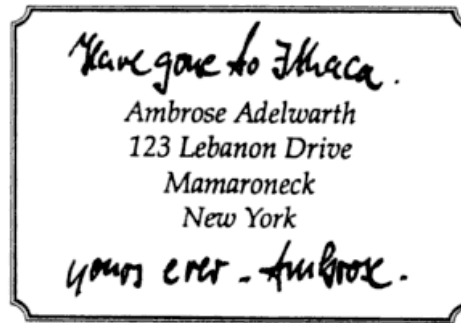


Figure 6. Adelwarth’s message

Ithaca, the narrator later discovers, is the home of the Samaria Sanatorium, a psychiatric clinic where Adelwarth receives numerous iterations of electroshock treatment, shocks that eventually come to consume him. Dora Osborne interprets Adelwarth’s mysterious departure as a type of unsubstantiated wanderlust: “both the visiting card and the journey away to the Odyssean *locus classicus* of origin and return indicate the instability of any notion of permanence or belonging” (Osborne 312).

Unlike the other examples I’ve cited in Sebald’s prose fictions, we can utilize the Freudian model of trauma to describe Adelwarth’s situation. A strong relationship between two men forms, then breaks when one of them dies. This is the trauma, the shock. The death does not immediately register for Adelwarth—he gets a new job and immerses himself in his work, taking care of Solomon’s father until he passes away. This acts as the latency period: as Cathy Caruth establishes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly” (4). Then finally, the devastating experience returns to him and repeats: Adelwarth finds he cannot blot away the memories of his past life with Solomon, remembering even the smallest details with “astounding precision” (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 100).

To Caruth, trauma manifests itself through an individual's compulsive return to the trauma in the form of a repetition compulsion, a compulsion that reflects that individual's inability to distinguish past from present. Adelwarth comes to be so tormented by the procedures surrounding Solomon's passing that he must check himself into a psychiatric clinic—a behavior congruent with Caruth's theory that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 4-5).

Yet it is at the sanatorium where something interesting begins to happen: the attempted *erasure* of traumatic referent. Adelwarth becomes the subject of an experimental technique called the “block method,” which consists of a barrage of more than 100 electric shocks delivered over the course of a few days. Since Adelwarth stays at the sanatorium for more than six months, the presiding doctor cannot even quantify how many shocks he had administered to the melancholic patient. But more significant than the number of shocks is Adelwarth's readiness to submit to these treatments. Though the experience of the block method is brutal—dislocated shoulders and jaws, teeth broken, fractures of various kinds—and many patients have to be “frogmarched” to the treatments, Adelwarth never misses an appointment (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 111). Described as “longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember,” Adelwarth wants nothing more than to completely obliterate his memories of Solomon, to blot out the event—the traumatic referent—responsible for his traumatized state, and looks resolutely toward the electroshock therapy as the method that will hasten his cure (114). The name of the treatment, the “block” method, seems particularly apt for its purposes—its purpose is to block, to obstruct, to occlude those memories that bear relation to the initial trauma.

In some sense, the electroshock therapy is successful, since the original traumatic event appears to have dissolved: Adelwarth's dreams are no longer beleaguered by memories of his best friend. A defining characteristic of trauma, as Freud sees it, are the dreams and visions experienced by the suffering patient; unlike normal dreams, which are always symbolic for some repressed desire, traumatic dreams and visions are defined by an ineluctable literalness. During the waking state, these spontaneous emissions of memory appear as flashbacks; during sleep, they appear as traumatic nightmares. In *War Stress and Neurotic Illness*, Abram Kardiner describes this perseverative dream as "one of the most characteristic and at the same time one of the most enigmatic phenomena we encounter in the disease" (Kardiner 201). However, traumatic visions and repetitions—whether in sleep or waking—are not at all a part of Adelwarth's experiences at the Samaria Sanatorium. While these dreams had certainly been a component of his experience pre-treatment—his inability to block out past events of "astounding precision" lies testament to this—there is no evidence in the text that post-treatment, these dreams have continued (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 100).

But Adelwarth is not, by any definition of the word, "cured." He becomes a skeleton of his former self, deteriorating both physically and psychologically. He grows thinner and thinner. His hands tremble; his face becomes lopsided, his left eye moving restlessly. He speaks sparingly. He is devoid of any meaningful interiority: the narrator's aunt comments that "Adelwarth the private man had ceased to exist ... nothing was left but his shell of decorum" (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 99). In the final days before death, Adelwarth is almost completely paralyzed in his joints and limbs, a condition the doctor reports was likely brought on by the shock therapy. Something deeply agitating appears to have happened during the block method: though the original event of trauma seems to have disappeared, Adelwarth still appears to be

traumatized—indeed, even more so than he had been prior to the therapy. It seems that though Adelwarth desires to have an experience excised from his memory, he is not able to do so without fundamentally destroying his health

