

**Pastoral Modes in the Poetry and Prose Fiction  
of W.G. Sebald**

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I extend the discussion of the works of W.G. Sebald beyond the more commonly discussed themes of melancholy, trauma, loss and memory. To this end I examine his long prose poem *After Nature* and his four books of prose fiction *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* to expose underlying pastoral modes and structural forms in these texts.

In *After Nature* I make the case for this poem to be read as an anti-pastoral text which runs true to the elegiac form but exhibits a subtext of pastoral and anti-pastoral tension. The first published work of prose fiction, *Vertigo*, I argue demonstrates the pastoral structural device, integral to pastoral form, of the double-plot and in so doing, extend William Empson's original thesis. In *The Emigrants*, I examine the parallels between Heimat and Pastoral by exposing the characters' difficult relationships with displacement both physically and psychologically and argue for an anti-Heimat mode expressed largely in anti-pastoral imagery. The *Rings of Saturn* demonstrates the impossibility of utopia by constantly deferring a potential pastoral both spatially and temporally during the narrator's "pilgrimage" across the Suffolk countryside. And finally in *Austerlitz*, we have a coalescence of pastoral modes structured as a discourse of retreat and return which, I argue, qualifies this work as a truly pastoral novel. In the final chapter I discuss the four short pieces of prose fiction in *Campo Santo*, which, although too brief to exhibit a pastoral form, demonstrate pastoral tropes commensurate with those discussed in the previous works.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**AN** - Sebald, W.G. *After Nature*, trans. by Michael Hamburger  
(London: Penguin, 2003).

**V** - Sebald, W.G. *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London:  
Harvill Press, 1999).

**E** - Sebald, W.G. *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse  
(London: Harvill Press, 1996).

**ROS** - Sebald, W.G. *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse  
(London: Harvill Press, 1998).

**A** - Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London:  
Penguin, 2001).

**CS** - Sebald, W.G. *Campo Santo*, ed. by Sven Meyer, trans. by  
Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

# Pastoral Modes in the Poetry and Prose Fiction of W.G. Sebald

## 1. Introduction

This thesis examines the English translations of Sebald's four works of prose fiction, *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, and his long prose poem *After Nature*. It is acknowledged that the inability to access his work in the original German places some constraints upon the interpretation of the texts and obviously prevents insight to much of Sebald's essays and literary critical writing of which, at the time of writing, little has been translated. There are several essays and critiques written in German, which also have therefore been inaccessible. While this has certainly impoverished an understanding of Sebald's particular approach to literature and its ability to foster a better appreciation of modern culture and history, it has not however weakened the arguments presented in the thesis which, it is to be emphasized, are primarily directed at the narrative function of pastoralism within the texts.

As discussed in depth below Pastoral is a multi-faceted concept and not simply a literary genre. This thesis is not therefore an attempt to categorise Sebald's prose and poetry as pastoral writing although some of the conventions attributed to the genre will be noted. Rather, it identifies pastoral modes and tropes within the texts and demonstrates how these operate and

function as narrative devices, which, it is argued, contribute to this author's particular narrative form.

Pastoral landscapes, as indeed Sebald's landscapes, may be physical spaces or psychological ones. In addition characters also represent the pastoral, and Sebald's fondness for the solitary introvert traveller is, as we shall discover, representative of the modern pastoral figure evolved from the lonely shepherd of traditional pastoral convention.

The primary device is the pastoral/anti-pastoral dynamic which creates a tension within the text. This is an example of pastoral functioning as a narrative structure and underpins much of Sebald's formal textual construct. We may for example note descriptive changes in physical landscapes between the idyllic and the menacing, between a character's psychological mood and the physical or psychological movement between rural and urban landscapes. This device facilitates and highlights Sebaldian themes which have been comprehensively discussed elsewhere under other headings. For example, his concern for nature and 'ecocentrism' is encapsulated time and again by contrasting a pastoral landscape against its antithesis; an anti-pastoral description of man's corruption of it. Exile and Heimat are two other, linked, leitmotifs in Sebald. These are also often represented by pastoral/anti-pastoral modes, the text becoming decidedly anti-pastoral for example when a character's personal Heimat is lost or under threat or when in enforced exile.

Pastoral's role as a textual analytic tool is developed further by examining Sebald's texts for evidence of other modes and reflecting on the way in which these function within it and contribute to the continually expanding body of scholarly research into his work.

The 'double-plot' device and comic interlude both feature in Sebald to a greater or lesser extent, in some cases perhaps to contrast a melancholic mood or accentuate it or, more significantly, as a structural device integral to the form of a chapter or complete work. These textual devices, while probably not true modes, are however central to pastoral and operate on the text in a similar manner to the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes by establishing a tension or binary opposition. We shall see examples of this particularly well illustrated in our discussion of Sebald's first work of prose fiction, *Vertigo*.

Pastoral 'retreat and return' may be a physical or mental occurrence, a dream, a memory or a journey either spatial or temporal. The retreat must deliver an insight or impact on a character's mind-set. These are ubiquitous throughout Sebald and as we shall develop, many of his 'digressions' function as this pastoral construct and reconfigure not only a character's perception of the text, but also the reader's.

The post-pastoral, a term coined by Terry Gifford<sup>1</sup>, is discussed below and with its six elements is a somewhat complex concept. However, its central tenet of 'literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 146-174.

illusions upon which Arcadia is premised,<sup>2</sup> is symptomatic of much of Sebald's work. It is precisely this reflexive element of modern pastoral that Sebald expresses through his, often autobiographical, characters whether it be for the loss of empathy with nature or the inability to acknowledge man's crimes past and present. In this sense alone therefore, Sebald may be considered a writer of pastoral texts although, as previously stated, it is not the purpose of this thesis to justify this statement but rather to critique his texts using pastoral methodology.

The use of terms such as Arcadia and idyll throughout the thesis is intended to denote a state of equilibrium, of well-being and Heimat. In this sense they equate to the classic or sentimental pastoral without their traditional motifs of a physical rural serenity. Heimat, a complex term without a direct translation into English, while not used synonymously with pastoral here, will be discussed further to clarify its use in this thesis.

The opening chapter of the thesis sets out some working definitions of pastoral and explains how, in some cases I develop or extend these terms for the purpose of textual analysis. For example, William Empson's description of 'double-plots' and Terry Gifford's pastoral 'retreat and return' have both evolved and been refined in the exegesis of Sebald's narratives for the purpose of this thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Gifford, p. 149.

The remaining chapters examine *After Nature* and his four works of prose fiction in the order in which they were published in German. This allows a more progressive discourse on the development of pastoral within the books than if taken in the order they appeared to the Anglophone reader. And while I make no claim for a more complex use of pastoral as the series progress, I attempt to make the case for a more consistent and constructive use of some modes over others in the different volumes.

Once again, it is to be emphasized that this thesis is not a work by a Germanist with a deep understanding of German history and literature. Rather, it is primarily that of a student of the pastoral bringing a further methodology of textual analysis to an author whose unique body of work increasingly attracts scholarly attention and defies categorization.

## 1.1 Some Definitions of Pastoral

In order to set my use of pastoral as a critical methodology in context, this section will present an overview of the terminology and development of pastoral. Where appropriate, reference will be made to Sebald's texts and some of the commentaries on them by Sebald scholars although without pre-empting any of the detailed readings that will be conducted in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, because my emphasis is on the structural model of pastoral, I will not seek to contextualise Sebald within the German tradition of pastoral writing but place him in a wider context more appropriate for him as a cosmopolitan writer.

It is generally accepted that pastoral writing originated in the third century B.C., in particular in the poetry of Theocritus. Regardless of genre, however, a key feature of pastoral writing is the celebration of rural life in the form of an idyll, traditionally, an episode or scene depicting serenity and tranquil happiness, and the elevation of simple pleasures, usually derived from nature. This is the pastoral or classic pastoral referred to in this thesis. From these origins all subsequent variations and refinements evolved, gradually coalescing into the literary convention of 'pastoralism', as Leo Marx<sup>3</sup> refers to it, built around the above motifs. Slightly later writers such as Virgil went on to introduce subtle complexities and tensions into pastoralism. Raymond Williams characterises the Virgilian pastoral as predicated upon a 'contrast [...] between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Marx, 'Pastoralism in America', in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch, and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 42.

eviction.<sup>4</sup> This tension that Virgil introduces is notable not only for its questioning of the pastoral idyll but also because it allows a concept of tension or clash within pastoral to evolve into one of the fundamental devices of pastoral literary criticism. This manifests primarily as a contrast between pastoral and anti-pastoral landscapes, but not exclusively. As we shall develop further, there is an essential binary interplay that pervades pastoral criticism.

The questioning of the pastoral idyll inevitably produces anti-pastoral tendencies. These may manifest themselves either as a corpus of texts such as the 'Counter-Pastoral' poems of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century cited by Williams,<sup>5</sup> or they may take the form of elements within a - usually longer - text that juxtapose pastoral motifs with one another; the latter often as a deliberate device, which operates on the text to effect a response in the reader. In Sebald's poetry and prose for example this often produces the form of a strained dialogue between man and nature such as in his epic poem *After Nature* (first published in 1988) which will be examined in detail in the next chapter, and which for Rüdiger Görner suggests 'the increasing incongruity between man and nature.'<sup>6</sup> Georg Steller's battle against a storm in the Bering Sea, for example, in the second section of *After Nature* illustrates this well. 'For almost a quarter of a year / the ship was tossed hither

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral' in *The Pastoral Mode*, ed. by Brian Loughrey (Cambridge and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p.155.

<sup>6</sup> Rüdiger Görner, 'After Words. On W.G.Sebald's Poetry' in *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald*, ed. by Rüdiger Görner (Munich: Iudicium, 2003), p. 75.

/ and thither, by hurricanes of a force no one in the team could recall / ever having experienced' (AN. 63). Similarly, the narrator of the third section, when recollecting his impressions of Manchester notes man's intervention in nature in the form of industrialisation, 'I rambled over the fallow / Elysian Fields, wondering at the work of destruction, the black / mills and shipping canals' (AN. 95). Tension is also something Peter Fritzsche notes in his essay when he says there is an 'enduring tension in Sebald's work between nature and history'.<sup>7</sup> In Sebald, the tension between pastoral and anti-pastoral tendencies within a single text often takes on a temporal or historical dimension as well. As Peter Fritzsche says 'Sebald's nostalgic correspondences also make the past enchanted and reveal the present to be completely disenchanted'.<sup>8</sup> This tension inherent in such correspondences seems to play out across time and history, frequently with fatal consequences, as the force of nature overtakes houses, whole areas of land are swept away by natural forces, and indigenous populations and races are subject to persecution. Pastoral/anti-pastoral tension is then a common motif and device in Sebald and this thesis is concerned with identifying further examples and the precise modalities of pastoralism in his work.

Over time, pastoral continues to evolve and become a complex concept far removed from the descriptive writings depicting shepherds in idyllic rural settings. Aside from the negative or pejorative note first hinted at by Virgil and the subsequent anti-pastoral, critics have identified a number of further

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Fritzsche, 'W.G. Sebald's Twentieth Century Histories' in *Sebald: History – Memory- Trauma*, ed. by Mark McCullough and Scott Denham (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 292.

<sup>8</sup> Fritzsche, p. 292.

more abstract and multi-layered dimensions of pastoral in the long history of the genre; it fragments into several versions or modes. Leo Marx for example, distinguishes between ‘sentimental’ and ‘complex’ pastoral. In *The Machine in the Garden* he directs his comments primarily towards American culture, but we can readily extrapolate from this for our own purpose. ‘Sentimental’ pastoral, ‘[a]n inchoate longing for a more “natural” environment’<sup>9</sup> with its desire for an ‘existence “closer to nature,”’<sup>10</sup> echoes the sympathies of a classic pastoral uncorrupted by pejorative or anti-pastoral elements. His ‘complex’ pastoral on the other hand acknowledges the possibility that peace and tranquillity are mere illusions within a classic pastoral setting. This is in sympathy with anti-pastoral tendencies and has a more metaphorical use of language to express these compared to the direct, descriptive language of pastoral prose and poetry. Indeed, Marx uses a similar term to describe ‘complex’ pastoral as that used by Williams to describe anti-pastoral; ‘counterforce’ in the former and ‘counter-pastoral’ in the latter. This ‘counterforce may impinge upon the pastoral landscape either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilisation.’<sup>11</sup> Marx’s complex pastoral may be considered to be a facet of the anti-pastoral mode and produces a similar function when encountered within a text. For the purposes of this thesis therefore, no distinction will be made between the ‘complex’ and anti-pastoral.

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<sup>9</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, pp. 25,26.

The counter or anti-pastoral is the most prevalent mode we shall identify in Sebald, whether it is operating as above, to demonstrate an incongruity between man and nature, or to create another form of tension within the text. We will therefore devote a separate section to this topic.

## 1.2 Anti-pastoral

A simple definition of the anti-pastoral would be to take the classic pastoral; the celebration of rural life and nature above all else and accept that any contradiction or unsympathetic reading of this is, by default, anti-pastoral.

However, while there are undoubtedly texts which qualify as anti-pastoral due to their pejorative content, the anti-pastoral also operates within otherwise non overtly pastoral texts as a mode and, particularly as a method of establishing tensions within the narrative.<sup>12</sup> It is largely in this context that we observe it in Sebald's works.

In *Pastoral* Gifford devotes a chapter to the 'Anti- Pastoral Tradition' and quotes several works which he considers anti-pastoral texts.<sup>13</sup> From these we can arrive at a more lucid understanding of the term and therefore acquire a more authoritative position from which to employ the anti-pastoral *mode*. Quoting works by Arnold, Crabbe and John Clare, for example, Gifford identifies scenes from nature that are not portrayed with pastoral's usual Arcadian imagery, but depicted as uncontrolled, destructive and threatening to humankind. This as Gifford notes is 'effectively breaking with the possibility of the pastoral.'<sup>14</sup> He further cites Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour* (1736) as the first major work of anti-pastoral, but this suggests a degree of overlap between the anti-pastoral of an *attitude* held by a farm labourer who quite patently sees nature as a force to be tamed and toiled over. But the introduction of pejorative note as a frame of mind here is probably

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<sup>12</sup> Pastoral as mode is discussed in greater detail in section 1.4.

<sup>13</sup> Gifford, pp. 116-145.

<sup>14</sup> Gifford, p. 119.

nuancing the anti-pastoral too finely and for the purpose of this thesis a literary representation of, or reference to, nature as potentially or actually intimidating and impacting negatively on humankind or the equilibrium will be regarded as an expression of the anti-pastoral mode.

In addition to anti-pastoral as a reaction to the more traditionally held concept of pastoral as idyll, there are other uses of the term. We see for example, a proto-feminist and sociological use of anti-pastoral in writings which seek to produce ‘a counter-discourse to this class-conscious, largely masculine tradition.’<sup>15</sup> Gifford is here quoting Donna Landry’s *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring- Class Women’s Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* and goes on by way of reinforcing this position with a further quote which, while informing the feminist stance, unfortunately, by using the term Georgic he introduces potential confusion since the terms pastoral and Georgic are not interchangeable. ‘[w]hat is distinctive about female plebeian georgic is its profeminist insistence upon the injustice and absurdity of sexual relations as they cut across and adumbrate oppressive class relations.’<sup>16</sup> If our understanding of the distinction between Georgic and pastoral is essentially that the former has a didactic function, then we must assume that these ‘proto-feminist’ writings are performing that function and therefore further assume that they are not truly anti-pastoral texts but may nevertheless still be elements operating as anti-pastoral *modes*. Again, for our purposes a text, or element of it which corrupts the ideal or benign form, be it natural, political, sociological or psychological, will be functioning in the anti-pastoral mode. It

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<sup>15</sup> Gifford, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> Gifford, p. 122.

is also interesting to note here that the anti-pastoral is often closely linked to the theme of retreat and return which is so inextricably linked to pastoral. A pastoral retreat often involves exposure to the anti-pastoral, be it a physical journey or psychological one and will generate a questioning of previously held beliefs and untarnished perceptions.<sup>17</sup>

Another important aspect of anti-pastoral mode which features strongly in Sebald is a filtering or self-protective function. Essentially a form of ‘self-delusion’ as epitomised in Blake’s lines ‘[f]or man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.’<sup>18</sup> This allows people to ‘select’ only what they want to see or hear to the exclusion of more unacceptable or unpalatable realities and is precisely what Sebald tries to convey in many of his works – including academic and what we later term ‘collective amnesia’. The anti-pastoral mode is also often set up as counterpoint to classic pastoral mode. This tension or ‘clash’ as William Empson<sup>19</sup> termed it, occurs frequently in Sebald and, as we shall develop below is foregrounded particularly in *After Nature*.

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<sup>17</sup> Gifford describes pastoral retreat as a discourse, implying that it is not therefore a true mode. It is however a common device in Sebald’s prose fiction and, as we shall discover, is the dominant element in *Austerlitz*.

<sup>18</sup> William Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, in *William Blake: Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 17. First published in 1935.

### 1.3 Post-pastoral

As we have seen so far, critics and historians of literature have constructed a complex concept of pastoral, and it is almost inevitable that this evolution continues into a post-pastoral form. This mode of pastoral is multifaceted and, in common with the anti-pastoral, it will play an important role in our analysis of Sebald's work.

The term *post* is a somewhat ubiquitous prefix that has inevitably now been applied to pastoral and we will devote some time to the discussion of this term since it addresses many of the common themes found in Sebald. Gifford has proposed the term post-pastoral for 'literature that addresses the problems of human accommodation with nature.'<sup>20</sup> Gifford's post-pastoral incorporates the central ethos of pastoralism; nature is very much at the centre of post-pastoral writing. There is a positioning of 'the self towards nature' which 'leads inevitably to a humbling that is a necessary requirement of the shift from the anthropocentric position of the pastoral to the ecocentric view of the post-pastoral.'<sup>21</sup> This ecocentrism of the post-pastoral is a topic to which we will return and in particular to Colin Riordan's discussion of the subject in Sebald's *After Nature*, in which, he says that 'the glory and pleasure in nature [...] is something which permeates the whole of the Sebald oeuvre',<sup>22</sup> although no reference to post-pastoral or indeed pastoral is made.

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<sup>20</sup> Gifford, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Gifford, p. 152.

<sup>22</sup> Colin Riordan, 'Ecocentrism in Sebald's *After Nature*' in *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, ed. by J.J. Long, and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 45.

Gifford first proposed the term ‘post-pastoral’ and ‘defined it by six qualities in the poetry of Ted Hughes’<sup>23</sup> and for completeness these will be briefly examined below. In the textual analysis of Sebald however the post-pastoral mode is frequently demonstrated on a continuum and the identification of individual criteria of post-pastoral is not essential to our understanding of its function.

Gifford states ‘[f]undamental to post-pastoral literature is an awe in attention to the natural world. Such a respect derives from [...] a deep sense in the immanence in all natural things.’<sup>24</sup> His second requisite, essentially a corollary to the first, is ‘the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution.’<sup>25</sup>

Understanding that ‘what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature’<sup>26</sup> is inherent in Gifford’s third element where he states the ‘third feature of the post-pastoral is the recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature.’<sup>27</sup> This, simply stated is essentially saying that the human being is, or should be ‘at one with nature’ and he goes on to cite of how this state of ‘oneness’ can benefit the psyche in certain situations such as hospital inpatients. It is not however sufficient to imply that this discourse is purely a

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<sup>23</sup> Gifford, p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> Gifford, p. 152.

<sup>25</sup> Gifford, p. 153.

<sup>26</sup> Gifford, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> Gifford, p. 157.

non-verbal/instinctual one. Although ‘it is important that we reconnect with it [nature] through our direct apprehension’<sup>28</sup>, we must inevitably express this through language which uses ‘a semiology that is socially constructed and has certain inescapable cultural connotations.’<sup>29</sup>

This cultural aspect is foregrounded in his fourth quality of post-pastoral which he says ‘is the basis upon which the pastoral was founded. Arcadia was recognisably a literary construct – nature as culture.’<sup>30</sup> From a deconstructionist point of view, this is a highly problematic criterion.

Deconstructionist critics would hold that there is no nature in the sense that there is ‘nothing we can agree upon by our use of the word’<sup>31</sup> although we may agree that nature can be understood as a form of textual representation.

Post-pastoral literature must, according to Gifford, convey awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature. We find therefore creations of human culture, which bring us closer to nature (Gifford cites Henry Moore’s sculptures) but we could find many other examples such as evocations of the seasons or nature’s forces in music, which must be contrasted to creations which potentially or actually threaten our harmony with nature such as nuclear weapons. The association of culture with nature again emphasises the inevitability of the importance of language in this discourse. Language and culture were for Matthew Arnold, as Gifford points out, ‘what kept us above

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<sup>28</sup> Gifford, p. 161.

<sup>29</sup> Gifford, p. 162

<sup>30</sup> Gifford, p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 38.

the anarchy of our “darkling plain”<sup>32</sup>. It therefore seems difficult to make the link between culture and nature without it being mediated through language. Furthermore, we might suggest that post-pastoral entails primarily, given the prefix, a postmodern reflexivity of the fact that any ‘pastoral’ is first and foremost, merely a literary construction. This will be discussed further when we examine William Empson’s contribution to this debate.

In the description of his fifth element of the post-pastoral Gifford links consciousness to conscience and in so doing brings an ethical dimension to the debate. As he tells us ‘it is our consciousness which gives us our conscience, our ability to take responsibility for our behaviour [...] the realisation of this fifth post-pastoral quality in literature, that with consciousness comes conscience.’<sup>33</sup> As illustration he quotes Rick Bass’s essay *Fiber*<sup>34</sup> by way of a fictional myth-like narrative he pleads for the protection of wilderness in a valley in Montana. In this piece, which Gifford calls a ‘masterpiece of the post-pastoral’<sup>35</sup>, it is demonstrated that ‘ultimately, consciousness, which has for centuries appeared to set us apart from nature, could be seen [...] to take responsibility for its ecological relationships and its ultimate survival.’<sup>36</sup> However, as we have noted above, the boundary between pastoral and georgic seems once again blurred here. When Gifford says ‘The role of the georgic (such as Bass’s logger story) now becomes, not the elaboration of good work practices, but a plea for environmentally sensitive

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<sup>32</sup> Gifford, p. 163.

<sup>33</sup> Gifford, p. 163.

<sup>34</sup> Rick Bass, *Fiber* (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Gifford, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Gifford, p. 165.

local and global management'<sup>37</sup> he is presumably classifying this work as Georgic because it assumes a didactic function. It is not clear however, whether we should now therefore call Bass's essay 'georgic' rather than 'post-pastoral' or whether the term 'georgic' is, in this case, encompassed within the post-pastoral. It will however become central to this thesis that, from the first work of Sebald to be discussed, the role of consciousness and conscience is a primary quality of many of his characters.

The sixth and final element of Gifford's post-pastoral definition is 'the ecofeminists' realisation that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities.'<sup>38</sup> The engagement with the pastoral here rests with the dynamic between the human species and its habitat. As Gifford puts it 'the concern for the exploitation of people (in terms of gender, class and race) must accompany concern for the environment (in terms of species, elements and atmosphere) and vice versa.'<sup>39</sup> Together with this concern for the environment comes the fear of alienation from it and from nature. Raymond Williams noted this in his *Problems in Materialism and Culture* where he says 'If we alienate the living process of which we are a part, we end, though unequally, by alienating ourselves.'<sup>40</sup> The ecofeminists' concept of exploitation of class and gender is also one that we have come across in our discussion of the working-class women poets above. The tenet central to post-pastoral, that of the centrality of nature and man's

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<sup>37</sup> Gifford, p. 165.

<sup>38</sup> Gifford, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> Gifford, p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 84.

consciousness of and conscience towards it and fellow beings is also ubiquitous throughout Sebald. As we will see in subsequent chapters, Sebald uses the pastoral to bring into sharp relief various forms of social oppression and ethnic persecution.

Echoes of previous debates are a suitable point from which to critique the post-pastoral. As Gifford states in his introduction to the chapter on post-pastoral, the three uses of the term pastoral described in his opening chapter were intended to ‘clarify three general strands of usage [...] rather than to make firm definitive distinctions.’<sup>41</sup> His six elements of post-pastoral (which he admits ‘the reader might want to expand my definition to twelve or reduce it to three’<sup>42</sup>) also cannot be viewed as prescriptive. We have already seen some instances of overlap or outright confusion with previous issues such as the anti-pastoral/protofeminist/ecofeminist debate above and perhaps we should not consider post-pastoral as a new development in the same way as we might consider the distinction between modernism and post-modernism, but rather an extension of the pastoral which incorporates and occasionally modifies its features.

Gifford himself is probably touching on this when, in his closing remarks, he states that ‘modern texts that might have performed a classic pastoral function in the past [...] are in fact, post-pastoral in their rejection of Arcadia in favour of a more knowing [...] adversarial, sense of environment rather than nature

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<sup>41</sup> Gifford, p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> Gifford, p. 151.

or the countryside or landscape.<sup>43</sup> This most surely has echoes for us in the work of Sebald.

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<sup>43</sup> Gifford, p. 174.

## 1.4 Pastoral as Mode

Pastoral ‘modes’ with all their subdivisions are indeed operating within Sebald’s work as ‘modalities’ and we are not therefore considering these texts as examples of pastoral genre. Indeed, some authorities would not accept the term genre as applied to pastoral literature at all. Some elaboration on this distinction between genre and mode is warranted. As Alpers says in *What is Pastoral*:

[Pastoral] seems to be one of the types of literature – like tragedy, comedy, novel, romance, satire and elegy – which have generic-sounding names but which are more inclusive and general than genres proper. We seek to recognise that pastoral is one of these literary types, when we say that it is not a genre but a mode.<sup>44</sup>

Certainly, for our purposes, we would not suggest that Sebald’s work falls into the pastoral genre or for that matter any other single genre and it is this very lack of easily identifiable generic classification that that makes him such an original writer.

The term ‘mode’ is not however a clearly defined one. Robert Scholes in *Structuralism In Literature* suggests that “‘primary modes of fiction’ derive from the way fictional worlds “imply attitudes””.<sup>45</sup> Harold Toliver also notes this association of pastoral with attitudes and divorcing it from genre when he says ‘I have extended the old principles of the shepherd poem freely to

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism In Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 133.

literature that abandons many of its conventions while illustrating its theme and attitudes.'<sup>46</sup> If this suggests that there is very much a psychological dimension to mode, then we might be able to extend this to pastoral. This extension would appear to be confirmed by Leo Marx, who elaborates:

Pastoral is not a genre but a mode – the broadest most inclusive category of composition. It derives its identity not from any formal convention but from *a particular perspective on human experience* [...] The point, in short, is that the essence of the mode does not reside in any particular form or convention or body of conventions.<sup>47</sup> (my italics).

Peter Marinelli has pointed out that the term pastoral is used in both the singular and plural. This adds a further dimension which in turn may illuminate the distinction between mode and genre. For Marinelli, pastorals are:

a particular kind of poetry [...] and in this sense means a particular kind of or genre of literature. When we use pastoral in the singular we mean really a view of life, an *ethos* or informing principle which can subsist either in itself [...] or which can animate other forms of literature like the drama, whether they be wholly pastoral [...] or only partially so.<sup>48</sup>

This latter version (pastoral in the singular) would suggest pastoral functioning as mode. The most workable definition for our purposes is a summary by Alpers and it is worth quoting at length:

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<sup>46</sup> Harold Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), p. vii.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, 'Pastoralism in America', p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 9.

mode is the literary manifestation, in a given work, not of its attitudes in a loose sense, but of its assumptions about man's nature and situation. This definition in turn provides a critical question we implicitly put to any work we interpret: what notions of human strength, possibilities, pleasures, dilemmas, etc. are manifested in the represented realities and in the emphases, devices, organisation, effects, etc. of this work [...] the key to all these questions [...] is the hero's or speaker's or reader's strength relative to his or her world.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, as further justification for employing the term mode in this context, a further quote from Paul Alpers will help: 'With more syncretic or idiosyncratic works, an appeal to mode is necessary to say whether or not they are pastoral.'<sup>50</sup> Also, as Ettin says, 'the test for the reader ought to be whether or not a reference to the pastoral tradition helps to clarify the thematic or formal issues raised.'<sup>51</sup>

The editor of *The Pastoral Mode*, Bryan Loughrey, also places emphasis on the attitude of the reader as central to the pastoral mode and quotes the Seventeenth century French author and critic Barnard Le Bovier de Fontenelle to reinforce this. Fontenelle's theory is 'based firmly on the psychology of the reader [...] It is the central idea of pastoral (the quiet Life, with no other business but Love) which he considers to be the essential

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<sup>49</sup> Alpers, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> Alpers, p. 59-60.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 64.

element of the mode.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, for a work entitled *The Pastoral Mode*, this is the first reference to the term. It is however clear that we are now depicting a function, an element as it were, and not a genre of writing by the use of pastoral mode. Laurence Lerner, writing in 1972, adds to this debate when, in order to distinguish between pure descriptive pastoral and that exhibiting pastoral's 'animating contrasts' he uses the terms 'convention' for the former and 'theme' for the latter.<sup>53</sup> We would suggest the term mode could be substituted for theme here without any detraction in meaning. Loughrey also highlights the pastoral as a departure from realism in his discussion of Pope's *Pastorals* by his comment:

Realism is therefore out of the question, and the poet must strive to "use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful: [...] At its subtlest, such a theory approaches a *semiotic mode* (my italics) of communication; pastoral conventions provide a system of signifiers which create a "formal pattern, which, in various guises and in various epochs, may be made to produce a certain complex of meaning."<sup>54</sup>

While not denying the existence of a pastoral genre, Andrew Ettin is also enlightening on pastoral as mode. In *Literature and the Pastoral* for example he speaks of the tensions generated in a poem by Schiller<sup>55</sup> as 'a version or

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<sup>52</sup> Bernard Le B Fontanelle, 'Discours sur la nature de l'eclogue' (1688) qtd. in *The Pastoral Mode*, ed. by Bryan Loughrey (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1984,) p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Lerner, qtd. in 'Introduction' *The Pastoral Mode: A Casebook*, ed. by Bryan Loughrey, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Loughrey, p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Schiller's distinction between the Sentimental and Naïve poet has certain parallels with pastoral and anti-pastoral. The naïve poet in his attempt to mimic nature has sympathies with the pure, uncorrupted nature of the pastoral while the Sentimental acknowledges the impossibility of this and can only

mode of the tension generated in the pastoral between good country simplicity and haughty urban sophistication [...].<sup>56</sup> According to Ettin, there are literary works which constitute examples of pastoral modes, and while ‘not directly pastoral in their material, they nevertheless embody those attitudes and situations traditionally dealt with in the pastoral and along the lines familiar to the pastoral.’<sup>57</sup> Pertinent also to our discussion is Ettin’s comment on why pastoral has so often been assumed to be a dead form where he says ‘that its modal continuities may not be easily recognisable for what they are.’<sup>58</sup> It is the exposure of these ‘modal continuities’ in Sebald that we will explore in this thesis. We will, in essence, give concrete form to Ettin’s comment that ‘the pastoral continues [...] in modal forms [...] that deal with life and structure life in ways that the pastoral has done for centuries.’<sup>59</sup>

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reflect nature, taking into consideration its imperfections. Friedrich von Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry and On the Sublime*, trans. by Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966)

<sup>56</sup> Ettin, p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> Ettin, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> Ettin, p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> Ettin, p. 74.

## 1.5 William Empson's Pastoral as Structural Device

William Empson was probably the first critic to re-examine pastoral in the light of contemporary developments in literary criticism and of whom we know Sebald was aware.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, Loughrey in his introduction to *The Pastoral Mode* would seem to be in sympathy with this viewpoint where he says 'The critic most responsible for the extension of the term pastoral is William Empson.'<sup>61</sup> Leo Marx also suggests that he was 'the first critic to concern himself with the political implications of literary pastoral and, more specifically, the subtle relationship between pastoral and twentieth century left-wing ideology.'<sup>62</sup>

For Empson, pastoral was a structural device, a formal technique which introduced a tension or differential play within the text. The essence of which was the 'process of putting the complex into the simple'<sup>63</sup> and in so doing acted as a means of resolving complex issues and antimonies. As Loughrey notes, for Empson 'Pastoral thus becomes a particular structural relationship which clarifies complex issues by restating them in terms which emphasise the universal at the expense of the accidental.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Sheppard notes that "[h]aving read Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Max already understood the importance of literary irony as a means of distantiation," 'The Sternheim Years' in *Saturn's Moons: W.G. Sebald – A Handbook*, ed. by Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (Oxford: Legenda, 2011), p. 99 n. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Loughrey, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Marx, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> Empson, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> Loughrey, p. 21.

Central to pastoral as Empson saw it was the action of a ‘double plot.’ As he says in the second chapter of *Some Versions of Pastoral* ‘An account of the double plot, then, is needed for a general view of pastoral because the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends.’<sup>65</sup> His use of the term ‘machine’ here is interesting and does, arguably, give credence to the sense of the pastoral mode’s ‘operation’ upon a text. In his account of the double plot Empson notes the difficulty in the critic or reader’s decision as to which is the main and which is the sub plot and that it ‘is neither an easy nor an obviously useful thing to notice.’<sup>66</sup> In Sebald, this difficulty is compounded because, as we shall argue, when there are any identifiable plots, often several ‘plots’ occur synchronously. Comedy is often a function of the double plot and Empson points out that the comic interlude is probably its earliest form. Although not noted for his comedy, again we will reveal several ‘comic interludes’, which serve to offset Sebald’s narrative melancholia and operate as instances of this particular pastoral device.

Although published in the 1935 Empson’s contribution to pastoral studies is remarkably pertinent to the current debate and much of the pastoral exposed in Sebald’s work will be seen to be examples of Empson’s pastoral as a structural device. The pastoral tension between rural and urban life has evolved for Empson into an antinomy of the complex and the simple.

Antinomy used here as a precise term which allows some resolution of these two seemingly opposite values. Empson explores this dichotomy and exposes

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<sup>65</sup> Empson, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Empson, p. 29.

it in various texts, which would not on first inspection be thought of as pastoral. However, as we have been at pains to establish, it is a *mode* or *operand* that is functioning, as it were, within a segment of the text; the complete narrative is not necessarily pastoral. As Lisa Rodensky points out in her introduction to *Some Versions of Pastoral* ‘Empson’s pastoral [...] is a mode, a specialisation of irony, an inner thing. It is a particular way of relating things to other things.’<sup>67</sup> Although this is a somewhat generalised statement and on the surface could therefore be applied too randomly, the ‘particular way of relating things to other things’ is central to pastoral as a structural device. As we will see, textual tensions, juxtapositions and counterpoint form the basis for the pastoral critique of Sebald’s texts.

Not all critics have agreed with Empson’s definition of pastoral<sup>68</sup> but, as alluded to above, much of his work, in its emphasis on structural relations and antinomies, has appealed to structuralist and deconstructionist critics alike and thus can be seen as ‘proto-deconstructionist.’ Indeed, pastoral conceived as a system of binary opposites, is surely ripe for deconstructive criticism. Christopher Norris would appear to be the first critic to openly discuss the connection between Empson and deconstruction theory in 1985 with *Some Versions of Rhetoric: Empson and de Man*. As he says, Empson and de Man ‘make a point of keeping the logical problems in view [...] In Empson [...]

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<sup>67</sup> Lisa A. Rodensky, ‘Introduction’ to William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. xxiii.

<sup>68</sup> In a review of *Some Versions of Pastoral* for example G.W. Stonier complained ‘Mr Empson avoids even mentioning the more straightforward forms of pastoral [...] and this flight from the obvious seems to me a weakness, because it deprives his book of the norm which it so plainly needs.’ ‘Complexity’, in *New Statesman and Nation*, 10/243 (19 October 1935), pp. 568-570.

this runs none the less into regions of textual doubt and self-questioning which often approach the stage of deconstructive aporia.<sup>69</sup> Empson's method of textual analysis of figural language by 'drawing out their logical contradictions'<sup>70</sup> is in sympathy with deconstructive thought and we can see the general tenet of Derrida's 'liberation of rhetoric (or writing) from its age-old subjugation at the hands of philosophic reason'<sup>71</sup> at play in his work.

In summary we should probably make note of the association between pastoral, deconstruction and allegory. As Gifford points out, when we speak of modern Arcadias, be they the nostalgia of childhood or other psychological states, we are referring to the myth of the literary construct 'it is like Arcadia, we are speaking metaphorically' and that 'It is essential to pastoral that the reader is aware of this construct so that he or she can see what the writer is doing with the device. The ultimate form of this distancing is the pastoral as allegory.'<sup>72</sup> For both de Man and Empson, allegory is very relevant. In Empson's case 'all allegory is essentially pastoral'<sup>73</sup> and for de Man 'it [allegory] becomes the demystifying trope *par excellence*.'<sup>74</sup> In Norris's view, then, de Man's concept of allegory 'exerts something like the power of deconstructive leverage that Derrida brings to the term *differance*. That is to say, it introduces the idea of a differential play within language that everywhere prevents (or constantly defers) the imaginary coincidence of

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> Norris, p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> Norris, p. 73.