Holes and wholes

In order to make sense of the strange transition that overcomes Adelwarth while at the Samaria Sanatorium, I move from a reading that probes for symptoms as a way to diagnose and cure to one that merely registers what it means for a character to be traumatized. Sometimes, as Anne Annlin Cheng puts it, “it is not a question of what the visible hides but how it is that we have failed to see certain things on its surface” (Cheng 101). In our quest for an interpretative model that antagonizes the text for a hidden meaning, the literal surfaces of the traumatized characters—the skin, the clothes, the fortresses—have become invisible to us. The following section attempts to restore an interpretative strategy that directly extracts from its own “flesh” an ad hoc schematic of reading what it means to be traumatized, which I call Sebald’s “geometric” model. Though the geometric model isn’t a traditional explanatory paradigm in the sense that it doesn’t rationalize why or how a particular traumatized condition came to be, it is one that engages intimately with the body of the text. Whatever might be lost in critical specificity is gained in faithfulness and accuracy to the objects and characters of analysis.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman describes two phenomena that are observed in traumatized individuals: intrusion and constriction. Intrusion is a feature that is qualitatively similar to the “haunting” and “possession” that Freud describes in his shellshocked patients. Herman describes intrusion as “reliv[ing] the event as though it were continually recurring in the present” (Herman 37). The traumatized individuals “cannot resume the normal

course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. ... The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory” (Herman 37). Constriction is largely the opposite. It describes a state of surrender, marked by symptoms of “detached calm, in which terror, pain, and rage dissolve” (Herman 42). Events are “disconnected from their ordinary meanings,” and “perceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations” (Herman 43). Herman cites a rape victim who describes her constricted state as an out-of-body experience; her body leaves the husk it was enveloped in, and she feels as if she is just a “shell on the bed” (Herman 43). According to Herman, these experiences of intrusion and constriction will oscillate in the traumatized patient, continually rupturing the psyche with their discontinuities; it is this dialectic of opposing psychological states that is the most characteristic feature of the post-traumatic syndromes.

Post-therapy, what Adelwarth seems to be experiencing is constriction without the intrusion. No traumatic dreams or visions concerning the death of Cosmo Solomon ever invade Adelwarth’s psychic shield after he submits himself to the block method (a fundamental characteristic of intrusion), but he *does* manifest many of the symptoms of constriction: his defenses break down in his continued submission to the shock therapy, and he experiences waves of both linguistic and physiological paralysis. And Adelwarth doesn’t just psychically experience constriction; his thinning body, quite literally, *constricts*. The narrator depicts Adelwarth’s worsening physicality as this: “the older Uncle Adelwarth grew, the more hollowed-out he seemed to me, and the last time I saw him ... it was as if his clothes were holding him together” (Sebald, *The Emigrants* 88). “Hollowed-out” intimates a perimeter that lines an empty core, the critical mass distributed outward rather than toward the center. Adelwarth’s clothes act as a “shell” that contains his ever-shrinking body. As time passes, that body grows smaller and

smaller, a nucleus that seems to be consuming itself from within. Therefore, the physical descriptor “hollowed-out” offers a geometric model of constriction commensurate with Adelwarth’s psychic experience.

Though Herman does not make such strict delineations between the two psychic states, the divorce of intrusion from constriction seems to capture the difference between *trauma* and being *traumatized*. Because memories of Cosmo Solomon no longer invade Adelwarth’s dreams and waking moments, the original event of trauma—the traumatic referent—seems to have dissolved. But constriction—a psychic quality of surrender fundamental to the condition of being traumatized—is still very much present. What Adelwarth seems to have excised, then, is the *event* of original trauma, but not the *state*. Though the initial circumstances of trauma have been blotted from memory, what lingers is the condition of being *traumatized*.

I would like to point out that “hollowed-out” is not a descriptor unique to Adelwarth’s condition. We witness a number of episodes where objects enclosed in perimeters are not commensurate with the size of the shells enveloping them. Any fortress described, whether real or metaphorical, is discovered to be hollow: The narrator of *Austerlitz* cannot locate the feelings of anguish from the torture chamber at the fortified encampments at Breendonk, just as the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* cannot find the fish beneath the breadcrumb plating. The quality of geometric constriction seems to pervade all characters’ psyches, bearing witness to the idea that they, like Adelwarth, are also traumatized, but that their conditions cannot be readily traced back to an original trauma.

As it happens, the intact perimeter and shrinking core serves as an apt metaphorical model for the psyche as Sebald sees it. A cure-centered model of trauma necessitates a referent, the embrace of the referent, and its eventual incorporation into the psyche: as Ruth Leys puts it in

Trauma, A Genealogy, one of the major goals of therapy is to “get the patient to remember by restoring the ‘pathogenic secret’ ” (2-3). The pathogenic secret is an analog for the traumatic referent, the part of the psyche that holds whatever event brought about the patient’s state of trauma. This therapeutic model—which assumes that following the restoration and reincorporation of the pathogenic secret, the psyche will pop back into place—intimates that a cured psyche is in some sense “full” or “complete.” However, J.J. Long points out that “Sebald diverges from Freud ... in his portrayal of the possibility of effective therapy” (Long, “Intercultural Identities” 516). Whereas for Freud, the acceptance and eventual disappearance of a traumatic referent ought to lead to the restoration of psychological health, Sebald’s prose fictions “do not contain within them the possibility of a salutary working-through” (Long, “Intercultural Identities” 517). Sebald’s presentation of these hollowed-out shells equally appears to work in opposition to this cure-centered model. A shell with objects that are smaller than the perimeter that encloses them will never be “full”; visually, it will always resemble a ring. As I have established in the first two chapters of this thesis, Sebald’s invitation for us to witness the experience of the flesh serves as an entreaty to accept things as they are, rather than what they might be; so while a symptomatic reading of the hollowed-out shell would set up the expectation of restoring the core as a means to cure, a surface reading acknowledges the missing core as a fundamental quality of the text as is. When gazing at the geometric model of being traumatized from a surface level, it seems appropriate that the content of Sebald’s prose fictions are never particularly concerned with finding a cure for his traumatized characters; the schematic model of constriction just doesn’t allow for such a trope.