<sup>72</sup> Gifford, p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Gifford, p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> Norris, p. 81.

meaning and intent.<sup>75</sup> This continues the ‘differential play’ mentioned above where he notes that allegories ‘have many levels of interpretation, or comparisons of which both parties are the subject’ and brings in the connection with pastoral by saying that ‘it is the clash between different modes of feeling which is the normal source of pleasure in pastoral’<sup>76</sup>: the ‘clash’ here being generated, in part by and therefore integral to, the ‘many levels of interpretation’ in allegory. While Norris does not always agree with de Man’s reading of Empson, he does concur that ‘Empson’s criticism presses the analysis of poetic language to a stage where comparisons with de Man are still very much to the point.’<sup>77</sup> The concept of a deferred pastoral and mistrust of language, the slip between signifier and signified, is something we will return to in our discussion of pastoral modes in Sebald’s prose fiction.

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<sup>75</sup> Norris, p. 82.

<sup>76</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Chatham: Pimlico Press, 2004), p. 114.

<sup>77</sup> Norris, p. 95.

## 1.6 Heimat and Pastoral

This section examines the relationship between between Heimat and pastoral.

It is to be hoped that elements of Heimat will be seen to be readily symptomatic of those of pastoral modes. In so doing we will explore the concept of pastoral further in terms of its role within political and cultural history, within a semiological system and pastoral as discourse.

‘Heimat is a German word that has no simple English translation. It is often expressed with terms such as home or homeland, but these English counterparts fail to encapsulate centuries of German consciousness and the thousands of connections this quintessential aspect of German identity carries with it.’<sup>78</sup> It is, of course, a term with which Sebald was familiar and on which he has written. Long and Whitehead in their introduction to *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion* note that the term ‘denotes “home” in the sense of a (predominantly rural and agrarian) place.’<sup>79</sup> Zilcosky, in a chapter exploring ‘uncanny travels’ in Sebald’s fiction<sup>80</sup>, addresses the notion of ‘uncanny Heimat’ in the context of a continuing sense of ‘home’ for the traveller no matter where he is in reality. From this perspective, Heimat is seen to be a psychological phenomenon and one which, for some, escape by a physical journey is seldom attainable. As Zilcosky says in his discussion of Max Aurach in *The Emigrants*, the ‘story of a childhood torn apart by the Holocaust abruptly returns the narrator – who has not even yet sufficiently

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<sup>78</sup> Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>79</sup> Long and Whitehead, *A Critical Companion*, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> J. Zilcosky, ‘Sebald’s Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost’ in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 102-120.

managed to lose his Heimat – to the Germany that he had been trying ‘for various reasons to escape.’<sup>81</sup> Zilcosky’s subject is the now familiar one of travel and memory in Sebald’s fiction to which we will return below when discussing common themes and motifs already identified in his work, but for now it is worth noting the suggestion that there is a strong association of Heimat and individual displacement, exile, whether spatial or temporal, with the pastoral discourse of retreat and return. Indeed, as we shall argue, it is appropriate to suggest that some Heimat themes in Sebald can be read as further examples of pastoral modes.

The difficulty of representing Heimat in English is highlighted by Boa and Palfreyman in their introduction to *Heimat: A German Dream*. As they point out, the German word ‘bears many connotations, drawing together associations which no single English word could convey.’<sup>82</sup> It is often also combined with other terms to denote discrete changes in meaning. We see, for example, *Heimatland* (native land), *Heimatliebe* (patriotism), *Heimatrecht* (right of domicile) and most pertinent to our discussion, *Heimatkunst* (Heimat art) a term which, according to Boa and Palfreyman, in the 1890s, began to be used ‘to both advocate and categorize literature and other forms of art dealing with *provincial or rural life*’ (my italics).<sup>83</sup> We can already see therefore, sympathy with the pastoral Arcadia entering into literary representations of

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<sup>81</sup> Zilcosky, p. 114.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Boa, and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat a German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890 – 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 2.

Heimat at the turn of the 20th century, a period of intense social and cultural changes effected by political unification, industrialisation and urbanisation.

It is vital to recognise that this modern form of Heimat literature as part of the ‘Heimatbewegung’ (Heimat movement) arose in response to Germany’s rapid modernisation at around 1900. Boa and Palfreyman describe it as promoting activities ‘in part reactionary, in part practically reformist, in part purely idealistically utopian’.<sup>84</sup> In its more reformist or progressive forms, it ‘embraced activities stretching from environmental planning and countryside protection [...] and touched too on such developments as the German garden city movement and even city allotments.’<sup>85</sup> Concern with utopias and the countryside *per se* does not, of course, necessarily justify the term pastoral. However, it would seem to imply a valuation of a celebratory nature of these features; to encourage ‘bringing the country to the city’ in the form of the garden city and allotments can, after all, be seen as pastoral traits.

My discussion here aims to work out a number of structural affinities between the pastoral mode and its inherent tensions, and Boa and Palfreyman's account of the Heimat mode in German culture between 1890 and 1990. The tensions we have seen in the literary concepts of pastoral would also appear to be key features of Heimat. As Boa and Palfreyman point out, ‘[k]ey oppositions in the discourse<sup>86</sup> of Heimat set country against city, province

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<sup>84</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> The use of the term ‘discourse’ has its parallel in the ‘discourse of retreat and return’ in pastoral. In this sense it is a meta term which may include the use of modes of Heimat or pastoral for its effect.

against metropolis, tradition against modernity, nature against artificiality, organic culture against civilisation [...]’<sup>87</sup> And indeed these tensions were popularised in Heimat or regional literature where they were either ‘sentimentally reconciled or just evaded, leaving the economic practices of capitalism and class untouched.’<sup>88</sup>

To make the association of Heimat and myth heightens the connection to pastoral. Boa and Palfreyman use Roland Barthes’s definition of myth-making as the ‘draining of meaning from a figure in one discourse to leave an almost empty signifier in a second-order meaning discourse.’<sup>89</sup> They then suggest that the ‘draining away of concrete regional meaning from the concept of Heimat as it was appropriated in nationalist ideology in the 1920s exemplifies such a process.’<sup>90</sup> Why should this connection of Heimat with myth heighten the association of Heimat with pastoral? In the broadest sense and taking Barthes’s definition of myth as ‘everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse’<sup>91</sup> and that ‘myth in fact belongs to the province of [...] semiology’,<sup>92</sup> the connection is assured by the former definition, since pastoral is certainly a discourse. Furthermore, I would also argue, and this may be more contentious, that it can be considered a form of semiological system whereby pastoral ‘postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified.’<sup>93</sup> This is, the ‘second-order semiological

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<sup>87</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, pp. 3,4.

<sup>91</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada Publishing, 1982), p. 111.

<sup>92</sup> Barthes, p.109.

<sup>93</sup> Barthes, p. 112.

system'<sup>94</sup> of Barthes's definition of myth to which Boa and Palfreyman are referring above in their association of Heimat with myth. They strengthen this further by introducing the mythical figure as in the 'clod of earth or the peasant.'<sup>95</sup> Peasant in this sense is not a mode of employment as in the classic pastoral but an 'inner disposition'<sup>96</sup> and this psychological attitude is equally at home in the figure of the nomadic intellectual, 'the scientist or the tourist' of Williams<sup>97</sup> we find in pastoral modes and other figures previously mentioned. Again, we see a tension between idyll and contingency and the suggestion here is that Heimat is another expression of that feeling of wellbeing that is also an element familiar to pastoral attitudes. The 'wellbeing' is given expression in similar concepts to those we see in pastoral, such as the nostalgia of childhood and uncontaminated nature and 'Heimat which is the outcome of a process of growing together with the land'<sup>98</sup> is reminiscent of Gifford's discussion of ecocriticism and his third element of post-pastoral in which 'what is happening in us is paralleled in external nature.'<sup>99</sup>

As we have previously noted, the discourse of 'retreat and return' is fundamental to pastoral and, as alluded to above, there is also a sense in which Heimat literature is, under certain conditions, a 'retreat' into the qualities of the pastoral but which can also be tinged with those of the anti-pastoral mode. For example, on the one hand we may have the retreat into

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<sup>94</sup> Barthes, p. 114.

<sup>95</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Williams, p. 20.

<sup>98</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Gifford, p. 156.

the province as an escape from the harsh realities of the modern world in literature, such as that of Ernest Wiechert, a writer popular in the 1930s and 1940s, for whom, ‘the forest signifies a more total rejection of civilisation, a deeper regression from an unbearable world’<sup>100</sup> but on the other hand this narrative may also be read as an example of anti- pastoral in that there is ultimately ‘no escape from the corrosion of a decadent civilisation’<sup>101</sup> even in ‘Arcadia’.

The classic pastoral element of Heimat is probably more self-evident in Heimat films, specifically of the 1950s, which, in many cases drew on literary models. Such films, in which there is a ‘flight from the past and the bitter questions of guilt and responsibility’<sup>102</sup> were in direct contrast to contemporary literature by writers such as Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass which asked uncomfortable questions and whose ‘rage was levelled not just against crimes of the past but the escapist mentality [...]’.<sup>103</sup> This ‘escapist’ Heimat cinema and literature conforms to pastoral formulae in that there is an accepted idyllic state or Arcadia which ‘offered no questioning of social relations or political tendencies, but an entirely unproblematic view of life.’<sup>104</sup> But fulfilling the ‘retreat and return’ criteria of pastoral often also involved a resolution of some attempt to disturb the idyll. The plots offered ‘the satisfaction of conflict followed by restoration of peace and reconciliation.’<sup>105</sup> The escapism, which Heimat literature and cinema readily exploited, relied in

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<sup>100</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 10.

<sup>104</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 11.

<sup>105</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 11.

large part on appealing to the nostalgic impulse and again we see the resemblance to pastoral. As we have seen above, the nostalgia of the past with reference to the golden days of childhood in particular, is a common element in pastoral and the ‘escapist mentality’, from a ‘self-protective’ perspective is typically anti-pastoral.

Before concluding this section it is worth noting a further interesting parallel to pastoral in the depiction of what Boa and Palfreyman call anti-Heimat. The temptation here is to make a direct association with anti-pastoral and this can certainly be made, if for no other reason than that there are convincing aspects of the pejorative pastoral in this form of Heimat. By invoking social and political aspects of anti-Heimat when the Heimat is represented as ‘repressive and xenophobic’ and ‘inculcating the ideological message of submission’<sup>106</sup> we are also witnessing an example consistent with Gifford’s definition of anti-pastoral exposing distances that can be caused ‘not only by economic or social realities but also by cultural uses of the pastoral.’<sup>107</sup> Like anti-pastoral, anti-Heimat would appear to be highly politicised with its move to ‘reject traditional Heimat forms as uncritical and politically reactionary’<sup>108</sup> but also serving Heimat ideology by alluding to ‘the destructive environmental effects of industrial pollution on a Heimat worth fighting for.’<sup>109</sup> The adverse effects of man on nature are, of course, typically anti-pastoral. When discussing anti-Heimat rhetoric in Volker Schlöndorff’s

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<sup>106</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Gifford, p. 128.

<sup>108</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 13.

<sup>109</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 13.

cinema<sup>110</sup> and Franz Xaver Kroetz' plays, Boa and Palfreyman note that 'rural life is emphatically represented as harsh and unjust'<sup>111</sup> in the former, and 'the brutality of rural life'<sup>112</sup> in the latter.

These sympathies are consistent with an anti-pastoral mode in which 'the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country.'<sup>113</sup> In other words, pastoral landscapes take no account of the harsher aspects of nature and also that the 'celebrated landscape' is often at the cost of someone's hard and little rewarded labour. This aspect of nature would also suggest elements of the sublime and indeed Boa and Palfreyman introduce this in the context of Heimat where they say '[m]an dwarfed by, at one with, or heroically rising above natural forces has been a pervasive theme since the invention of the sublime [...] and the encounter with the sublime or terrible mode is a commonplace in Heimat literature and art.'<sup>114</sup> The sublime is, of course, a genre worthy of a thesis itself but suffice to say here that it can readily be found in the anti-Heimat and anti-pastoral modes within Sebald's work.

Although it is hoped that we have demonstrated parallels of Heimat and pastoral, the purpose of introducing these at this point is not to suggest that the terms are in any way interchangeable. While we can identify 'modes' of Heimat, some of which impinge on pastoral, it also harbours psychological

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<sup>110</sup> They refer to Schlöndorff's film *Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Korbach* (1970).

<sup>111</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> Gifford, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 14.

attitudes and more concretely is, a 'movement' in the true sense of the term with various related strands. The purpose is more to acknowledge that passages of texts which may have been read as Heimat themes in Sebald could indeed be further examples of pastoral modes.

## 2. *After Nature*: An Anti-Pastoral Poem

Sebald's long prose poem *After Nature* was his first non-academic book to be published in 1988 although it did not appear in English translation until a year after his death in 2002. The possible reasons for this and discrepancies between his German and English publications are well documented.<sup>115</sup> The work can be seen as a prolepsis for his subsequent fiction<sup>116</sup> and as such, prefigures many of the dominant themes for which he is now renowned.<sup>117</sup> Although *After Nature* is a poetic triptych, we can see, as James Martin says, that the poem 'contains the essential or elemental narrative forms of Sebald's writing that also hold true for his later work: the semi-autobiographic, first-person narrator, the melancholic perspective, and the direct or indirect representations of other images and texts within the text itself.'<sup>118</sup> It is an embryonic form of his future 'prose fiction.'<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Mark McCulloh gives a detailed discussion of this in his 'Introduction', *W.G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 7,8. Deane Blackler specifically attributes the delay in the English edition of *After Nature* to 'perhaps the diminished market for an esoteric work of poetry from an unknown writer.' *Reading W.G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007), p. 65

<sup>116</sup> Richard Sheppard notes however, it was most probably Sebald's first academic article on Kafka, that was the true proleptic of his work in general, 'Dexter-Sinister: Some observations on decrypting the mors code in the work of W.G. Sebald' in *Journal of European Studies*, 35(4): 419-463, here, p. 437.

<sup>117</sup> Eva Hoffman discusses this in 'Curiosity and Catastrophe', *New York Times Book Review*, September 22, 2002  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/22/books/curiosity-and-catastrophe.html>  
[accessed 10 July 2007]

<sup>118</sup> James Martin, 'Campi deserti: Polar Landscapes and the Limits of Knowledge in Sebald and Ransmayr', in *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselsberger (Rochester, New York, Camden House: 2010) p. 143.

The poem is divided into three sections with each of these divided into sub-sections making a total of thirty-six irregular stanzas. It has probably received the least amount of attention from Anglophone critics and researchers which may, in part, be due to its late translation into English, although commentaries can be found in which it is cited often in discussion of the now familiar topics in Sebald, such as melancholy,<sup>120</sup> nature,<sup>121</sup> loss,<sup>122</sup> emigration and the betrayal of emotions<sup>123</sup> and the incongruity between Man and nature.<sup>124</sup> Greg Bond goes as far as to describe it as a ‘protest poem’.<sup>125</sup> It has also been read as a work that ‘concerns itself with the fundamentals as well as the elements. Life, earth and the struggle for existence, not only of the individual but also of the species, emerge against the backdrop of a variety of hostile environments.’<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately, the sub-title *Ein Elementargedicht*, which points the reader to expect a work that deals with the elements, the fundamentals, was omitted in the English version. This ‘struggle for existence’ is presented predominantly through a discourse with nature. This discourse is however, often a disturbed one and nature is not always

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<sup>119</sup> This is Sebald’s description of his work which he also says has ‘elements of pretty much all literary genres’ in *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby*, Vol 2 (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 2001), p. 156.

<sup>120</sup> Greg Bond, ‘On the Misery of Nature and the Nature of Misery: W.G. Sebald’s Landscapes’, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 33 and Rüdiger Görner, ‘After Words. On W.G. Sebald’s Poetry’, in *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, ed. by Rüdiger Görner, p. 75.

<sup>121</sup> Riordan, p. 45.

<sup>122</sup> Sebald felt that ‘loss is perhaps the most common experience that we have.’ *Writers in Conversation*, p. 163.

<sup>123</sup> Görner, *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, p. 75.

<sup>124</sup> Görner, p. 74.

<sup>125</sup> Bond p. 34.

<sup>126</sup> Riordan, p. 45.

the benign earth mother of the classic pastoral and as such, it is often the destructive side to nature that predominates in *After Nature*. This destructiveness on the part of the natural world is a topic which Sebald felt to be, in large part, the direct result of man's interference with nature itself.<sup>127</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, pastoral is not merely a collection of themes which must be displayed in a particular poem, piece of prose or indeed any work of art, for it to qualify as pastoral. Pastoral modes themselves operate at the level of character, subject and narrative device. Therefore, pastoral is also a structural entity/formal device and as such can be identified within the text as a specific technique with which to impose a desired effect on the narrative and in turn on the reader. Pastoral largely achieves this by establishing a tension or 'clash' as Empson terms it, within the text. This tension is predominantly achieved by setting up contrasts. The effect of this tension, no matter what technique is used, is to contribute to the resonance the poem has on the reader. These 'animating contrasts' as Loughrey<sup>128</sup> refers to them, and 'patterns of association' an expression Sebald himself used<sup>129</sup> set up a dynamic consciously designed to destabilise the reader. My argument

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<sup>127</sup> Sebald's comments in an interview reinforce the anti-pastoral theme of *After Nature* '[b]ecause we have created an environment for us which isn't what it should be. And we're out of our depth all the time. We're living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out of it ....' 'The Ghost Hunter' an interview with W.G. Sebald in *the emergence of memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York, London, Melbourne, Toronto: Seven Stories press, 2007), p. 56.

<sup>128</sup> Loughrey, p. 22.

<sup>129</sup> Bigsby, p. 155.

here is that this dynamic is essentially an example the structural aspect of pastoral and as we shall discover, is used effectively in this poem. In *After Nature*, this is achieved by juxtaposing the anti-pastoral mode to the classic or sentimental pastoral mode and this in turn can be observed either in the characters, subject or location and we will encounter examples of these below. There are examples of other pastoral contrasts within this work such as retreat/return and these will be identified as they are encountered, but it is the overall concept of anti-pastoral / pastoral tension I wish to consider in this chapter.

I shall discuss each section of the poem in sequence. This is appropriate not only chronologically but also because each section demonstrates a different example of pastoral tensions. In the first this is largely achieved through the character's psychology and is a somewhat internalised debate while in the second it is more the character's physical struggle and his encounter with the landscape and nature that dominate. Finally, the narrator himself sets up a conflict of conscience and collective amnesia which uses a particular anti-pastoral mode to accomplish it.