In this sense, there is a significant distinction between Freud’s geometric model of trauma and Sebald’s. To Freud, trauma is described as any shock or stimulus that bursts through the

psychological wall built up by the individual. Restoration of the wall will lead to restoration of the psyche. But in Sebald's narratives, what defines the experience of being traumatized is not so much the destruction of the wall, but of the core—the lost traumatic referent. The end, post-traumatic result is this imagery of the hollowed-out shell: we witness the guano-encrusted fortifications of Breendonk with a hollowed torture chamber on the inside, the mountains of frozen breadcrumbs hiding an absent fish, and hollow-socketed Adelwarth, rattling around in his cufflinks and bow tie. In Freud's paradigm, the referent is omnipresent, so strong that it punches through the psychic shield and dissolves the border between inside and outside, whereas in Sebald's model, the referent shrinks with time, all the more elusive the longer we search for it. The geometric difference between trauma and being traumatized is incorporated into the way the fortifications are represented: in trauma, with the perimeter breached but the core intact; in being traumatized, with the perimeter unbroken but the core shrunken in size.

A cure that kills

Despite the fact that we can utilize a symptomatic reading to exhume a traumatic referent from Adelwarth's traumatized state, it doesn't appear to add any depth to our understanding of the rest of Sebald's prose fictions. Just because we manage to track one character's cognitive wound back to its original point of contact—which, for Adelwarth, would be the death of Cosmo Solomon—it doesn't mean that we can elucidate the rest of the characters' conditions better. We certainly cannot say that *all* of the other characters experience symptoms of being traumatized because they, too, are suffering from the loss of Cosmo Solomon. The only thing a psychoanalytic mode appears to accomplish is to drive a wedge between those characters in

Sebald's prose fictions who *have* justification for being traumatized and those characters who do not.

A surface reading, however, enables us to draw the two types of characters together, offering a geometric model that pays attention to shelled surfaces and cores that shrink with time and touch. Bear in mind that *all* of the end conditions of Sebald's characters share these features. They, like Adelwarth, deteriorate temporally with time. They, like Adelwarth, fail to manifest the dreams and hallucinations characteristic of traumatic intrusion, and they, like Adelwarth, experience the dissociative feelings intrinsic to constriction. We've seen how the imagery of the hollowed-out shell pervades all parts of Sebald's prose fictions, and we witness symptoms of linguistic and physiological paralysis in multiple episodes. To name a few, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* is rendered mute and lame after a long journey, and Austerlitz, coming closer to understanding his Jewish heritage, is overcome with the "total paralysis of [his] linguistic faculties" (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 3, *Austerlitz* 140). Though a surface reading might see Adelwarth as a hyperbolic exemplar of Sebald's depictions of traumatized characters, he's certainly not a deviation from them.

We might call Adelwarth's desire to receive shock therapy a metaphor for how an initial trauma can come to be excised from a traumatized condition. I've identified instances in the previous two chapters in which strict adherence to the Freudian cure-centered model of trauma—where discovery and eventual elimination of the traumatic referent will eventually restore a condition of health—will actually cause the referent to recede more into the distance. Adelwarth, too, appears to possess this Freudian mentality of referent elimination. In *Understanding W.G. Sebald*, Mark McCulloh points out that Adelwarth "recognizes his depression not as an existential despair but as a pathological condition" (McCulloh 37). He, like the symptomatic

reader, reads his surface features as belonging to a kind of disease that must be dealt with relentlessly and singlemindedly. It is through the aggressive technique of electroshock therapy that he is ultimately rendered *traumatized* but no longer suffering from *trauma*, a condition qualitatively similar to those of the other referent-less characters. Thus, the biography of Adelwarth acts as a kind of parable for how a state of traumatization can become unlinked from the traumatic origins that brought it on.

Rather than elucidate the traumas that don't have readily exhumable referents, Adelwarth's electroshock experience has enabled us to map the untethering of trauma from being traumatized as a process that is hastened the more determined a character is to find a cure. It's provided us with a geometric model of shells and surfaces that can be used to "read" other traumatized characters and events. Though I only implicitly and retroactively utilized this model to look at Sebald's textual narrative, there is another aspect of the author's prose style that I have not yet addressed: photography. Therefore in the next chapter I would like to pursue the argument further, utilizing this geometric model to read Sebald's images as also a function of being traumatized but not of trauma, and explore the ways in which a traumatized style can manifest itself not just in the verbal narrative, but also in the texts' photographic discourse.

Chapter 4: Photographic Film

Sebald and photography

Up until now I have only discussed Sebald's traumatized prose style in regards to his text, but the author's four prose fictions are populated with another literary element: the photographic image. Sebald's photographs and artworks, which total more than three hundred in number, are considered a crucial aspect of the author's mode of writing; Sebald has many times discussed his interest in collapsing the image's distinction from text: "I write up to these pictures and I write out of them also, so they really are part of the text and not illustrations" (Bigsby 155). Since Sebald considers his images to be a critical feature of his prose style, any argument that addresses such a style must also contend with the author's use of photography as an essential feature to the condition of being traumatized.

Thusfar, the body of literature that tackles Sebald's use of photography has largely been interested in troubling the image-text relationship—how a photograph that clearly refers to something bears association to a fictional narrative whose referent is either arbitrary or nonexistent. Many critics—among them J.J. Long, Stefanie Harris, and Carolin Duttlinger—have agreed that the photographs in Sebald's narratives tend to unsettle the relationship between text and image rather than provide documentary evidence to the surrounding story. They believe that Sebald's photographs don't illustrate in any sense of the word, since illustration suggests a clarifying link between image and text. Long and Harris both speak of the "ontological hide-and-seek that Sebald plays with his readers, which both invites and thwarts attempts to separate fact from fiction" (Long, "History, Narrative, and Photography" 117-118). Harris is specifically interested in the photograph's relationship to trauma and memory: how the photograph refers

back to an irretrievable past while the narrative fails to temporally coincide with it. Duttlinger is similarly concerned with the association of photography with trauma, and shows how photography provides “both a theoretical model and a mode of visual testimony that accompanies [Austerlitz’s] quest for his repressed past” (Duttlinger, “Traumatic Photographs” 170).

While I am not arguing against the critical consensus that Sebald’s handling of photography disturbs the binary opposition between past/present or fiction/nonfiction, there is a limitation to such readings: they are largely dependent on linguistic cues to inform what it is we are looking at. For instance, one of the most frequently referenced passages in the Sebaldian critical corpus is a scene from *The Rings of Saturn* where the narrator gets lost in a garden labyrinth at Dunwich Heath. When he looks down from a higher perspective he sees the full blueprint of the maze, and it is at this point he knows “with absolute certainty” that the maze “represent[s] a cross-section of [his] brain” (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 173).



Figure 7. The “cross-section of my brain”

This scene has been furnished as evidence on a variety of topics ranging from déjà vu (Rapport) to getting lost (Zilcosky) to Sebald’s homage to *King Lear* (Sherman), but few of these readings have opted to sever the image entirely from the text as a mode of analysis. Instead,

critics have taken the narrator's "absolute certainty" that the pattern represents "a cross-section of [his] brain" as fact without troubling the strange association (*Sebald, The Rings of Saturn* 173). This is a curious statement to accept without question; the image resembles a garden maze more than anything else, and its oblong shape is only vaguely reminiscent of a cognitive blueprint. But because the narrator reports with "absolute certainty" that this image is a map of his mind, the reader, and by extension the critic, trusts him, with equal certainty, that this is exactly what the image depicts. Some have even subconsciously referred to it as a brain—Romi Mikulinsky gestures to the image repeatedly as an "extension of [the narrator's] troubled mind" (Mikulinsky 54).

I maintain that Sebald's images can be examined, in the absence of any accompanying narrative, as a form of text. In her book *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*, Lise Patt advocates for the close reading of Sebald's photographs without contextual indicators, particularly in the author's later works. Patt observes that *The Rings of Saturn* marks the first time that Sebald not only added images taken with his own camera, but also purposefully *manipulated* them (91). The work is concentrated in photographs that have some visual defect on their seductive black-and-white surfaces—scratch marks, uneven cropping, overexposure, underexposure—impressed upon them. As a result, we find that Sebald's intentional interrogation of the photographic surface grapples with real questions of the medium's essence; the author is not only concerned with the content an image communicates, but the way in which it is presented to us. In interviews, Sebald has simultaneously defended his manipulation of images and tried to eliminate their distinction from text: "I change things in them, brush things in or cut things out or make them more gloomy or lighter, depending on what I need to do. ... If they were produced in a much better form ... then they would ruin the text. They must not stand

out; they must be of the same leaden grain as the rest” (Biggsby 155). Therefore, Patt asserts that by *The Rings of Saturn*, “photographs are no longer just important *Bildmaterial* used to augment Sebald’s prose, but they have become objects worthy of study in and of themselves” (91).

Hence, I would like to look at this photograph in the absence of textual context to see whether the geometric model established in the previous chapter—that is, that the experience of reading Sebald represents the permanent condition of *being traumatized*, but not of *trauma*—applies visually as well as textually, and to examine whether and where the mediums diverge. Any conversation on trauma and photography must include Roland Barthes’s reflections in *Camera Lucida*, so I will begin with a discussion of how Freud might contend with Barthes’s conception of the *studium* and *punctum* of an image. Following this I will engage in a reading of the garden maze photograph using the geometric model of being traumatized and the base terms set up by Freud and Barthes. Ultimately I aim to demonstrate that the idea of no referent, of trauma as a state of being, is consistent throughout Sebald’s works regardless if the author chooses to communicate through words or images, provided that we isolate the text from the photograph to prevent unnecessary context from bleeding into our readings.