The first section of the poem introduces the character of Mathias Grünewald who acts as a vehicle through which Sebald introduces the imagery of some of his now well-known topics such as death, torment, identity and what Hoffman describes as the 'doubleness both of nature and human consciousness.'<sup>130</sup> It is also in this section that the ambiguous

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<sup>130</sup> Hoffman, *Curiosity and Catastrophe*, p. 2.

meaning of the title, which Görner says is ‘essential to the meaning of the whole poem’, is exposed when Sebald says that Grünewald probably painted ‘after nature’.<sup>131</sup> The second section again uses a figure from real-life although a little more contemporary. This is Georg Steller, an eighteenth-century naturalist, the adventures of whom Sebald uses to address the elemental forces of nature and the human psyche through his ill-fated expedition accompanying the Danish explorer Vitus Bering. In the final section the narrator is unnamed but in terms of biographical detail, has a striking resemblance to Sebald himself. This section, which Riordan sees as ‘nothing less than an elegy for nature’<sup>132</sup> is an attempt at a resolution of the preceding themes of death and destruction and indeed if we were to presume to label this poem, I suggest, the term ‘anti-pastoral poem’ would seem appropriate.

The traditional elegy is a lament often for the death of an individual the poet held in regard and adopts a series of conventions which we can also identify in Sebald’s poem but which are applied to nature and man’s interaction with it rather than one individual. It is also quite clearly not celebratory of nature’s blessings and the potential ‘renewal of hope and joy, with the idea expressed

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<sup>131</sup> Görner, ‘After Words: On W.G.Sebald’s Poetry’, in *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, discusses this ambiguity whereby the title could mean both ‘after the exhaustion of nature; but also [...] that the words and images of this poem are formed according to nature.’ [...] On the other hand ‘after nature’ may also suggest that these poems constitute a second nature with three main subjects [...]’ p. 75.

Riordan, ‘Ecocentrism in Sebald’s *After Nature*’, also touches on this topic in *W.G.Sebald – A Critical Companion*, in which he comments on the translation of *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht*, which could also mean ‘from nature, as in a scene painted through direct observation of nature.’ p. 51.

<sup>132</sup> Riordan p.56. Here he is referring to the final sub-section.

that death is the beginning of life'<sup>133</sup> of the traditional pastoral is tenuous in the closing passages of *After Nature*. In terms of form therefore it conforms to elegy but in content it is most certainly an anti-pastoral poem.

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<sup>133</sup> J.A. Cuddon, revs. by C.E. Preston, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 254.

## 2.1 The Not-So-Green World of Grünewald

Now go, the will within us being one:  
you be my guide, lord, master from this day,  
I said to him; and when he, moved, led on  
I entered the steep wild-wooded way.

The epigraph to the first section of *After Nature* is a quote from Dante's *Inferno* and is the last four lines from Canto II. That Sebald should choose Dante and this quote in particular seems pertinent to our discussion of pastoral. The lines appear at the end of the second Canto when Dante is about to embark on his journey having talked with Virgil whom he regards as his 'leader, lord and master.'<sup>134</sup> Virgil was probably the foremost of pastoral poets and the *Inferno* itself takes place between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection – from death to rebirth. By quoting Dante Sebald introduces a reflection of images of death and conflict followed by the journey and finally the resolution and possibility of rebirth which are echoed in his own poem. By the association with Virgil and the poem's form in particular we can already identify the overall pastoral discourse of retreat and return in this work.

The choice of the painter Mathias Grünewald is an interesting one that conforms to Empson's description of the 'tragic-hero'.<sup>135</sup> He is essentially

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<sup>134</sup> Dante, trans. by John D. Sinclair *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), Canto II p. 41.

<sup>135</sup> 'The pastoral hero is discovered to be at once the representative figure and the exceptional one [...] he comprehends all and everything: he is both insider and outsider' [...] the poet as outcast and unacknowledged legislator ... puts him exactly in the position of the mythical tragic hero.' A full

conforming to the pastoral view ‘of the artist’s terribly solitary vocation as the “detached intelligence”’.<sup>136</sup>

The detail Sebald gives us about this character is based on an account by Sandrat in 1675, and also inferred from his cameo appearances in his paintings of which there are many. We do know however, that Grünewald (literally Green wood or forest) was not his real name and this can be attributed to a mistake by Sandrat. His surname was probably Gothart or Neithardt which in *After Nature* Sebald refers to as Nithart, who may, or may not, be Grünewald himself.<sup>137</sup> Already we have a tension/ambiguity in the text in the very identity of its first character and this tension is further embellished by his vocation, as some examples from the text will establish.

Grünewald, we are told, inserted self-portraits into several of his paintings and indeed the poem opens with an example from the Isenheim altarpiece in which he depicts himself as Saint George.<sup>138</sup>

Foremost at the picture’s edge he stands  
above the world by a hand’s breadth  
and is about to step over the frame’s  
threshold. (AN. 5)<sup>139</sup>

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discussion can be found in William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 29-74.

<sup>136</sup> John Haffenden, *William Empson: Volume 1: Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 394.

<sup>137</sup> An interesting fact we do know however, is that Grünewald was at one time the teacher and mentor of Albrecht Dürer, who is probably best remembered for his depiction of melancholy – Melencolia 1.

<sup>138</sup> The depiction of St George, also Sebald’s middle name, is a recurring leitmotif in Sebald’s oeuvre.

Here, as Sebald says, Grünewald aligns himself with the auxiliary saints. In other works he appears as ‘a witness / to the snow miracle, a hermit / in the desert, a commiserator / in the Munich *Mocking of Christ*.’ (AN. 5) But in each of these he wears the same ‘burden of grief / the same irregularity of the eyes, veiled / and sliding down into loneliness.’ (AN. 6) Certainly then, a man of sorrows, who led, as Sandrat tells us in the poem ‘a reclusive, / melancholy life and been ill-married.’ (AN. 11) In addition to his self-portraits, we can also see some of his angst expressed in his paintings. For example, he clearly seems to have despaired of the world since its moment of creation when he paints, what is one of the elements of the Garden of Eden ‘a fig tree with fruit, one of which / is entirely hollowed out by insects.’ (AN. 8) Here we also have an anti-pastoral sentiment, nature’s beauty turned in on itself. His paintings reflect his view, and almost certainly, Sebald’s ‘of our insane presence / on the surface of the earth,’ (AN. 26) and the expressions of his subjects ‘the absence of balance in nature / which blindly makes one experiment after another’ (AN. 27) while his vision of the future is one of death by asphyxiation in ‘an evil state of erosion / and desolation the heritage of the ruining / of life that in the end will consume / even the very stones it has depicted.’ (AN. 31)

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<sup>139</sup> It is interesting to note here John Sturrock’s comment on Derrida’s description of a painting’s frame as ‘parergon’ which essentially challenges the hierarchical notions of inside and outside. John Sturrock, *The Word from Paris: Essays on Modern French Thinkers and Writers* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 80. By extension, we might infer Grünewald’s troubled relationship with tradition and authority by the depiction of himself in this context.

The paintings then would point us towards this sensitive, tragic figure but there are other examples in the narrative Sebald gives of his life which draw our attention to the ambiguous nature of this character. The question of identity and alterity which Sebald raises by introducing Mathias Nithart as a possible doppelgänger of Grunewald, allows Sebald to effectively destabilise the narrative. We now have a mysterious 'other' who emerges from a palimpsest of the Sebastian panel of the altar painting, who is a painter of idylls, an engineer of watercourses and possible homosexual. These are all aspects of Grunewald's alter ego. The theatricalisation of them here heightens the ambiguity of the personality by placing a truly pastoral figure adjacent to the anti-pastoral hero. This ambiguity is an essential part of the pastoral modes displayed in this work and in this context, the choice of the Grunewald character is highly symptomatic.<sup>140</sup> An enigmatic figure then, but one who, as well as seeing the tragedy of life also sees its beauty and wishes to contribute to its preservation. But underlying all this is always the spectre of guilt.

His religious paintings certainly reflect this guilt with his depiction of the asphyxiated Christ (the ultimate scapegoat), human suffering through illness, torture, martyrdom and 'the mountain landscape of weeping, / in which Grunewald with a pathetic gaze / into the future has prefigured / a planet utterly strange, chalk-coloured / behind the blackish- blue river.' (AN. 31)

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<sup>140</sup> Empson's comment seems appropriate here when he says in the opening chapter of *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 'literature is [...] an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.' p. 22.

Sebald also tells us of his response to the horrors of war which included the gouging out of eyes, by wearing ‘a dark bandage over his face.’ (AN. 35)<sup>141</sup>

By his marriage to a convert born in the Frankfurt ghetto he would also have had intimate experience of the persecution of Europe’s Jews, which prefigures much of Sebald’s future prose work. As we have noted, this reclusive, solitary and melancholic figure feels the world’s pain and suffering. Sebald is not only using him as a vehicle for the emotions he wishes to expose but in so doing he is also presenting him as a ‘tragic-hero’ subsequent to the pastoral textual construct.

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<sup>141</sup> This temporary self-blinding is an anti-pastoral gesture of protective filtering which will be developed further and in particular in our discussion of *The Emigrants*.

## 2.2 The Ultimate Retreat without Return

The second of the three sections of this poem Sebald also uses a figure from real life 'to project back into the past a character type, ill at ease in the world, indeed in exile from it,'<sup>142</sup> but the figure of Georg Steller also exhibits pastoral traits within a discourse of pastoral retreat.

The character Georg Wilhelm Steller, whose journey accompanying Vitus Bering on a doomed expedition to America is central to the second section of *After Nature*, epitomises Raymond Williams's description of pastoral's transition away from its Virgilian beginnings. Here is an individual with 'an intensity of attention to natural beauty, but this is now the nature of observation, of the scientist or the tourist, rather than of the original working countryman.'<sup>143</sup> Here again then Sebald uses a character, like Grönwald, who qualifies as a pastoral figure but in Steller's case these qualities are those of the lone, somewhat melancholic individual at odds with his environment but eager to comprehend it.

The opening stanzas depict a young man who turns away from religion in favour of the natural sciences and travel, to the Americas in particular. He could 'think of nothing other than / the shapes of the fauna and / flora of that distant region' (AN 44) and turned his back on society and potentially secure job to travel to St Petersburg in preparation for the expedition. His nostalgic

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<sup>142</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *inner workings: essays 2000-2005* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 152.

<sup>143</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p. 20.

pastoral memories of ‘his childhood, / the woods of Windsheim; / the learning of ancient languages / protracted through his youth’ (AN 46) soon however turn to an anti-pastoral image of a city which he saw as ‘no more than a chaos erupting, / buildings that began to subside / as soon as erected, and / nowhere a vista quite straight.’ (AN. 47) He begins his pastoral retreat by taking solace in the manmade nature of the Botanical Garden<sup>144</sup> where he ‘escapes the city’s bustle. / Neatly he walks the paths / between the flowerbeds, marvels at / the hothouses, filled with tropical plants,’ (AN 49) and also in the arms of the naturalist’s wife who pledges to accompany him on his forthcoming journey.

If Steller had, as we must assume, naive feelings of adventure and the pursuit of a potential Arcadia, these are constantly thrown into relief by Sebald’s frequent practice of juxtaposing any potential idyll against its anti-pastoral by the use of images of corruption, such as those of St Petersburg, and of the ‘deeply melancholic man’ (AN 51) in the form of Daniel Messerschmidt the elderly naturalist mentioned above and, by the words of his temporary employer Archbishop Theophon who tells him ‘all things, my son, transmute / into old age, life diminishes, / everything declines’ (AN 50). So it is with this frame of mind, clouded further by the refusal of his ‘true wife’ to accompany him (in place of whom he has two ravens which dictated ominous sayings to him<sup>145</sup>) that he sets forth to join the Bering expedition with a feeling that ‘he would not / arrest the slow corrosion / that had entered his soul.’ (AN. 54) This is now a character that was once (and may still in part

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<sup>144</sup> This image of man imposing order on nature recurs in the final section.

<sup>145</sup> One cannot help but recall Poe’s poem *The Raven* here.

be) looking for adventure and discovery but whose overriding emotion is that of retreat from the present, to explore, to achieve what is, after all, at the centre of pastoral, an escape from the contingencies of modern life to the pleasures and simplicity of nature. Unfortunately for him, it became the ultimate retreat into death.

Steller's first encounter with Bering is an austere moment in which Sebald portrays him (Bering) as 'a beast, shrouded / in deep mourning, / in a black coat / lined with / black fur.' (AN. 56) This description heavy with its sense of melancholy, blackness being not merely superficial but permeating the depths – the black fur lining – is echoed in the subsequent stanza where it is juxtaposed against potential elevations of mood which only serve to heighten the sense of foreboding. In the last lines of section XI for example we see Steller's excited mood of anticipation tempered with that of Bering's inertia.

the snow-covered, ragged merlons  
of Alaska loomed 'resplendent',  
the word that seemed right to Steller,  
in rosy red and purple colours.  
Vitus Bering, who throughout the voyage  
had lain in his cabin staring  
at the ceiling of beams above his head,  
roused by the incessant jubilation  
of the crew for the first time came aloft  
and contemplated the scene  
in a fit of deepest depression. (AN. 58)

It is not only the sentiments of the text that we should note as a dichotomy but, as with Grünewald and Nihart, the text would suggest ambiguity in the characters of Steller and Bering, one representing the naivety and hope of youth and the other of worldly-wise weariness and mistrust. So, Sebald establishes an anti-pastoral counterpart to the essentially naïve, pastoral hero Steller and continues the pastoral tension throughout the text.

As Steller goes ashore on his first scientific excursion, his pastoral persona becomes more apparent in a setting that is, for the moment, nearing the idyllic. But before Steller steps out on his first excursion ashore, in section XII, Sebald makes one of his ‘digressions’ which were to become characteristic of his later prose. These are far from seemingly throwaway asides and have an important function as a narrative device. A more detailed discussion will be given in the section on *Vertigo*. In *After Nature* the passage in which Chamisso imagines taming whales to be trained as ‘beasts of burden’ serves as something of a prolepsis for the mind-set of the naïve but well-intentioned Steller during this expedition.

It is ‘with dread already imprinted /on his brow’ (AN. 61) that Bering allows Steller to go ashore at dawn on St Elijah’s Day (the patron of lightning and thunder) for a scientific excursion. Bering’s dread is, however, contrasted to Steller’s delight at a setting in which ‘a deep blueness / pervaded both water and the forests’ and where, St Francis like, ‘animals came close to Steller, black / and red foxes, magpies too, jays and / crows went with him on his way.’ (AN. 61) But, as we have noted previously and is so often a feature of

*After Nature* this pastoral scene is not allowed to remain and rather than ‘proceeding / towards the mountains, into / cool wilderness,’ (AN. 61) the scientist in him, that urges him to make order and sense of the natural world, insists that he turns his attention to anthropological investigations.

Following this short exploration the expedition returns to sea where, for a period of three months Steller and the crew experience some of nature’s more destructive elements. ‘All was greyness, without direction, / with no above or below, nature / in a process of dissolution, in a state / of pure dementia...’ (AN. 63) Many of the crew fell ill with scurvy and many died and Steller, the physician, unable to help them, questions the fundamental purpose of his profession. This section of the poem ends with the ship driven upon rocks, amidst boulders but with a description of an image of potential pastoral, which contrasts to the destructive natural elements and the devastation these have caused. While the ship lies wrecked behind the reef of the lagoon, Sebald uses a recurring metaphor which, in this narrative, suggests a future that may yet have the potential to overcome history’s darkness; ‘A white sickle [...] mountains in snowlight, / phosphorescent.’ (AN. 65)

Sebald tells us that after a period of eight months Steller and what remains of the crew sail in a ship built from the wreckage to the harbour of Petropavlovsk where, in accordance with Bering’s wish, they make an icon to St Peter out of the silver coins left unspent. Six years pass before the crew are recalled to the capital but our ‘hero’ remains behind to explore the peninsula’s interior. During the last weeks of that summer Steller is depicted

as being ‘happy for the first time in his life.’ (AN. 72) He finds his Arcadia for a brief period. His companion provides for their everyday needs while Steller is occupied with collecting and classifying botanical specimens.

His idyll is short lived however and his naivety and trust of nature is once again exposed when he is reprimanded by the authorities for criticising mistreatment of the indigenous population.<sup>146</sup> This episode appears to unhinge Steller. As Sebald says he ‘now wholly grasps the difference / between nature and society.’ (AN. 73) The pastoral image for him is destroyed and his personal retreat is unresolved. Following bouts of heavy drinking his decline is rapid. His is the ultimate retreat without return with nature the victor once again as Sebald reminds us, ‘thus nature has her way / with a godless / Lutheran from Germany.’ (AN. 75) Steller, the latter-day pastoral figure of exploring scientist, in his attempt to socialise the natural world, finally succumbs to its most extreme elements.

In the first two sections of the poem Sebald has embarked upon a discourse with nature mediated through two real life figures which displays a pastoral/anti-pastoral tension both internal to the characters’ psychology and in their interaction with the external environment and social setting. In the final section, Sebald continues the dialogue with nature and the past in an attempt to resolve some of these issues: man’s inhumanity (personal and collective) to his world and fellow beings, the fundamental irrepressible

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<sup>146</sup> The championing of underprivileged and maltreated native populations recurs in Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* where he discusses Roger Casement’s conflict with the British government on similar charges. A full discussion will be given in section 5 of the thesis.

forces of nature, death and the possibility of rebirth, but here, in place of an individual character through which to conduct the discourse, he suggests the leitmotif of a composite character who, although anonymous, displays biographical features in common with Sebald and will become the Sebaldian narrator of his subsequent works.



As Jo Catling says ‘the reference to smoke, together with the foreboding implicit in the shadows, also acquires sinister resonances, both in this context and in the verses which follow.’<sup>148</sup> This would appear to be corroborated by the translator of the Penguin Classics version of *The Eclogues*, Guy Lee, who notes ‘These shadows, though picturesque, sound ominous in the Latin.’<sup>149</sup> We must ask therefore whether the intention of this epigraph is to presage the pastoral/anti-pastoral tensions that feature in the following verses. This dynamic is certainly echoed throughout the poem and returns very distinctly in the epiphanic final verses of section VII.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, this section of the poem acts as a pastoral return from the previous sections in that, while it continues to expose elements of natural and man-made desecration, it holds out hope for the survival of society and a potential Arcadia.

The opening stanza of the third part of *After Nature* sees the narrator musing on the past and in particular on his own origins. At first, there is a retreat into prehistory – which, by definition almost, must be unspoilt – but these ‘places beautiful and comforting’ (AN. 81) are immediately qualified as ‘more cruel, too, / than the previous state of ignorance.’ (AN. 81) This would suggest that the ‘state of ignorance’ a pre-lapsarian existence as it were, is to be desired as utopian, although it is an Arcadia that cannot be sustained. Already this section of the poem suggests a tension developing between the nostalgia of

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<sup>148</sup> Jo Catling, ‘Gratwanderungen bis an den Rand der Natur: W.G. Sebald’s Landscapes of Memory’ in *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald* (Munich: Iudicium, 2003), p. 35.