Studium, punctum, and trauma

Roland Barthes—a critic that Sebald has credited as being particularly influential to him (Baker)—is famous for his discourse on the traumatic nature of photographs in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes begins his argument by establishing the key distinction between narrative and image: Whereas a narrative’s traumatic referent is frequently masked or elided (particularly in Sebald’s works), the photograph’s referent is always present, right in front of us. “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes 5). To gaze at a photograph is to gaze at its

referent; the two are “glued together, limb by limb ... belong[ing] to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both” (Barthes 5-6). Photographs distinguish themselves from narrative, Barthes believes, because they simply are what they refer to—a man points to a photograph of himself and says “This is me” rather than “This is an image of me.” To Barthes, the photographic representation of a body cannot be separated from the body itself.

Barthes’s second argument contains his twin theses on the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* of a photograph is its information: the social, cultural, and historical knowledge that the viewer can gain when he or she gazes upon an image. We are always able to point to particular aspects of the photograph and call them *studium*; they are properties of what Barthes calls the *noeme*, or, the referent: features of the image that draw the viewer’s interest by way of “figures, faces, gestures, settings, actions” (26). But while every photograph has some component of *studium*, the *punctum*—the “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”—is a quality few photographs possess (26). A photograph’s *punctum* is that poignant detail which pricks the viewer, something in the image that elides description and brings it to life; “it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see” (59). Barthes sees the *studium* and the *punctum* as mutually exclusive; we cannot point to some property of the image and call it *studium* and *punctum* simultaneously. This is because, Barthes dictates, “what I can name cannot really prick me” (51). Therefore, finding the *punctum*, for Barthes, is a kind of proof by negation; if a particular detail has any component of *studium* to it, it can no longer be considered the *punctum*.

In one example, Barthes cites an 1863 photograph of Queen Victoria on horseback; in the image, we see her as the primary focus of the frame, her voluminous skirts swathing the front surface of the horse. Beside her, Barthes notices a kilted groomsman holding the equine's bridle; the presence of the groomsman, he asserts, is the *punctum*. "For even if I do not know just what the social status of this Scotsman may be ... I can see his function clearly: to supervise the horse's behavior: what if the horse suddenly began to rear? What would happen to the queen's skirt, *i.e.*, to *her majesty*" (Barthes 57)? The *punctum*, an unscripted, contingent detail of the image that doesn't claim center stage yet wounds the viewer anyway, is eventually what traumatizes; it causes us to come into contact with the real. Barthes can't go back to the Queen Victoria photograph without thinking about the bridle in the Scotsman's hand, and what would happen should the harness be let go.

That the *punctum* contains some aspect of trauma is undeniable. In "Barthes and Bazin: The Ontology of the Image," Colin MacCabe asserts that "the *studium* captures the relationship to the referent by placing it within the comprehensible world of objects," whereas "the *punctum* indicates that moment at which the referent touches the subject, destroying the world of objects" (MacCabe 74). Described as a "sting, speck, cut, little hole ... that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)," Barthes's description of the *punctum* recalls much of the language regarding the "shock" and "possession" that Freud employs to describe his shellshocked soldiers (Barthes 27, Freud 21). Geometrically, both trauma and the *punctum* are described as events that assault a boundary between inside and outside and cause the psyche to be profoundly destabilized; Freud depicts trauma as a stimulus that breaks through the psychic "shield" and renders the individual "possessed" (Freud 21), a model commensurate to Barthes's

portrayal of the *punctum* as the driving stimulus that breaks through the screen and allows the real to briefly poke through.

Furthermore, both the effects of trauma and the *punctum* are registered in the recipient belatedly. According to Freud's theory of latency, the original traumatic referent isn't traumatic during its initial experience; the condition of being traumatized is constructed after the fact through a later incident, an incident that repeats the referent but is not the referent itself. The *punctum* can be said to be experienced in a similar way. As Bianca Theisen puts it, "with *punctum*, Barthes extends the semiotic function of the uncoded message through the paradoxical temporality of the traumatic moment. Photography does not refer to or copy reality, yet it is referential in that it captures the real in a contingent detail like a traumatic moment. And like trauma, its temporality is one of belatedness" (Theisen, "The Art of Erasing Art" 557-558) This is because "reference in the photographic *punctum* is ... contingent on observation" (Theisen, "The Art of Erasing Art" 558). The individual does not feel traumatized at the same moment that the reality is captured in a photograph; the trauma of the *punctum* is experienced later through a delayed revival of that reality, which occurs when the traumatic referent revisits the viewer as he gazes upon the photograph. In this way, both the traumatic referent and the *punctum* of an image are experienced by an individual after they actually occur.