<sup>149</sup> Vergil, trans. by Guy Lee, *The Eclogues* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 110.

<sup>150</sup> The sense of foreboding, of something hidden is, of course, an innate part of Sebald’s psychology. In an interview with James Atlas he says ‘I had grown up with the feeling that something was being kept from me [...] as if those horrors I did not experience had cast a shadow over me [...]. James Atlas, ‘W.G. Sebald: A Profile’, *Paris Review* 151 (1999), p. 282.

innocence and the harsh reality that comes with maturity and the intrusion of mankind on an uncorrupted world. The effect of this disallows any sense of comfort without the possibility of menace.

The idyll continues to be disrupted when the narrator goes on to reminisce about his ancestry. There is no comfortable return to an untroubled past. The image of his grandparents on their wedding day is an austere and bleak one. We see for example a bride in a black dress carrying paper flowers on a cold morning in January. There is nothing to cheer the memory here and the qualification of the flowers being paper (although this would surely be difficult to infer from a photograph but as this occurred in January, perhaps this should be assumed) further distances any warmth that nature may have brought to this scene. The absence of a sympathetic or reassuring natural element continues in the description of the photographs of their children, which include the narrator's parents.

It is interesting to note here as an aside the absence of photographic reproductions in this, Sebald's first published work for the general public. We have ekphrasis rather than the photographs or pictorial representations that we see in his subsequent publications. In the first photograph he describes a scene that might have depicted the innocence of childhood but far from a celebratory nostalgic picture we have 'Forty-eight pitiable coevals' on a 'grey cardboard mount' with an inscription on the reverse 'In the future death lies at our feet.' (AN. 82) There is no nostalgic pastoral of childhood here as there is in the protagonist's schooldays in *Austerlitz* but rather, an example of the anti-pastoral pastoral mode in operation. The classical pastoral takes no

consideration of labour or other mundane input, which often contribute to pastoral idylls. In this photograph we see a childhood scene through an adult's eyes. This will, of necessity, colour the interpretation and bring a bleaker side to it with the benefit of backshadowing.<sup>151</sup> It recognises the underlying emotional and physical trauma to which he knew these particular children were exposed. It acknowledges the potential unpleasantness, the labour if you will, that contributed to an otherwise pastoral nostalgic childhood. I suggest therefore that this mode is termed anti-pastoral nostalgia and we will see further examples throughout Sebald.

The lines which describe the second photograph, continue in an anti-pastoral mode. Nature is not natural as it were and man's corruption of it is highlighted. We have 'a swan and its reflection / on the water's black surface, / a perfect emblem of peace.' (AN. 82, 83) This is an unsettled peace however. The *white* swan on a *black* surface instils a sense of disquiet and the following lines confirm this: '[t]he botanical garden around the pond, / to my knowledge, is situated / on the bank of the Regnitz at Bamberg, and I believe that a road / runs through it today.' (AN. 83) The 'emblem of peace' is now seen to have the intrusion of man imposed upon it. The natural landscape is intruded on by firstly, a man-made representation of nature, the botanical

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<sup>151</sup> A detailed account of this topic together with the associated term 'sideshadowing' which is pertinent to Sebald's texts but outside the remit of this discussion can be found in Nicola King, 'Structures of Autobiographical Narrative: Lisa Appignanesi, Dan Jacobson, W.G. Sebald', in *Comparative Critical Studies* vol. 1, no. 3 (2004), pp. 265-78. See also Nicola King, 'But we didn't know that then' in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 1-10.

garden,<sup>152</sup> and then replaced by a truly utilitarian artificial structure. Man overtakes nature; the pastoral becomes the anti-pastoral. The photograph, however, stops short of man's domination of nature, with only the artificial garden present at this moment (the road came later) and nature is still evident in the form of:

the elms, the hornbeams and densely green  
conifers in the background, the small  
pagoda-like building, the finely raked  
gravel, the hortensias, flag-irises,  
aloes, ostrich-plume ferns and  
giant leaved ornamental rhubarb. (AN. 83)

Although even in this idyll we still see the hand of man in the 'finely raked gravel' and 'pagoda-like building.' The impression, the narrator says is 'somehow un-German.' (AN. 83) This resonates with a sense of un-Heimat, the importance of which Richard Sheppard, among others has noted, 'particularly in his (Sebald's) first two literary works [...] there is a quest for fragments of a lost, benevolent Heimat.'<sup>153</sup> There is nothing here that the narrator can relate to as typical of his experience of German culture. 'Mother [...] with a lightness she was later to lose' and 'Father [...] with no cares.'

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<sup>152</sup> The image of the botanical garden can also be seen as a metaphor for displacement and man's desire to 'structure' or impose order upon nature when we consider what these structures contain and were designed for; exotic examples of flora from the Orient and African continents, categorised and kept in artificial conditions. This, of course, reminds us of the work of Steller in the second section of the poem and perhaps also instils a feeling of displacement and unquiet Heimat. James Martin also notes this where he says of Steller's arrival in St. Petersburg that he revelled in the 'encyclopaedic drive of botany to name, catalogue, and thus systematise an otherwise unruly nature.' p. 148.

<sup>153</sup> Sheppard, p. 436.

(AN. 83) It is a picture of unsustainable pastoral, developed using a particular aspect of memory which we have termed anti-pastoral nostalgia and which continues to resonate as the poem progresses.

After this the poem turns immediately away from this, albeit disquieting peace, to scenes of menace and destruction. Sebald's father departs for Dresden, and Nuremberg is blanket bombed, forcing his now pregnant mother, to take sanctuary on her way to her parents' home in the Alps. There is a noticeable paucity of memory on both his mother and father's behalf. He retains no memory of the beauty of Dresden and she none of the burning city. The narrator however feels he has seen the burning town of Nuremberg when viewing a painting by Altdorfer depicting Lot with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the background and 'In the middle ground there is a strip / of idyllic green landscape.' (AN. 85) The pastoral contrasting structure is here foregrounded yet again, not only in the description of the painting - the pastoral idyll interposed between the incestual scene of destruction - but in the anti-pastoral 'protective filtering' on behalf of his mother and father as against the narrator's acknowledgement of past atrocities. The characters, including the narrator, have undergone a physical retreat but as well as this physical dimension there is also a mental 'return' resulting in new insights not only for the protagonists but also for us, the readers.

Section two of the third part of the poem sees the birth of the narrator on Ascension Day. There is an idyllic, celebratory atmosphere established in the opening lines. But, in a manner reminiscent of the Virgilian epigraph, this seemingly pastoral scene on the surface has a menacing undertone. The

convivial atmosphere of, the procession with the ‘fire-brigade band, on its way out / to the flowering May meadows’ is soon contaminated by a gathering sense of foreboding when we see ‘that above the mountains / already the storm was hanging.’ (AN. 86)

This storm develops sufficiently to kill one of the four canopy bearers. Sebald’s comment on this and the fire shortly before he started school and ‘the dreadful course / of events elsewhere’ is that ‘he grew up [...] without any / idea of destruction.’ (AN. 86,87) However this may be, he clearly did not escape these experiences entirely untouched.

The poem continues to describe his ‘habit of falling down in the street’ which could represent a form of seizure analogous to epilepsy and ‘hours / doing nothing but looking out’ (AN. 87). Yet despite these episodes of atypical behaviour he ‘grew up’ and the nostalgia he describes is also continually coloured with pastoral images. He sits at the window looking out for hours ‘between the potted fuchsias’ [...] ‘gazing down into the herb garden / in which the nuns under their white / starched hoods moved so slowly / between the beds as though a moment ago / they had still been caterpillars’ (AN. 87)

It is tempting here to suggest that ‘caterpillars’ is not a purely descriptive term but denotes the possibility of a brighter future: the metamorphosis into butterflies.<sup>154</sup> This characteristic interposition of uplifting episodes in an

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<sup>154</sup> This image of the caterpillar is not thought as necessarily benign by William Empson who compares the devouring of a petal by a caterpillar to a

otherwise endless stream of melancholia<sup>155</sup> is not a commonly noted feature in most commentaries on Sebald, which tend to dwell mainly on the darker aspects of the prose at the expense of these, albeit subtle, moments of potential mood enhancement. Only Hart suggests as much when he notes ‘Sebald and his alter egos never manage to forget the fallen world of dehumanizing labor and violence just beyond the walls of Edenic gardens or pastures.’<sup>156</sup> However the above sequence of the poem is interpreted, it is, with its constant juxtaposition of unpleasant images alongside blatantly celebratory ones, anti-pastoral in mode and, as previously noted, is an example of anti-pastoral nostalgia. That is nostalgia, far from being a longing for a past seen as idyllic, a Golden Age, here is depicted as troubled with an ever present sense of foreboding and this is generated in large part by never allowing a pastoral image to survive for too long before it is destroyed, either by events or a narratorial ‘pricking of conscience.’<sup>157</sup>

Another element of the anti-pastoral discernible in this section of *After Nature* is an example of a psychological dimension to this mode. This can also be viewed as the pastoral aspect of the psychological element of return which John Zilcosky notes is present throughout the entire Sebald oeuvre together

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rodent ulcer when discussing Nash’s ‘Summer’s Last Will and Testament’ in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>155</sup> One of the effects of anti-pastoral in Sebald is to disrupt the melancholic mood and will be returned to below and developed more fully in the thesis.

<sup>156</sup> Hart, p. 2.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Sheppard also alludes to this in his review article where he says that ‘Max’s (Sebald) melancholia [...] derives not just from his sense of the catastrophic nature of the present, but also from a perpetually frustrated nostalgia for the unity and plenitude of being,’ p. 429.

with lexical and historical motifs.<sup>158</sup> We have previously encountered this psychological dimension to the anti-pastoral mode in the characters Grünewald and Steller, both of whom could be accused of subconsciously editing their own histories. However, there is further evidence of this ‘logic of “prudently” excluding uncomfortable natural forces’<sup>159</sup> in the anti-pastoralisation of *After Nature*.

As we have noted above, both his mother and father demonstrated lapses of memory with the former in particular ‘selecting out’ the sight, and her feelings of the burning city of Nuremberg. The text also reveals more subtle examples. As we have seen above, Sebald uses the anti-pastoral technique of contrasting the idyll to the unpleasant, the unwanted intervention of mankind and the despoiling of Arcadias. But, as we will see in the context of Sebald’s comic interludes, he is also diluting these harsh realities (often in nostalgic form) with pastoral scenes which are in many cases acting as his and some of his characters’ ‘protective filter’. The real world and its history are viewed obliquely, from a metaphorical ‘cavern’.

The latter part of the poem’s subsection II develops further the psychological theme of the anti-pastoral mode. The narrator is alluding to ‘the scarcely identifiable disaster’ (AN. 87). The verse continues:

After that come the children grown  
a little bigger who believe that  
parts of their parents ride ahead

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<sup>158</sup> Zilcosky, p. 113.

<sup>159</sup> Gifford, p. 136.

on the removal van's horse  
to make ready the living quarters,  
while in the dark box  
on the way to Gmunden  
they eat their supper,  
drink two pots of coffee,  
spread butter on the bread  
and say not a word about  
either herring or radish.' (AN.88, 89)

This section is using a series of metaphors for the uncomfortable history of both World Wars and the Holocaust. We note combinations of deliberate evasion 'A long series of tiny shocks / from the first and the second pasts / not translated into the spoken / language of the present,' (AN. 88) and innocent oblivion or unwilling comprehension '[a]fter that come the children grown / a little bigger who believe that / parts of their parents ride ahead' (AN. 88). Some scenes could be described as examples of pastoral childhood; eating supper with the luxury, for that period, of butter and two pots of coffee, but the mention of herring and radish, typical Jewish fare, bring the reader sharply back to earth, reminding us what this passage signifies; the disturbing memory of the loss of the children's parents to the Holocaust.

Section III continues to give examples of this form of nostalgia but rather than continue to give further examples we will turn our attention to sections IV and V which develop other aspects of pastoral including those to be found in the descriptions of art works Sebald mentions in his text.

Section IV of the poem sees the narrator in Manchester, which, he notes, Disraeli called ‘a celestial Jerusalem’ (AN. 95). The sojourn in Manchester is a verifiable autobiographical episode and appears again in *The Emigrants* and although initially he talks of rambling ‘over the Elysian Fields’ in true anti-pastoral mode he goes on to talk of ‘the work of destruction, the black / mills and shipping canals, [...] the banks / of the Irk and the Irwell, those / mythical rivers now dead, / which in better times / shone azure blue [...]’ (AN. 96)<sup>160</sup> This represents man’s intrusion on nature in the tradition of, for example, Goldsmith or John Clare whose, ‘anti-pastoral intention was carried with some force by a poetry of protest against inhumane agricultural change that altered the land itself’ and which ‘represents what people have done to people in a landscape pastoralised by others.’<sup>161</sup> The attempt at pastoral interpretation of the mundane is also in play within the narrator’s imagination in such phrases as ‘I thought / I could see the will-o’-the-wisps/ of their souls, as with tiny lanterns / they haunted the rubbish dumps / of the City Corporation, a smouldering / alpine range [...]’ (AN. 97) This is a reference to the souls of volunteer workers recruited during World War Two.

So there is melancholia here, ‘a kind of mourning’<sup>162</sup> but our argument is that this melancholia is typified by the anti-pastoral mode. It functions here by constant juxtaposition to and hints at, its pastoral opposite, the reader is never

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<sup>160</sup> Eva Hoffman in ‘Curiosity and Catastrophe’ notes this contrast in Section IV although without reference to its anti-pastoral quality, where she says ‘stark descriptions of barbarity give way to luminous vistas of icy landscapes, and fantastic naturalistic detail [...] alternates with memorable depictions of despair.’, p. 2.

<sup>161</sup> Gifford, p. 122,123.

<sup>162</sup> Hoffman, p. 2.

left with a sense of tranquillity. There is an awareness of an underlying pathology whenever nature is at any time superficially seen to be benign.

The works of art and photographs mentioned by Sebald in *After Nature* are unlike the photographs and reproductions that appear in his future work in that they are unseen and are described, in varying degrees of detail, in order to enhance the mood or meaning of the poem, rather than being left to the readers' interpretation of their purpose. In a sense, therefore, we might assign more importance to their function. As we see for example in the Brueghel and Altdorfer paintings, each individual work of art demonstrates its own pastoral modes and often a tension between them.

The painting by Altdorfer referred to above depicts Lot and his daughter in the foreground against a background of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But even in this dreadful landscape there is a hint of pastoral. 'In the middle ground there is a strip / of idyllic green landscape, / and closest to the beholder's eye / the new generation of Moabites is conceived.' (AN. 85) The effect is to disrupt the melancholia (while not necessarily attenuating it) and this is achieved by contrasting the idyll with the apocalyptic, by utilising, in other words, the anti-pastoral mode. This becomes something of a leitmotiv in the paintings that Sebald utilises in this and several of his other texts. There is human folly, or maybe simply 'humanness' counter-pointed with nature, either in all its beauty or at its most destructive.

In Section V of the poem as in *The Emigrants*, we are introduced to another character who briefly becomes a narrator, in *After Nature* it is Engineer D, in

*The Emigrants* it is an artist, Max Ferber. Sebald uses reported speech, the formal element with which he would experiment in *The Rings of Saturn* and develop further in *Austerlitz*,<sup>163</sup> Sebald describes Brueghel's *Fall of Icarus* (c1560). Once again, it would appear that we are not allowed a glimpse of beauty without a reminder of nature's indifference to mankind. We are shown a potential Arcadia of a 'golden coast [...] a beautiful meadow' but then the magnificence of nature 'the Rhine glacier [...] the Chirfirsten peaks [...] Säntis range [...] glowing bright in drifting ice.' (AN. P. 103,104) begins to take on a more menacing tone until the plight of Icarus is described.

An anti-pastoral mode is therefore in operation and is extended further in the painting itself; a painting moreover by an artist renowned for his landscapes depicting peasant lifestyle. In the foreground of this painting, which is often cited as an allegory of the folly of human nature, we have a pastoral scene of a ploughman tilling the soil, a shepherd with his flock and what appears to be the figure of a fisherman in the bottom right hand corner of the painting. Our eye is then drawn to the splendour of the sky and the permanence of nature in the form of the mountains and sheer cliff faces and rugged coastline. Even the small fortress structure, which appears to have been hewn from the rock itself, creates a sense of timelessness more so than the somewhat ephemeral buildings of the town in the background. Icarus, an almost comical figure, is

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<sup>163</sup> A more detailed account of Sebald's use of language and the subjunctive in particular can be found in Mark McCulloh's 'Introduction' to *W.G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 7-20.

A detailed discussion of Sebald's use of (or absence of) narrators can be found in Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchen 'A Time He Could Not Bear To Say Any More About: Presence and Absence of the Narrator in W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*', in *W.G. Sebald: History-Memory-Trauma*, pp.141-155.

depicted in the bottom right hand corner of the painting by a pair of legs disappearing beneath the surface of the water.

This somewhat ignominious end to Icarus which, as mentioned, traditionally warns of man's foolishness, is here as depicted by Brueghel and in turn by Sebald more an anti-pastoral representation of an attempt to manipulate natural forces and is summarised in the lines 'the beautiful ship, / the ploughing peasant, the whole / of nature somehow turn away / from the son's misfortune' (AN. 104). Nature has not deemed the event any significance. Again, if we apply Empson's pastoral analysis here, a complex metaphor is represented as a simple image with a comic interlude (the figure of Icarus's legs) as its resolution: nature's indifference to man's attempt to manipulate or in any way conquer it and as if to reinforce this, this section ends on a definitively pastoral note:

Another summer gone by. And  
as ivy hangs down, Hölderlin wrote,  
so does branchless rain. Moss roses  
grow on the Alps. Avignon sylvan.  
across the Gotthard a horse gropes its way. (AN. 104)

The above illustration of pastoral modes within a painting can be extended to others, if not all, within this poem. Even in a sombre religious scene such as *The Crucifixion of Christ* (1505) by Mathias Grünewald, Sebald makes a point of noting nature's intrusion as an indestructible, timeless quality. An event, even as catastrophic as this has essentially no impact upon nature and

is a further example of the importance given to man's interaction with and ultimate domination by, the forces of nature, including the human psyche.