In geometric visualization, manner of experience, and temporality, Barthes's thesis on the *punctum* shares a number of similarities with the Freudian psychoanalytic model of trauma. And though Freud's paradigm embodies an optimistic component of healing not present in Barthes *punctum*—Freud ultimately hopes to knit what was experienced from the real back into a symbolic text, a text whose photographic counterpart would perhaps be the *studium*—both of

these models ultimately view a traumatic experience as attributable to some component of a referent.

A boundary breached

Having now established a relationship between trauma and the *punctum*, I will next turn to how Sebald's encounter with photography engages with these aspects of Barthes's theory. Can it be said to attend to *punctum* and *studium* in a similar way to Freud's, to Barthes's, or to neither? How does the experience of being traumatized configure into all of this? To investigate these variables, I'd like to return to the image in *The Rings of Saturn* that Sebald's narrator describes as his cognitive cross-section, and to conduct a surface reading of the photograph in the absence of any linguistic context.

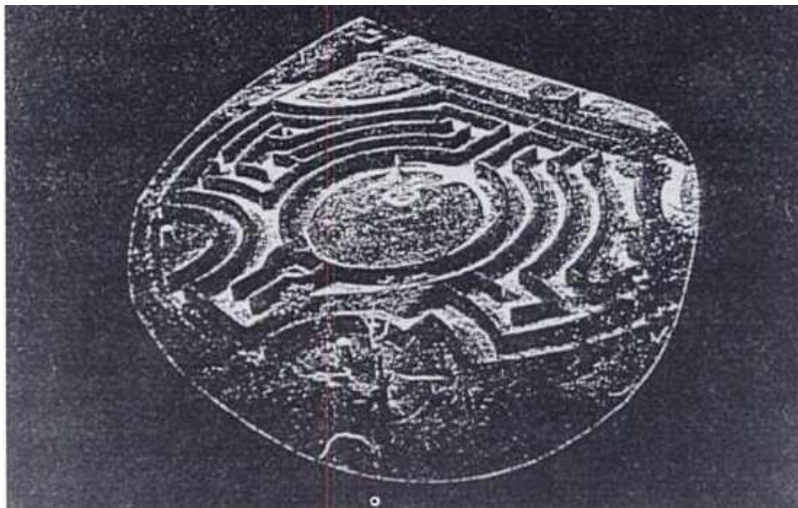


Figure 7. The “cross-section of my brain”

What's immediately evident in this photograph is that there is nothing in the frame other than the image and the black background on which it is placed; the juxtaposition heightens the sense of contrast between the inside and outside. Within the image, there is an even more complicated nest of boundaries. Pockets of light and dark indicate where the original space has

been emptied, and even with image's poor photocopying quality—an effect, perhaps, of too many facsimiles formed by the Xerox machine—we can see where the walls of the image have cast shadows. In other words, what we see is another depiction of a core surrounded by a perimeter, this time visually rather than textually represented. The strict delineation of inside from outside shares features with the practice of psychoanalysis, where the split between self and other was thought to be synonymous with the division between interior and exterior. According to Freud, the psyche is contained inside a tightly demarcated boundary, and any breakage to that boundary laid testimony to the intrusion of a traumatic stimulus. But in this particular image, I would like to point out that the outer boundary is *not* broken; for the most part, the line separating the black background from the image continues fluidly around the perimeter. Thus we can conclude that the *studium* of the image has *not* been recently ravaged by trauma—at least not in the Freudian sense of the word. The *punctum*—that “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”—does not manifest itself as Freud would expect it to, in the interruption of the image's outer perimeter (Barthes 26).

I would next like to draw attention to the photograph's visual defects: a jagged mess of scratches that dominates the bottom fourth of the image. What initially appears to be a neat enclosure of space dissolves into an erasure of walls the further our gaze descends. Notably, the outer perimeter of the image is more damaged than the inside, since the walls nearest the edge have completely disappeared into the black background save for a small, semicircular scratch, whereas those closer to the center are only in the process of decay—the walls have deformed into a muddle of lines, yet are still visible. The edges of the maze, particularly toward the bottom of the image, appear to be fraying inwards, gradually encroaching upon the center as more time passes. The whole thing can be said to be a boundary interrupted.

The intrusion upon the center doesn't appear to have come from an external force, since, as mentioned earlier, the outline delineating the black background and maze is largely unbroken. Rather, the walls seem to be consuming themselves from the inside. This consumption of self recalls the ulceritic sores employed to describe the blueprint of the Breendonk fortress in *Austerlitz*. In both instances, the damage inflicted upon the interior of the structure is self-generated. Like an ulcer, the "body" of the image turns against itself, as the membranes enclosing its internal spaces disintegrate and disappear into the black orifices it previously contained. We can imagine that as time passes, more of the internal fortifications will break down, until we are left with nothing but a perimeter and a small, shrunken core.

In Chapter Three, I drew attention to Sebald's use of verbal descriptors—clothes holding a rapidly decaying body together or a fortress caked with breadcrumbs that held only the skeleton of a fish—to discuss the shell and the core. Here we get to *see* an image of this shell in the process of decay. Once again, we know this decay is not a signifier of psychic trauma. Trauma would look like, in Freud's terms, a breach in the psychic wall. Trauma would mean that the boundary separating the inside from the outside would break, whereas in this particular image, it seems to be the *only* line impenetrable to destructive forces. But while the perimeter is undamaged, the core is gradually shrinking, being eaten away—*traumatized*—by the inside. The distinction between referent-driven trauma and the condition of being traumatized is encapsulated in this image of the mental "cross-section."