The penultimate section continues in pastoral mode with the narrator resolving 'to make a new start' (AN. 105) and sets forth with his daughter to leave the town for the countryside. But the pastoral never fully matures. Man's hand is seen in the image of the mill 'a groaning miraculous construct / of wheels and belts' (AN. 105). The 'shadows' are again present in the form of unsettling images such as 'an old people's home, / a prison or an asylum, / an institution for juvenile delinquents' (AN. 107) and the potential apocalyptic feature of Sizewell Nuclear power plant which the narrator describes as the 'Whispering / madness on the heathland / of Suffolk.' (AN. 108) His mood is clear when he asks his daughter 'Tell me, child / is your heart as heavy as mine is' (AN. 107). The final lines remind us of the elemental nature of the poem: 'Water? Fire? Good? / Evil? Life? Death?' (AN. 108)

The final subsection of the poem, which Jo Catling has described as 'a dream of flying,'<sup>164</sup> is certainly a journey of the observer's mind's eye and by depicting this 'journey' as a dream sequence, the narrator is able to select out, to subconsciously filter, extraneous or unwanted contingencies. He is, as it were, 'filtering' reality and experience, but at the same time we sense that he may be struggling to come to terms with it, although, as we have seen above, the reality or 'forces' cannot be suppressed by being ignored. The dream itself

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<sup>164</sup> Catling, *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, p. 36.

is a form of filter.<sup>165</sup> And for this reason if no other, is strongly anti-pastoral. We revisit themes from the previous sections and indeed, from the whole poem. We see for example Icarus (Sebald) ‘scarcely moving a wing, / high above the earth’ (AN. 109) the botanist’s ‘proliferating molluscs, / woodlice and leeches’ (AN.110) and the anti-pastoral nostalgia of childhood in the form of the school chaplain who described the carnage of the Battle of Alexander as ‘a demonstration / of the necessary destruction of all / the hordes coming up from the East.’ (AN. 111)<sup>166</sup>

The use of the term ‘journey’ above is deliberately used as a descriptive of movement in time as well as geographically. In his dream he travels from his home in Norfolk at the day’s end with ‘the shadows falling / on the East Anglian landscape’ (AN. 109) eastwards and then south following the Rhine Valley<sup>167</sup> on his way to Munich to see the painting of Alexander’s battle. He is, as Catling says, flying and observing events from an omniscient point of view; we might recall his description of Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus* here. Once again, the contrast between anti-pastoral is very much in evidence in such lines as the overtly pastoral ‘the waves lapping at the shore / and in the North sea the ships / motionless ahead of the foam-white wakes’ contrasted to

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<sup>165</sup>There has been much discussion of Sebald’s knowledge of Freudian theory and its application in his fiction. See for example Long and Whitehead in ‘Introduction’ to *A Critical Companion*, pp. 6-12. The association of Freud and pastoral has not however, to date, be made in this context. This will be developed later in the thesis but it is appropriate to note here that what Lawrence Lerner describes as the ‘pastoral poetry of illusion’ (Loughrey, p. 154) can, I suggest, be applied, selectively, to this section of the poem.

<sup>166</sup> The figure of childhood authority is something of a leitmotiv for Sebald and plays an increasingly dominant role in his future works.

<sup>167</sup> The Rhine Valley and travelling through it is a recurring event in Sebald’s prose fiction and we will explore the relevance of this in detail below.

‘Cities phosphorescent / on the riverbank, industry’s / glowing piles waiting /  
beneath the smoke trails’ (AN. 110,111).

As we have noted, this section is ‘resolving’ (in much the same way that dreams function in everyday life) the entire poem, and it gives hope for the future. We see in these verses recurring themes from previous sections that the narrator seems to be attempting to reinterpret through illusion. In particular though, Sebald uses a complex pictorial work of art with which to arrive at or distil into, a simple image of a potential Arcadia. In a manner similar to his painting of *Lot and His Daughter*, Altdorfer’s *The Battle of Alexander* contrasts the sins and follies of mankind with the splendour and power and potential destructive force of nature. The folly here is that of violence and possession as Alexander is shown defeating Darius to claim the Persian Empire. But, here again, nature is the true victor, as Sebald says and this comes in the form of an awakening, a vision of the future and a continuation of the journey further south as Altdorfer’s painting turns away from man’s folly and opens out to the vistas of the Red Sea, Egypt and Africa. It is this magnificent spectacle which gives him hope and allows him to say:

Now I know, as with a crane’s eye  
one surveys his far-flung realm,  
a truly Asiatic spectacle,  
and slowly learns, from the tininess  
of the figures and the incomprehensible  
beauty of nature that vaults over them,  
to see that side of life that  
one could not see before. (AN.112)

This first example of Sebald's work for the general reader has then introduced us to the major themes of his future prose fiction. In doing so it has also demonstrated several pastoral modes either by way of subject, character or literary technique. In particular, we have seen the pastoralisation of the melancholic mode for which Sebald's prose is renowned. His second non-academic work, *Vertigo*, demonstrates *par excellence*, pastoral's function as a literary structural device.

### 3. *Vertigo's* Double Plots

Sebald's first work of prose fiction was published in Germany in 1990 under the title *Schwindel. Gefühle*. The English translation entitled *Vertigo* was not published until 1999, after *The Emigrants* in 1996 and *The Rings of Saturn* in 1997. The text is divided into four sections which are seemingly unrelated and can be read as narratives complete in themselves.<sup>168</sup> However, the interrelationship of the four chapters is firmly established by exposing themes which Sebald scholars have demonstrated as dominant traits throughout his oeuvre. For example McCulloh has noted the intertextualities and cross references between the chapters in *Vertigo* and in particular Kafka and Stendhal.<sup>169</sup> Zilcosky<sup>170</sup> regards Sebald's 'uncanny travels' and the dichotomy between travelling and dwelling, and develops the psychological effects of getting lost. My argument however, is that in addition to these there is also the pastoral construct of the 'double-plot' in operation. We shall see examples of tension within the text by the use of anti-pastoral and classic pastoral modes as we have in *After Nature*, but here they are associated with an overall structure based on this device. This, as we shall see, not only demonstrates interconnections between and within the chapters but also interdependencies which, when exposed, enhances our conception of the narrative as a whole.

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<sup>168</sup> Indeed, the section All'estero has been published separately in a collection of love stories as 'Going Abroad' in *Granta*, Number 68, Winter 1999, pp. 175-203.

<sup>169</sup> McCulloh, p. 84.

<sup>170</sup> Zilcosky, John, 'Sebald's Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost', in J.J.Long and Anne Whitehead, eds. *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2004), pp. 102-120.

That we should expect some form of ‘doubling effect’ is sign-posted in the title of the German language edition. By separating the word *Schwindelgefühle* into its component parts *Schwindel. Gefühle* so that now the title is not simply ‘dizzy feeling’ in English but the possibility of a trick or swindle is inferred. We are alerted to be on guard for hidden or double meanings within the text.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, the arrangement of the chapters suggests a pairing or doubling effect. The two first-person narratives with their Italian titles<sup>172</sup> are set in opposition, or mirrored as it were, to the two third-person, historically based sections. In addition, the cohesive elements between all four are again a doubling effect of place, character, historical and personal detail. What I refer to as doubling, McCulloh terms ‘the phenomenon of repetition’.<sup>173</sup> Overtly, this is the case, but when we examine these ‘repetitions’ more closely, we see that Sebald is not simply repeating a place, date or character randomly, but these are echoes mirroring and doubling one another, which has the effect of accentuating the symbolism. To reveal the pastoral double-plot device operational within the narrative we do, however, have to interrogate the text in some detail. Prior to this a description and discussion of Empson’s original thesis is appropriate.

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<sup>171</sup> McCulloh notes ‘Schwindel. Gefühle is a re-combination of the compound word *Schwindelgefühle* [...] using a period to divide the word into its component parts, whereby Sebald exposes an ambiguity in the German language’ *Understanding Sebald*, p. 87.

<sup>172</sup> Martin Klebes, suggests the use of Italian in the chapter titles serves to ‘throw into doubt [...] the notion that *Heimat*, home country or *patria*, will have one unambiguous referent in the context of Sebald’s narrative.’ ‘No Exile: Crossing the Border with Sebald and Amery’, in *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria/Expatriate Writing*, ed. by Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. 77.

<sup>173</sup> McCulloh, p. 102.

### 3.1 Pastoral double-plots

William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* is not without relevance in today's discussion of literary texts.<sup>174</sup> Pastoral, for Empson, epitomised the tensions within texts and the relationship of seemingly unrelated elements to one another.<sup>175</sup> For Empson, fundamental to this pastoral dynamic is the 'double-plot' device which he originally proposed for drama, but can equally be identified in poetry and prose. It is worth quoting Empson here when he says 'An account of the double-plot, then, is needed for a general view of pastoral because the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends.'<sup>176</sup> Essentially, exposing the double-plot device requires a structural analysis of the text first to expose the main-plot and once this is established, to identify the sub-plot(s). It is the very interaction of the two – the sub and main plot – which gives coherence to the piece. The sub-plot *informs* the main plot. Traditionally, the sub-plot would take the form of a love story with typical themes of intrigue and betrayal.<sup>177</sup> Empson demonstrates how this has its parallels with the main plot and assumes almost an allegorical function - again typically a story of political and or social interest. He then demonstrates that, by juxtaposing two seemingly contrasting

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<sup>174</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin Books, 1995)

<sup>175</sup> Empson, pp. 31,32.

<sup>176</sup> And further, when discussing Robert Green's plays and of especial relevance to *Vertigo* 'Some critics have called Green's plays "a heap of isolated episodes [...] but why, if these stories have nothing to do with one another, they should form a unity by being juxtaposed.'" Empson, p. 32.

<sup>177</sup> Among the examples Empson uses is *Troilus and Cressida* in which two seemingly separate plotlines - one sexual and the other political – are perceived to connect when the sexual disloyalty of Cressida is made to correspond to the political disloyalty of Achilles and Ajax.

plotline sentiments - love/politics, serious/comic – a unity of opposites is produced. It is this disparate unity which is fundamental to Empsonian double-plot device and which contributes significantly to the irony and ambiguity which is essential to his dialectic.<sup>178</sup> Thus Empson, having identified pastoral as tension within a text extended his concept of the pastoral to the broader understanding of literary texts. This constructional model, revolving around pastoral double-plots, allows us to restore to the surface of the text a deep structure which reunites the two, seemingly disparate plotlines, within the broader unity of a double-plot structure.

As critics have noted ‘Empson double-plot device is predicated on a series of correspondences, interrelationships and juxtapositions,<sup>179</sup> terms which Sebald researchers agree as being integral to his prose form. Furthermore, Sebald’s predilection for ‘digression’ and his ‘layering narrative technique’<sup>180</sup> and coincidences, his inclusion or description of photographs, works of art and other memorabilia, function, I shall argue, as sub-plots for the purpose of the double-plot device. Indeed, Sebald, has come very close to describing this technique himself when, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel with reference

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<sup>178</sup> Unity in this context is a structural unity of the narrative – two plots, which could be read independently, are shown to correspond with one another forming an interdependence.

<sup>179</sup> See for example, McCallum, ‘Figural narrative and plot construction: Empson on pastoral’ in *William Empson: The Critical Achievement*, ed. by Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 198.

<sup>180</sup> Ben Hutchinson, “‘Egg boxes stacked in a crate:’ Narrative Status and its Implications’ in *W.G. Sebald: History-Memory-Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 171-182. Sebald himself has said ‘my texts are like palimpsests’ in an interview with Kenneth Baker, ‘Up against Historical Amnesia’, in *Chronicle of Art*, Sunday, October 7, 2001.

to symbolism in his work, ‘You just try and set up reverberations in a text and the whole acquires a significance that it might not otherwise have.’<sup>181</sup>

I have refigured Empson’s concept in two directions which, I believe, do not distract from the original tenet, but allows it to operate on the text more freely and addresses the distinctive construct of Sebald’s *Vertigo*. Firstly, the term ‘plot’ does not necessarily refer to a causal sequence of events and a character’s role within that event. For our purposes it may include a ‘digression’ or ‘juxtaposition’ or other incident operating within the main narrative – a contrapuntal form in musicology. Secondly, I suggest that sub-plots are operational on micro and macroscopic levels. That is to say that they can be found within a short piece of text (micro), where they act very specifically on the narrative, or a complete chapter or section of narrative (macro) can provide the same function as sub-plot. In *Vertigo* as we shall see, the whole text – each chapter of the book – is supported by a sub-plot that continues throughout. It is on the macroscopic level, therefore, that I shall begin our discussion of *Vertigo* as a double-plot device within the pastoral mode.

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<sup>181</sup> Eleanor Wachtel, p. 54.

### 3.2 *Vertigo*'s inter-chapter counterpoint

The four sections in *Vertigo*, while pertaining to be separate narratives, have recurring motifs, for example, the unreliability of memory and sense of loss and displacement and the first signpost of paranoia in Sebald's works which will be developed below.<sup>182</sup> These themes form the main-plot of *Vertigo* and they are brought to the readers' attention largely through literary and artistic allusion by the narrator, a travelling literary figure, recalling the lives of three writers, one of whom is the narrator himself in real or thinly disguised autobiography. They are reinforced by intertextual references which is unsurprising in the prose work by an otherwise exclusively literary scholar. Many critics have noted and commented on this with particular reference to Kafka and they are by no means confined to *Vertigo*.<sup>183</sup>

While these themes and their intertextual interaction give this work a sense of cohesion we are also able to identify a double-plot structure underpinning the whole framework. Firstly, the arrangement of the chapters is fundamental to the double-plot device in *Vertigo*. The two chapters narrated in the first-person, 'All'estero' and 'Il ritorno in patria', by a narrator who bears a similar biography to Sebald himself, foreground the elements of loss and exile - two components of the book's main-plot - and the other two chapters narrated in

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<sup>182</sup> McCulloh goes as far to say that the 'primary theme is loss – loss of relatives, loss of the security of childhood, loss of friends and the loss of one's health [...]', p. 102.

<sup>183</sup> Jo Catling suggests that the narrator's 'fragile psychic state is reinforced – or perhaps undermined – by an overfamiliarity with Kafka', *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, p. 39.

See also, Carolin Duttlinger, 'A Wrong Turn of the Wheel: Sebald's Journeys of (In)Attention' in *The Undiscover'd Country*, pp. 92-123.

the third-person are juxtaposed to provide a contrapuntal effect which, as I will now elaborate, acts as an Empsonian sub-plot.

In 'All'estero' and 'Il ritorno in patria' the main plot of loss is channelled through a narrator, a man of letters, who is very much a 'lost soul' with his constant need to travel and aimless wanderings. There are also futile attempts at alighting on firm ground usually by seeking solace in art – frescoes being the recurring motif – and architecture. Nature however is often found to be wanting, invariably spoilt by the hand of man's progress. In 'All'estero' there is also a sense of quest - he is we remember 'trying to get over a particularly difficult period in my life.' (V. 33) The quest is continued in 'Il ritorno in patria', the second 'autobiographical' chapter. Here we find the narrator returning to the scene of his childhood in search of his Heimat. But the sense of loss and exile prevails, returning to the past brings no contemporary comfort and indeed, the tricks memory can play on our recall of events further compound a sense of instability of the present.

It is entirely reasonable that Sebald chooses two writers as characters for the chapters that function as sub-plot to the autobiographical sections. Like the narrator, they are also 'displaced' figures who question the validity of memory and who are psychologically ill at ease with their environment. In the opening chapter the reader encounters the young Stendhal, although Sebald is careful to use his given name Henri Beyle, which the author himself never

used, even in his autobiography.<sup>184</sup> This is a figure who in real life, like the narrator in ‘All’estero’ and ‘Il ritorno in patria’, suffered from what is now named Stendhal Syndrome, a psychological term to describe ‘incapacitation due to sensory overload’ which manifests in a physical sensation of vertigo and disorientation.<sup>185</sup> He was also a writer very much concerned with the intricacies of and distortional effects on memory. Here then we have a character in sympathy with the first person narrator of ‘All’estero’ and ‘Il ritorno in patria’ and whose activity and recollections, when read in juxtaposition and not as a separate entity to these chapters, can be seen to enhance our awareness of the main plot. And Sebald is careful to articulate the mutual relations between the main plot and the sub-plot signpost, which allows the reader to establish a coherence between the chapters. Once we understand for example, that the first-person narrator’s fascination for frescoes on his travels in Northern Italy and later when he returns to his home town, reflects back on Stendhal’s use of the fresco as a metaphor for the memory of a past event<sup>186</sup>, we imbue the former’s encounter with renewed significance and consolidation.

Another example, relating to the character’s psychology and in particular their ‘sensory overload’ will reinforce this argument. In the ‘All’estero’ chapter the narrator is frequently overcome by ‘vertiginous feelings’ and certain sights or recollections precipitate attacks of vertigo. When in Milan, gazing ‘out upon the dusky, hazy panorama of a city now altogether alien to

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<sup>184</sup> Stendhal, *The Life of Henri Brulard*, trans. by John Sturrock (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995)

<sup>185</sup> McCulloh, p. 86.

<sup>186</sup> McCulloh, p. 86.

me' he was 'beset by recurring fits of vertigo.' (V. 115) And again, on the bus to Riva 'a vertiginous feeling came over me as it did in my childhood.' (V. 89) If we now recall the episode in the first chapter where Sebald discusses Stendhal's 'vertiginous sense of confusion and irritation' (V. 47) when observing the former scene of the battle of Marengo, it becomes apparent that there is a sub-plot and main-plot interaction. By the juxtaposition of Stendhal's sensory disturbance at the site of a past atrocity to the first person narrator's disturbance on realising that he suddenly had no recollection of the vista before him accentuates, by a parallel dissimilarity, the unpredictable and therefore unstable, dynamic between memory and reality. This is brought to the readers' attention by using two seemingly different plots which act as a double-plot device, and in this particular example they also correspond to Empson's original tenet in that they act as 'plays within plays'.