The force that produces this state of being traumatized isn't the *punctum* as Freud would see it; to him, the *punctum* would be a property of the image—its referent—something about the scene that grabs the spectator and brings the photograph to life. Though there *is* a detail about the photograph that is arresting—its assaulted internal boundaries, its capacity to self-consume—this

element is *not* a property of the actual image, since we can presume that the original garden maze at Somerleyton did not have portions of its walls erased and its boundaries reduced to graininess. Rather, these effects are the sole responsibility of the Xerox machine, of Sebald's own hand in degrading "crisp(er) photographs down to blocks of indiscriminate leaden grays" (Patt 49). Thus, the condition of being traumatized is a property of the film—the *medium*—on which the image is printed, not its content. If there is a *punctum* that pierces us, we find it in the very materiality of the print on which the image is affixed to, rather than the image itself.

Sebald's characters react to the traumatizing nature of the photo's materiality in much the same way his readers do. In "Trauma Obscura: Photographic Media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," Samuel Pane argues that Sebald utilizes photographic film as a means to traumatize his characters, citing a scene where Austerlitz sits rearranging a series of uncaptioned photographs on the floor:

Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the gray tabletop, or he felt exhausted from the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 119)

Pane remarks that Austerlitz's viewing of the photographs is not traumatic in the same way that viewing Holocaust photos can be for Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, who encounters a series

of atrocity photographs of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camps and is struck by the poignancy of the content. “When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying” (Sontag 20). Sontag suggests that the act of viewing a photograph can wound the viewer and induce him or her to experience symptoms resembling trauma. But Sontag’s conviction of the image’s capacity to wound stands at stark contrast to Austerlitz’s situation; though he also appears to be traumatized from the collection of images laid out before him, his condition has not been brought on by the *content* of the photographs—there is nothing particularly arresting about the actual photos; they are merely a collection of family portraits, and what’s more, he is not even looking at them the right way up.

Rather, Pane says, “Austerlitz’s trauma seems to emerge from contact with the medium itself” (Pane 39). As he pushes “the pictures back and forth over each other,” Austerlitz is manipulating the photographs in a way that doesn’t engage with their contents—their referents—but rather with their materiality. As time passes, he appears more and more troubled, so “exhausted from the constant effort of thinking” that he is left an empty shell, and must “rest on the ottoman.” But it is not his encounter with the content that is so traumatizing—it’s the way that the images rub up against each other; the gray tabletop that remains, so similar to the way that Sebald describes his own technique with the Xerox machine: “they must be of the same leaden gray as the rest,” is what ultimately brings about his traumatized state (Bigsby 155). The referents that the photographs enclose on their surfaces seem to hardly matter; the mere act of touching the film and bumping up against its surface seems to be the devastating stimulus for Austerlitz.

In fact, how readers and characters encounter images—bumping up against the creases, dimples, dirt, dust, and scars of the photographic media—strongly resembles the way they experience the world of trauma. Sebald’s trauma is rendered as a diffusible substance that permeates all parts of the universe, that is knitted into the very texture of the world his characters inhabit. Trauma doesn’t so much attack as it does consume, gradually, over time. The narrator walks into a fortress and is traumatized. A woman serves up a platter of frozen fish and is traumatized. There doesn’t seem to be any specific cause to this condition. Try as we might, we can’t pinpoint some overarching event that devastates the psyche, just as we can’t identify some particular feature of the images—a referent—that wounds us. The entire photographic collection is what wounds Austerlitz—the act of skin coming into contact with silver nitrate film—not the objects that the images depict. Thus, Freud’s assertion that there is some component of the *studium* that wounds—the referent, what the photographic image portrays—is demonstrated to be false when we engage in a surface reading of Sebald’s pictures. To Sebald, to be traumatized is a natural part of living in the world, embroidered into the fabric of the medium, whether that medium is the human body, the style of writing, or the photographic film. In this way Sebald’s paradigm of photography and what it means to be traumatized is different from Freud’s depiction, less acute and more chronic—less a prick to the skin and more of a continuous, throbbing pain. Rather than emerging from the screen of the real and punching the viewer in the face, Sebald’s *punctum* resembles something like diffusion: the world of the real gradually seeping into the world of the symbolic. Such is the experience of being traumatized, but perhaps not of trauma.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have employed the strange, resonant term *being traumatized* to articulate the shape of Sebald's delicate universe rather than utilizing the standard vocabulary of *trauma*. This movement has been a purposeful one. Whereas *trauma* is a noun—a static event that sticks to the psyche and must be tidied away in order to reach a satisfactory state of health—*being traumatized* occupies the wispy liminal space between adjective and verb, descriptor and disembodied actor. *Trauma* is a system; it bestows a preconditioned theory upon an individual or text that, like Jameson's advocacy for symptomatic reading, seeks to reveal truths that “remain unrealized in the surface of the text” (Jameson 48). *Being traumatized* is a state; it embodies both condition and action, past and present. Rather than rallying for a search for hidden truths below a surface, being traumatized *is* the surface.