The chapter 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva' continues the established sub-plot of displaced literary figure and again, Sebald uses material direct from the writer's own journals. The main-plot and sub-plot are closely paralleled rather than opposed in this section. Dr K.'s journey to Venice and Lake Garda is reflected in the narrator's own travels in the previous section and Beyle's in the first. The motive for the narrator's journey to 'get over a particularly difficult period in my life' (V. 33) might also apply to Dr K.<sup>187</sup> Once again the identification of these two chapters as sub-plots informs the reading of the other two chapters. In fact, Sebald gives us several clues throughout the text that the sub-plot chapters are to be read alongside the other two, and their

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<sup>187</sup> We know from his journals and letters of this time that Kafka was having difficulty (again) in his relationship with Felice Bauer.

coincidences noticed. It is no accident that in the first chapter we find our hero, a member of the Napoleonic forces in Milan, the venue of the narrator's own mixed adventures in the subsequent chapter. It is also not without significance that he, again like the narrator, revisits the city after a long period of absence.<sup>188</sup> We are also told of a story Stendhal wrote which describes his journey with a companion to Desenzano on Lake Garda, which is one of the venues not only of the narrator but also of Dr K.'s during their journeying.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, in the Dr K. section there are references back to previous chapters which focus the reader's attention on the interdependence of the chapters and their 'doubling' effect. For example, Stendhal is referred to by name by the general (who later commits suicide) who is 'taking the cure' with Dr K. at Riva when he makes the comment, particularly pertinent to our debate, when he says 'all is determined by the most complex of interdependences.' (V. 157) Immediately prior to this we are told also that Dr K. 'at mealtimes [...] often feels quite paralysed and unable to pick up his knife and fork,' (V.156) an almost verbatim reference back to the narrator's visit to Ernst Herbeck in 'All'estero' where he describes the occupants of the houses in Kritzendorf, as if afflicted by an evil spirit and 'not one of them would have been able to lift a spoon or fork again.' (V. 43) And this in turn reflects back to the first chapter where Sebald tells us of Stendhal's bouts of syphilis when 'the shaking that was at times so bad that he could not use a knife and fork.' (V. 29) One final example should suffice to concretise this argument. In the final

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<sup>188</sup> Both these episodes are examples of pastoral returns which will be developed further.

<sup>189</sup> The short story is *De l'Amour*, published in 1822, in which Stendhal travels in the company of Mme Gherardi, a name, Sebald informs us is used as a cipher for various lovers including Angéline Bereyter, the surname of Sebald's teacher in *The Emigrants* who commits suicide.

chapter the narrator, when exploring the attic of his aunt Mathild's house before she died, discovers the 'grey chasseur' which is in fact a tailor's dummy wearing the uniform of Austrian regulars who fought against the Napoleonic forces in 1800. This returns the reader to Stendhal's description of his experience at Marengo as a member of the Napoleonic invading army depicted in the first chapter of *Vertigo*.

Such examples are more than a 'phenomenon of repetition'<sup>190</sup> and deserve attention other than incidental to the narrative. They are also Sebald's 'clues' to remind the reader that in this text each section is in symbiosis with the other and which therefore demonstrate a double-plot structure functioning at an inter-chapter level.

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<sup>190</sup> McCulloh, p. 102.

### 3.3 *Vertigo* as a double-plot narrative

We have seen above how Sebald's construct of the chapters in *Vertigo* enables the interplay of main and sub-plot which demonstrates a double-plot device on an inter-chapter level. In *Vertigo* Sebald has additionally interwoven a continuous intertextual reference throughout the text which also acts as a sub-plot to the main-plot of the work as a whole. This is his reference to Kafka's short story *The Hunter Gracchus*.

Much has been written on *The Hunter Gracchus* and its relevance in the context of *Vertigo*.<sup>191</sup> Its operation as a sub-plot within a double-plot device has, however, not been recognised. Sebald mentions the story overtly towards the end of the Dr K. chapter (V. 164,165) but also makes several references to it throughout the whole text which a reader unfamiliar with the tale would not notice. Its recognition therefore, is not necessary for comprehension of the book at one level. But, as with all double-plot devices, once recognised, another element of *Vertigo's* narrative construction is exposed.

The first (and retrospectively blatant) reference to *Gracchus* is in the first chapter when Sebald quotes from Stendhal's short story *De l'Amour* in which he and (a possibly fictional) Mme Gherardi travel to Lake Garda where, when at Riva, they see 'an old boat, its mainmast fractured two-thirds of the way up [...] and two men in dark silver-buttoned tunics were at that moment

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<sup>191</sup> See for example Martin Klebes, 'Infinite Journey: From Kafka to Sebald', in *A Critical Companion*, pp. 123-139; R.J.A. Kilbourn, 'Kafka, Nabokov...Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*', in *History – Memory – Trauma*, pp. 33-63; Carolin Duttlinger, pp. 92-120.

carrying a bier ashore on which, under a large, frayed, flowered-patterned silk cloth, lay what was evidently a human form,' (V. 25) a clear and almost verbatim reference to the opening of Kafka's story. A more subtle, but nonetheless deliberate, reference is the passage in 'All'estero' when the narrator, having spent ten days in Vienna speaking 'not a word to a soul except for waiters and waitresses'(V. 36)<sup>192</sup> tells us that '[t]he only creatures I talked to [...] were the jackdaws in the gardens by the city hall, and a white-headed blackbird [...]' (V. 36). This is an oblique reference therefore to Gracchus which translates as grackle or blackbird.<sup>193</sup> Further on Sebald strews the text with more frequent clues for the observant reader with varying degrees of subtlety. In 'All'estero' again, the narrator sees the words 'Il cacciatore' (the hunter) scrawled beside a mirror in the railway station lavatory at Desenzano to which he added 'nella selva nera' (in the Black Forest) (V. 86). When at Limone on Lake Garda he stages a *Hunter Gracchus* piece of theatre with the narrator, alone, lying supine in a small boat at night slowly drifting on the lake back to the harbour. The theme returns again, more pointedly, towards the end of this chapter as we see the narrator back in Verona outside the pizzeria from which he had fled in panic seven years previously. Here he recalls the image of 'two men in black-silver buttoned tunics, who were carrying out from a rear courtyard a bier on which lay, under a floral-patterned drape, what was plainly the body of a human being.' (V. 125) Then, as if to reinforce the message, he tells us that he made an urgent request of a young tourist to photograph a flock of pigeons that had

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<sup>192</sup> A prolepsis to the 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva' chapter when, also in Vienna he 'was alone and exchanged not a word with a living soul excepting the staff' (V. 148)

<sup>193</sup> Kavka in Czech also means jackdaw.

just alighted on the roof of the pizzeria. So, in addition to repeating the *Hunter Gracchus* opening sequence previously mentioned in the first chapter, Sebald adds emphasis by including reference to a flock of pigeons, the same birds which always flew ahead of the ship carrying Kafka's hunter and one of which announced his arrival to the Mayor of Riva.<sup>194</sup>

In 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva' Sebald is setting the scene for the *Hunter Gracchus* passage. Sebald is using Kafka's story 'of the kind of helplessness, loneliness, and inability to connect with the living that accompanies the suppression of an unconventional sexual orientation'<sup>195</sup> as an allegory for the emotionally confused and lonely Dr K. which the preceding text, referring to events from Kafka's own journals and letters of this period in 1913 portrays. But this could equally apply to the Stendhal and first-person narrator of the previous chapters. By its interconnectedness with these; the Northern Italian setting,<sup>196</sup> Stendhal, illness and cures, the wandering writer in exile brooding on memory and by the intertextual examples above, the *Hunter Gracchus* sub-plot is in operation throughout the whole text. Indeed, in the final chapter Sebald continues to remind us of this.

In the final chapter of *Vertigo* the narrator continues his travels but now his quest is more purposeful – he returns for the first time in almost thirty years

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<sup>194</sup> It is also interesting to note here that the tourist did not take the photograph because his companion was 'plucking impatiently at his sleeve.' (V. 127) The use of the term 'plucking' here is surely relevant and echoes the pigeon's action when alerting the Mayor to Gracchus's arrival.

<sup>195</sup> McCulloh, p. 100.

<sup>196</sup> McCulloh goes as far to call Venice 'a character' for the purposes of the narrative, p. 92.

to the place of his childhood abbreviated simply as W.<sup>197</sup> He decides to walk the last leg of the journey to the village and on his way stops at a chapel in Krummenbach (crooked brook). This small stone building becomes for the narrator a metaphor for a boat on the sea which he imagined ‘sailing [...] out of the flooded mountains.’ (V. 179) The stonewalls become ‘the hull of a wooden boat’ and the ‘moist smell of lime became sea air.’ (V. 179) So even in this solid edifice in a landlocked country the image of the drifting hunter is not far from his thoughts. And the image recurs again shortly after arriving in W. when he recalls films and newsreels shown at the local inn, one of which shows ‘a hunter whose chest had been torn open by a bear’s paw.’ (V.187) But the most obvious reference to the *Hunter Gracchus* story is his own recollection of the huntsman Hans Schlag who resided in the village but once ‘had managed extensive hunting grounds in the Black Forest.’ (V. 237) This character represents a pastoral figure, at home in a natural environment who one morning is found dead at the bottom of a ravine and, as in the Gracchus story; was said to be in pursuit of a chamois, an animal not found in that area. Schlag’s death also has a suspicious element. He was found outside his normal hunting ground having apparently slipped from a bridge and probably died from hypothermia as no mark of injury was found on his body. There was however, so the narrator tells us, a sailing ship tattooed on the left upper arm of the dead man. A curious image for a man of the land with no known

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<sup>197</sup> Martin Klebes, notes the relevance of this chapter’s Italian title, ‘The use of Italian [...] refers to the narrator’s previous travels through Italy [...] it also serves, of course, to throw into doubt from the very first line [...] the notion that Heimat, home country or patria, will have one unambiguous referent in the context of Sebald’s narrative.’ in *Schreiben ex patria*, p. 77.

seafaring association to have tattooed on his body but one which foregrounds the *Hunter Gracchus* theme once again.

In the closing passages of the book, Sebald gives us one last image to remind us of the *Hunter Gracchus* sub-plot. On his return to England the narrator departs from Liverpool Street Station<sup>198</sup> where he notices several buddleias in bloom against the 'soot-stained brick walls [...] And I could hardly believe my eyes, as the train was waiting at a signal, to see a yellow brimstone butterfly flitting about from one purple flower to the other.' (V. 260) As we know from *The Emigrants* the image of the butterfly man is a reference to Vladimir Nabokov and predominates throughout the text. But here in *Vertigo* the brimstone butterfly that the narrator remembers seeing (or, Stendhal-like, thinks he remembers seeing) is another reference to *Hunter Gracchus* who tells the mayor of Riva that he has himself turned into a butterfly.

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<sup>198</sup> The station from which trains for Norwich (Sebald's place of work) depart.

### 3.4 *Vertigo*'s intra-chapter double-plots

We have considered above examples of sub-plot/main-plot interaction on two levels. Firstly we have seen how the four chapters pair up to form a sub-plot and main-plot formula representing an Empsonian double-plot construct. That is, the chapters 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva' and 'Beyle, or Love is a Madness most Discrete', function as sub-plots for the dissolute writer of the first person narrator main-plot in 'All'estero' and 'Il ritorno in patria'.

Secondly, in the above section, we have examined a sub-plot/main-plot dynamic which is consistent throughout the whole text; our example, namely the *Hunter Gracchus* story, functioning as sub-plot to the book's overarching main-plot of exile and loss. I shall now turn our attention to another level of this device and demonstrate how it can also function at an intra-chapter level.

Within 'All'estero' there is a sub-plot which is intrinsic to this chapter. It functions in the same fashion as those above and although identifiers are distributed throughout the text, it only becomes apparent as such when the chapter is complete. McCulloh calls this sub-plot 'the crime story at the heart of the tale.'<sup>199</sup> This is the series of murders committed by the Organizzazione Ludwig<sup>200</sup>, the exploits of whom are raised at the end of the chapter by Salvatore<sup>201</sup> and in the text are juxtaposed to the trial of Contessa Tiepolo in 1913. The theme of this sub-plot serves to heighten the chapter's main-plot of the narrator's sense of paranoia and persecution.

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<sup>199</sup> McCulloh, p. 97.

<sup>200</sup> The Organizzazione Ludwig were two young men who were responsible for several murders from 1977 to 1980 and who claimed their purpose in life was to destroy those who had displeased God.

<sup>201</sup> It should be noticed incidentally that this is another reference to the *Hunter Gracchus* story in which the mayor of Riva's name is Salvatore.

Perhaps the first reference to this sub-plot is the narrator's imagined sighting of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Aside from the obvious nominal reference, this real-life character was obsessed with erecting fortresses and castles and was himself imprisoned in one of his own institutions. The next episode which, probably only in retrospect, should raise our awareness of this developing sub-plot is the description of the buffet at Santa Lucia station, a situation which McCulloh notes as Kafkaesque.<sup>202</sup> In this scene, the narrator feels that he has 'attracted somebody's attention. And indeed it transpired that the eyes of two young men were on me.' (V. 68) This recalls to his memory the two men who were in the bar where he had met Malachio, and were, he now believes, one and the same.<sup>203</sup> Immediately following the buffet scene, the narrator travels to Verona where, subsequent to a brief but truly pastoral episode in the Giardino Guisti he 'suddenly had a sense of being entangled in some dark web of intrigue' when entering the Arena (V. 71) and again 'became aware of two figures deep in the shadow' who 'were without doubt the same two young men who had kept their eyes on me that morning at the station in Venice.' (V. 72) At this point, he is gripped by fear and 'could not move from the spot.' (V. 72) But when he finally makes his way to the exit he has another vision of being the hunted animal; 'I had a compulsive vision of an arrow whistling through the grey air, about to pierce my left shoulderblade

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<sup>202</sup> McCulloh, p. 93.

<sup>203</sup> It is worthwhile noting here that this episode has been cited as having possible homosexual undertones and while this is not for discussion here, this may represent another, more discrete reference to Ludwig Organizzazione who also targeted homosexuals amongst their victims. See for example McCulloh, p. 94.

and, with a distinctive, sickening sound, penetrate my heart.’ (V.72) The above encounters are clearly continuing to fuel the narrator’s paranoia.

The first overt reference to a criminal organisation which had committed a number of murders in Verona and Northern Italy and which may also be the first occasion for the readers’ suspicion of a sub-plot, comes when the narrator, on his third day in Verona, while sitting in a pizzeria reads in the *Venice Gazzettino* of the Organizzazione Ludwig. The brief description of the group’s activity so unsettles the narrator that when the bill arrives and he sees the owner’s name ‘Cadavero’ printed on it he hastily settles the bill, returns to the hotel, packs and leaves on a train for Innsbruck.<sup>204</sup> This episode terminates the first section of ‘All’estero’ and therefore leaves the narrator and the reader with a sense of apprehension.

The return journey seven years later, the subject of this section of ‘All’estero’ was made, we are told, ‘in order to probe my somewhat imprecise recollections of those fraught and hazardous days and perhaps record some of them.’ (V. 81) It is not unreasonable to assume that much of the ‘fraught and hazardous’ recollection is related to the activity of the Organizzazione Ludwig and its impingement on the narrator as he sees it. The ‘hazards’ I suggest are more psychological than physical. The sub-plot is picked up again therefore almost immediately and Sebald reminds us of this by his reference

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<sup>204</sup> Sebald has said that one of the functions of his technique of inserting images into the text is to authenticate the narration is foregrounded here where he includes a reproduction of the bill with relevant word circled. See interview with Christian Scholz in *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W.G. Sebald*, ed. by Lise Patt with Christel Dillbohner (Los Angeles: The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), p. 106.

to the Giotto frescoes in the Scrovegni Arena Chapel at Padua. This is the narrator's first port of call following his arrival and the lament of the angels, 'Gli angeli visitano la scena della disgrazia' the direct translation of which is, 'the angels visit the scene of misfortune/disgrace', represented in the frescoes, remains with him as he travels on to Verona. This, it would appear, is also what the narrator himself is undertaking in this second section. Before returning to Verona however he feels compelled to travel on to Lake Garda in the footsteps of Dr K. It is on this journey by bus from Desenzano to Riva that we find yet another reference to Kafka and the narrator suffers yet another bout of vertigo. He notices twin brothers, accompanied by their parents, who bear an uncanny resemblance to the young Kafka. While attempting to explain this to their parents and expressing a desire to photograph them he inevitably comes under a cloud of suspicion which makes him so uncomfortable that he has to leave the bus prematurely. The significance of this episode to the current debate is, not so much that it adds to the many Kafka references throughout the text, but the irrational disquiet the appearance of the two young men generates in the narrator. While it is acknowledged that his predicament is largely due to his seemingly unnatural interest in the boys, we have noted that it is invariably the appearance of young males in pairs that trouble the narrator. Further on in the narrative for example, in Milan, we are told of two young men who attacked him in an attempt to steal the bag he was carrying – 'two young men, talking to each other in a state of great agitation, came straight at me [...] their hands beneath my jacket tugging and pulling.' (V. 109) The figure of two young men is central to the sub-plot centred on the Organizzazione Ludwig which is

continuing to thread its way throughout this chapter. At one point the narrator himself suggests that it may even be a text that he himself is generating.<sup>205</sup> At the Hotel Sole in Limone on Lake Garda he is asked by Luciana, the wife of the owner of the hotel, what he is working on, to which he replies ‘I did not know for certain myself, but had a growing suspicion that it might turn into a crime story, set in upper Italy [...] The plot revolved around a series of unsolved murders and the reappearance of a person who had long been missing.’ (V. 94,95) This is a précis of the sub-plot under discussion within the chapter, and the ‘person who had long been missing’ is the narrator himself.

Towards the end of the chapter the threads of the sub-plot are brought together. In Verona the narrator has a rendezvous with an old acquaintance in the central piazza. This character is a newspaper or publishing house editor named Salvatore who informs him of the recent trial of the Organizzazione Ludwig. This group, consisting of only two young men from respected families had committed a series of horrific murders over the seven year period from the narrator’s first visit to Northern Italy in 1980 at the beginning of ‘All’estero’. Salvatore apprises him of the details and at the conclusion the reader feels as though a ghost has been laid to rest. The chapter finale is a musing on the history of opera at the Arena and of Aida in particular. There is also one further reference to Kafka by way of a visit to the dying author by Franz Werfel who gave him a signed copy of his book about the opera, the

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<sup>205</sup> As with much of Sebald’s work, the reader is constantly jolted back into questioning what could be received as purely autobiographical writing and, in so doing, reminds us of the trickery within the text that the German title suggests.

relevant page of which is reproduced in the text. Sebald also tells us here that Kafka was soon to make his final journey to the nursing home in Klosterneuburg which returns the reader to the Ernst Herbeck episode at the beginning of the chapter.

With hindsight then, we are able to identify the elements of the sub-plot to the Organizzazione Ludwig throughout 'All'estero'. As discussed above, a sub-plot in this context is juxtaposed with the main plot and in some way either contradicts or enhances it. In each case, the reader is able to better appreciate a distinctive narrative construction once it is identified. The activity of the two young men of the Organizzazione Ludwig, the commencement of which coincided with the narrator's first visit to Northern Italy and ended at the time of his return visit seven years later is, as we have seen, woven throughout this chapter acting as a contrapuntal theme to the main-plot of the narrator's paranoid state of mind. Its function therefore is to foreground this psychological condition by a concretised 'true' narrative. In our example, when the sub-plot is exposed, the reason for the narrator's seemingly overwrought reactions to certain events throughout the chapter becomes entirely rational and the text as a whole is seen to act as a fully rounded double-plot structure.