To Sebald, being traumatized is not an event that can be rubbed out with repetition or reincorporation; it is a vertiginous condition that increases with time and contact. It happens by chance, without cause. It occurs through contact—contact with skin, contact with theory, contact with photographic film. Unlike Freud's shellshocked soldiers, Sebald's characters don't just dream about past traumas that ruptured their psychic shields. Trauma invades the world that is experienced. It is a hollowing from within, bubbling out of the orifices between self and world, self and other, self and self.

Such a definition of what it means to be traumatized is perhaps less graspable than the one ordinarily employed to describe trauma. Trauma can often be explained in the confines of a few sentences. Jean Laplanche's classic definition in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* functions quite well: “Trauma is characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard

of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically. ... Effective cure is sought by means of an abreaction and a psychical working out of the traumatic experiences" (Laplanche and Pontalis 465-466). In two sentences, Laplanche manages to encapsulate a problem ("an influx of excitations"), its solution ("effective cure"), and a method for reaching that solution ("abreaction and a psychical working out of the traumatic experiences"). The attraction of the psychoanalytic model is that it contains an enormous amount of specificity, acting as a sort of instruction manual for the critic to read and employ as he or she wishes to a particular text or individual.

However, this interpretative strategy becomes problematic when one must decide *which* reader wields the most correct explanation of the text. A sticky tendency of the Sebaldian critical body's adherence to excavating a traumatic referent is its elimination of all other criticisms that precede it—if Sebald's prose fictions are about the Holocaust, can they also be about modernity? if they're about natural destruction, can they also be about displacement? How do we know for certain that the text is about any of these referents at all? Who ultimately holds the authority here? In this sense, my thesis is secondarily an inquiry of power. It asks the question: just how privileged *is* the reader when he or she interprets a text?

Michael Warner points out in *Uncritical Reading* that our critical modes have largely situated us in opposition to the works that we aim to analyze. Because of "the competitive positioning of professional discourse," Warner says, "the critic adopts a projectively aggressive defensiveness in relation to the object of criticism" (16-17). For this type of critic, freedom emerges from an antagonistic relationship with the ideological text, the appeal of which, according to Mary Thomas Crane, lies in the "heroic agency" it grants "in a theoretical landscape where agency ... is denied to other human actors" (Crane 78). Crane maintains that "the effect of

symptomatic reading is to empower a reader who is able to analyze the symptoms that appear on the surface of a text in order to diagnose the deep conflicts that it would conceal” (78). It places the reader in a position of power; he alone “is able to bring to light meaning that has been hidden from everyone else” (Crane 83).

But I would contend that this aggressive critical approach is not the all-encompassing liberation it purports to be. This is because everything we observe is ultimately mediated by the surface of the text. To return to the Rembrandt painting a final time, the only reason why we think we’re in a site of omniscient objectivity—that we alone can see the horrors enacted upon the body, while the surgeons and the paying public myopically gaze at the anatomical atlas for answers they will never receive—is because of how the text manages to reposition the corpse and the hand toward our focal points. Had this rhetorical strategy not been undertaken, we would not have registered any of the observational discontinuities that Sebald’s narrator points out about the scene. Thus, in our singleminded quest to probe for hidden meanings, surfaces have become invisible in our quest for depth: we forget to realize that it is the *text* that is the ultimate arbiter of what we can and cannot see.

We can witness a similar power dynamic arising in the psychoanalytic approach to interpreting trauma, in which the power to diagnose and cure lies not with the patient that suffers from the traumatic symptoms, but rather with the medical professional, who is never able to experience the condition firsthand. Such a model disenfranchises the subject of its analysis, wresting control away from the individual who suffers from the very condition it seeks to cure. It sacrifices accuracy to gain specificity, forgoing the precision of depicting a traumatized condition in order to pinpoint its submerged traumatic referent.

Yet Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that an “adversarial relation to the object of criticism”—whether that object be a text or a traumatized individual—is not the only way for the critic to experience liberation (16). Susan Sontag famously admonished in *Against Interpretation* that the primary work of a critic is to “show it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than ... show what it means” (5). Sontag’s manifesto refuses the notion that meaning and content can define a work of art, proposing that we set aside our hierarchies of power in order to experience art in its “pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy” (14). By creating a universe continually shot through with shocks, ruptured defenses, paralyses, shrunken cores, and unexplained bouts of nausea, Sebald pulls all of the invisible signs of being traumatized to the surface. His world is one of a psyche turned outward, embedding what it means to be traumatized into the style and medium of the prose. In utilizing a literary mode that attends to textual surfaces and addresses the Sebaldian experience of being traumatized as a fundamental background noise that emanates from the prose style, we are able to wrest the power away from the bickering critics and restore control to the rightful owner: the text itself. The aspiration of surface reading, to Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, is “to take text as manifestly manifest,” “as close to the letter as we can get and still be able to see anything” (139). It is not by any means a perfect model, but it is a democratizing one, and it is one that recognizes the experience of being traumatized in all of its natural complexity.

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