### 3.5 *Vertigo's* micro double-plots

As mentioned above, I have extended Empson's original definition of sub-plot to include those which are not necessarily complete storylines but which function in the same way by their operational interplay on the main-plot. I suggested above that Sebald's predilection for digression within the text, his textual meanderings and his inclusion of other artefacts within the text, could function as sub-plots on a microscopic level. They may be a short description of a remembered event, a description of a work of art or a seemingly simple throwaway one-or two-sentence remark. It is to these examples of sub-plot that I should now like to turn our attention in this section and once again, interrogation of the 'All'estero' chapter will be appropriate for our purpose.

In section 3.4 above I suggested that the narrator's paranoia is the main-plot within the chapter, superimposed as it were on the main-plot of the work as a whole.<sup>206</sup> It could be asked why this is not then a sub-plot. This is because it does not function as such – it is not impacting on or informing the main-plot but has its own set of sub-plots which are in turn interacting with it, as we shall now demonstrate. We will now scrutinise the text in more detail in order to reinforce how Sebald has clearly signposted this and then identify several examples of microscopic sub-plots which are juxtaposed to it. Some of these episodes we have examined above in the context of the *Organizzazione* Ludwig and its role as sub-plot. There is therefore a further 'doubling' effect

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<sup>206</sup> We might also argue that the tensions generated within pastoral have parallels in the pathology of paranoia. The victim of this affliction is constantly aware of another 'plot' - real or imagined - being played out alongside his day-to-day notion of reality.

here as we see the same scenes in some instances, but here, in addition to a psychological destabilisation of the narrator, they are also operating on a structural level in keeping with the Empsonian double-plot device.

In the second chapter of *Vertigo*, 'All'estero', which literally translates as 'to a foreign country' or 'abroad', the narrator who biographically resembles Sebald, travels from England, his adopted home of nearly twenty five years, to Verona via Vienna and Venice. This journey is performed on two occasions within the chapter, once in 1980 and again in 1987. As we have seen above, these provide the narrator with a number of opportunities to embark on episodes of narratorial memories, reflection, dreams and description of works of art and architecture. These textual interpositions are what we have come to expect of Sebald's prose and are significant contributors to the narrative without which we would have a very austere and linear piece of travel writing.<sup>207</sup> In addition, these digressions are integral to the double-plot device. They may act as micro-sub-plots, referents to the narrator's mood or, as in some of the examples below, indicators of the chapter's main plot.

The motivation for the journeys in this chapter of *Vertigo* is what we now recognise as a common theme in Sebald, a low mood in the life of the

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<sup>207</sup> J.J. Long suggests a very specific purpose for Sebald's digressions. He notes 'Digression is a deliberately uneconomic mode of narrative [...] The rejection of modern modes of transport in favour of walking and the rejection of an easily consumable text in favour of digression can be seen as part of the same project, a critique of modernity [...].' 'W.G. Sebald: The Ambulatory Narrative and the Poetics of Digression', in *Schreiben ex patria/Expatriate Writing*, p. 61.

narrator. He was 'hoping that a change of place would help me to get over a particularly difficult period in my life.' (V. 33) It is established at the outset that here is a narrator with a vulnerable mind-set. And it is this mind-set or psychological condition which functions as the main-plot in this chapter.<sup>208</sup> Sebald very clearly establishes this mental state throughout the chapter and we will now identify some examples before examining the sub-plots which interact with this main-plot.

Descriptions of the narrator's mood feature increasingly in the text and in so doing become more refined. From general feelings of unease and dizziness the symptoms become more specific. In Vienna, he feels lost, missing his routine and wandering aimlessly whilst hallucinating figures from the past. In Venice, he experiences an episode of depression when he did not leave his room for days, 'It seemed to me then that one could well end one's life simply through thinking and retreating into one's mind.' (V. 65) This mood lifts somewhat to allow him to leave his room but is replaced almost immediately by what becomes his dominant psychological condition of paranoia. In the buffet scene at Santa Lucia station he becomes 'prey to unpleasant observations and far fetched notions' (V. 68) concluding in the first of many episodes, some of which we have previously mentioned, of a feeling of being pursued by two young men. He flees Venice immediately following this event and stops off in Verona on route to Milan. Here, on

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<sup>208</sup> The narrator's mood has been discussed by many commentators on this work although most remark on his mood as melancholy. McCulloh, probably comes as close to describing paranoia without actually so doing when he notes 'his *apprehension* which manifests itself in "nausea and dizziness."' (my italics) in *Understanding W.G. Sebald*, p. 90.

entering the Arena he ‘suddenly had a sense of being entangled in some dark web of intrigue’ (V. 72) and his awareness of being pursued by the same two men returns. This, I suggest, is not Sebald’s usual voice of melancholia, but a clear, almost clinical, description of paranoia, of being h(a)unted and the inability of escape. This continues in the second section of ‘All’estero’.

On his return journey, seven years later, the narrator, hoping to exorcise his ‘recollections of those fraught and hazardous days’ (V. 81) of the first journey, his sense of unease returns. Following the unfortunate episode on the bus to Riva mentioned above, he arrives in Limone where Sebald describes two further episodes that serve well to highlight our main-plot for this chapter. Firstly, he is drawn to an article in a newspaper which, while not mentioned in the text, our eyes are drawn to his underlining of a reference to Casanova, and his sojourn at the Castello di Dux, itself a reference back to the previous section where he discussed Casanova’s incarceration and subsequent release from the Doge’s Palace. And secondly, an incident which clearly addresses his fear of threat to his freedom, on his departure from Limone his passport has been misappropriated. He becomes therefore a potential prisoner himself, a displaced person unable to leave the country. Once his passport is restored and he is able to continue on his travels, however, his sense of unease continues. As in the first section, we see his ‘aimless wanderings and bouts of distress’ (V. 115) this time in Milan, a city which he is careful to point out by reproducing a representation of a map as a labyrinth which is ‘indeed auspicious for anyone who knows what it is to lose one’s way:’ (V. 108) and in which he ‘no longer had any knowledge of where I was.’ (V. 115)

And at the railway station at Desenzano, as we have noted above, he sees the graffiti on the lavatory walls the words ‘Il cacciatore’ – the hunter- to which he adds ‘nella selva nera’ (in the Black Forest), and while this is certainly a reference to Kafka’s short story it has a double intertextuality as a reminder of the narrator’s feeling of being pursued or possibly playing the role of hunter himself.

Sebald’s choice of characters provides further evidence of the narrator’s mood. His hallucination of Dante who, as we know, was an influence on his work, but who, as we also know and more relevant here was a victim of persecution who was forced to flee his native city of Florence and lived in exile in Rome and Verona.

In addition, the King of Bavaria, Ludwig II, another of his imagined sightings was also an historical figure who, famous for constructing many castles, failed to escape an uprising against him and was himself imprisoned in Castle Berg.<sup>209</sup> And as noted above his many references to Casanova, including in Venice, when outside the Doge’s Palace he describes Casanova’s internment there again reinforce the narrator’s current obsession.

In the person of Ernst Herbeck, to whom the narrator pays a visit before his journey to Venice, we also have an example of the imprisoned, institutionalised artist figure suffering a psychological illness and (as indeed Ludwig II was rumoured to have been) subjected to the unseen powers of

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<sup>209</sup> Another example of intertextual doubling as this is also referring to the *Organizzazione Ludwig*.

state authority. In an effort to reinforce his theme of disempowerment, Sebald even notes during this episode the presence of a dog whose ‘natural gentleness’ had been ‘broken by ill-treatment and long confinement.’ (V. 43) And in flashback he tells us of Clara’s mother, Anna Goldsteiner, in St. Martin’s home ‘a large rectangular building with massive stone walls [...] through whose ‘barred and recessed windows [...] it was like looking upon a heaving sea.’ (V. 43)

All Saints Day in Venice prompts a memory of childhood when ‘nothing seemed to possess more meaning than those two days of remembrance devoted to the suffering of the sainted martyrs’ during which ‘the villagers moved about [...] as if they had been banished from their houses.’ (V. 64) And it was on this day that he imagined a journey across the lagoon seeing the hospital island from which ‘thousands of madmen were waving’ and across the swamps ‘St Catherine came walking, in her hand, a model of the wheel on which she was broken.’ (V. 66) Again, we note figures and places of incarceration and persecution.

The architecture and landscape also echo the narrator’s mind-set as in descriptions of the great hospital precincts of the Alsergrund, the pensioners’ home of Ernst Herbeck, the Jewish community centre, the Doge’s Palace, the ‘deathly silent concrete shell’ (V. 61) of the community incinerator in Venice.

Indeed, some of these are represented pictorially, further reinforcing this perspective.<sup>210</sup>

The main-plot in 'All'estero' then is not one of linear causality, a sequence of events impacting on one another, producing some form of resolution, but an attitude of mind. We have seen above how the sub-plot of the Organizzazione Ludwig has interacted with this throughout the chapter – the inter-chapter level – and now we can identify how sub-plots function on a microscopic level using the same main plot of the narrator's troubled state of mind. One aspect of some of these sub-plots is to set up a pastoral/anti-pastoral relationship which not only reflects the narrator's disturbance but also destabilises the reading experience. This technique is something I develop further and which several critics have observed but not associated with the pastoral mode.<sup>211</sup> For example, in the episode of the narrator's visit to Ernst Herbeck, during their journey, the image of menace and incarceration – the fortress at Burg Greifenstein – is contrasted to 'that wonderful view, a blue haze lay upon the sea of foliage that reaches right up to the walls of the castle.' (V. 41) A further example in the same episode at Klosterneuburg, the 'gruesome building banged together out of breezeblocks' which was like

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<sup>210</sup> Sebald's use of photographs and images is a huge subject upon which there is a wealth of debate. However, in addition to the existing debate, it is my contention that they can also act as sub-plots juxtaposed to the main-plot. As Sebald himself has said in an interview with Elanor Wachel in 'Ghost Hunter' in *the emergence of memory*, p. 41. 'they slow the reader down' and part of this slowing down process will cause the reader to dwell a little more on what the narrator is attempting to convey – this is also one of the functions of the sub-plot within the double-plot device.

<sup>211</sup> Eva Hoffman for example notes in *After Nature* 'stark descriptions of barbarity give way to luminous vistas of icy landscapes, and fantastic natural detail [...] alternates with memorable descriptions of despair.' 'Curiosity and Catastrophe', p. 2.

‘witnessing a hideous crime’ is immediately juxtaposed to a scene of innocence – children inside the primary school singing. (V. 43,44) Sebald cannot however allow this to be an uncontaminated nostalgic interlude – it is the discordant notes which most appeal to the narrator.

The interspersions of pastoral motifs, as a sub-plot device, heightens the sense of foreboding represented by the, in this example, gross architectural images and this returns the reader to the narrator’s troubled mood. We can observe more examples when, for instance, the narrator in Verona, having left Venice, where he was troubled by the sight of his possible stalkers, ‘went immediately to the Giardino Guisti, a long habit of mine’. Here, lying on a stone bench he ‘heard the sougling of the breeze among the branches and the delicate sound of the gardener raking the gravel paths between the box hedges, the subtle scent of which still filled the air [...] I had not experienced such a sense of well-being for a long time.’ (V.69).<sup>212</sup> There follow further pastoral images before the stage set changes again to one of a darker nature – ‘Entering the arena, I suddenly had a sense of being entangled in some dark web of intrigue.’ (V. 71) These pastoral scenes function as sub-plots to repeatedly draw the reader’s attention to the narrator’s psychological condition but they are also part of the narrative’s double-plot device on a micro, and sometimes, sentence or single phrase level.

Section two of ‘All’estero’ provides further instances of this method of contrasting sub-plot. For example, the narrator, following the attempted

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<sup>212</sup> Once again however, we should note man’s dominant hand in the ordering of nature in the figure of the gardener.

mugging checks into a hotel where he dreamt of ‘a rainbow in the heavens [...] of a green field of corn and floating above it, with outstretched arms, a nun from my childhood.’ (V. 112) This description, while pastoral, is bordering on the comic for its contrasting effect, and it is to the comic interlude that I now want to turn our attention. Empson has said that the comic interlude was probably the first example of the double-plot device and often emphasises the inextricable relationship between a tragic main-plot (in this case psychological disturbance) and the comic sub-plot. For Empson this sub-plot would have taken the form of a separate storyline in a play, but, as already stated, the same effect can be achieved on a far smaller scale. In the Ernst Herbeck episode, the narrator at one point says ‘That morning, I think we were both within an inch of learning to fly, or at least I might have managed as much as is required for a decent crash.’ (V. 42) This is a humorous remark with sinister overtones. The humour here serves again to heighten the potential tragedy of both characters’ circumstances. Several critics<sup>213</sup> have noted Sebald’s ‘special brand of humour’.<sup>214</sup> Greg Bond for example has described Sebald’s comedy as ‘involuntary humour’, and he suspects the occasional comic episode or ‘stylistic faux pas is what happens when the melancholic gaze has to be upheld at all costs.’<sup>215</sup> While I would not agree that this is involuntary humour in that Sebald would surely be aware of its effect, these episodes whilst heightening the ‘melancholic gaze’ are

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<sup>213</sup> Richard Sheppard also notes the function of humour in *Vertigo* as ‘a counterweight to the “seelischen Anfechtungen” (attacks of spiritual darkness/despair)’, p. 455. n.35.

<sup>214</sup> McCulloh, p. 100.

<sup>215</sup> Greg Bond, ‘On the Misery of Nature and the Nature of Misery’ in *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*, p. 41.

integral to the highly developed narrative construct of *Vertigo* and, in particular, to the pastoral double-plot device.

Another example of the one-sentence, almost throwaway, comic moment occurs when the narrator, in a pizzeria in Verona, decorated as a marine grotto festooned with fishing nets and walls painted a hideous marine blue<sup>216</sup> ‘put an end to all hope I might have entertained of ever seeing dry land again.’ (V. 77) When the narrator observes a carabinieri being helplessly ridiculed by a group of taxi drivers in a truly slapstick descriptive episode (V. 87,88) we again observe another comic scene and one whose purpose as a sub-plot is to contrast with the authoritarian, bureaucratic and menacing atmosphere, which is driving the main-plot.

These humorous interludes together with the pastoral and anti-pastoral descriptions examined here are but two examples of sub-plots operating at what I have termed the microscopic level. That is, they are barely plots as traditionally defined - they may be short passages, one or two lines or occasionally images inserted into the text – but they function, nevertheless, as sub-plots for the purpose of the double-plot device. This chapter has also considered other types of sub-plot/main-plot interaction and extended Empson’s original concept without detracting from its underlying tenet that he held, was essential to the pastoral mode. In the next chapter I want to examine another aspect of pastoral in Sebald’s work which has close links to

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<sup>216</sup> It is worth noting here that this interior of an artificial maritime scene contrasts to the marine motif of the ship at sea in the *Hunter Gracchus* story.

the German concept of Heimat and take his second work of prose fiction *The Emigrants* for this purpose.

#### 4. *The Emigrants* as Pastoral and Anti-pastoral Heimat

With the publication in Britain of *The Emigrants* in 1996, the English language readership was introduced to the work of W.G. Sebald. Although he had published *Nach der Natur* and *Schwindel. Gefühle.* in Germany, British and American publishers felt that *The Emigrants* would have a more favourable reception as an introduction to this writer.<sup>217</sup> And, indeed, it met with considerable praise from many highly regarded critics, the majority of whom noted the book's dominant themes of '[g]rief, absence, loss, longing, wandering, exile, homesickness.'<sup>218</sup> All of which are associated with the German concept of Heimat, as a sense of place/belonging and origin. This has, of course, been noted by many Sebald scholars and not only in relation to *The Emigrants*.<sup>219</sup> We have seen the accepted relationship of and parallels to pastoral and Heimat in the introduction. In this chapter I examine how the dynamic of personal displacement and consequent loss of Heimat is represented by pastoral and anti-pastoral modes. This establishes a tension

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<sup>217</sup> Anthony Lane, 'Higher Ground: Review of *Vertigo*', *New Yorker*, 29 May, 2000, p. 137.

<sup>218</sup> Cynthia Ozick, 'The Posthumous Sublime', *New Republic*, 16 December 1996, pp. 33-38.

<sup>219</sup> See for example Markus Zisselsberger in *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselsberger (New York and Woodbridge (UK): Campden House, 2010), p. 8,10.

Also J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, pp.6,7. Carolin Duttlinger, "'A Wrong Turn of the Wheel: Sebald's Journeys of (In)Attention'", in *The Undiscover'd Country*, pp. 100-103, 113-114

Brad Prager, 'Convergence Insufficiency: On Seeing Passages between W.G. Sebald and the "Travel Writer" Bruce Chatwin', in *The Undiscover'd Country*, p. 193

Margaret Bruzelius, 'Adventure, Imprisonment and Melancholy: *Heart of Darkness* and *Die Ringe des Saturn*', in *The Undiscover'd Country*, p. 267

Martin Klebes, 'No Exile: Crossing the Border with Sebald and Améry' in *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex Patria/Expatriate Writing*, ed. by Gerhard Fisher, (New York-Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 73-90.

that Dora Osborne describes as ‘The protagonists’ [...] overwhelming sense of displacement, at once a compulsion and refusal to disassociate themselves from their place of origin.’<sup>220</sup> Unlike Osborne who develops this from a psychoanalytical context, I examine these forms of displacement as depicted in terms of the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes. There is a direct correlation between the anti-pastoral mode and a character’s loss of Heimat, and the pastoral mode when the Heimat is either temporarily restored or the refusal to dissociate from it is suspended. This Sebald achieves by choreographing his characters in landscapes (textual and visual) that are essentially pastoral or anti-pastoral.

*The Emigrants*, like *Vertigo*, is divided into four stories.<sup>221</sup> As in his first work of prose fiction, Sebald also introduces a narrator who, in biographical terms, closely resembles the author himself. Unlike *Vertigo* however we have four distinct, closely drawn characters that may or may not be historically accurate figures. A character’s past is usually described in nostalgic pastoral mode and this is contrasted to their contemporary existence (often spent reminiscing on the past) described using the language of the anti-pastoral mode. This temporal contrast has its direct correlation in a character’s spatial displacement. The pastoral mode is invoked when their Heimat is stable as in idyllic episodes from the past but anti-pastoral landscapes are painted when

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<sup>220</sup> Dora Osborne, ‘Topographical Anxiety and Dysfunctional Systems: *Die Ausgewanderten* and Freud’s *Little Hans*’, in *The Undiscover’d Country*, p. 299.

<sup>221</sup> Braun and Wallmann have also referred to *The Emigrants* as the middle section of a triptych with *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* as the other two panels, ‘Bilder einer langsam sich zermahlenden Erde: Briefwechsel über Bücher II: *Die Ringe des Saturn* von W.G. Sebald’, *Basler Zeitung*, 11 October 1995, pp. 7-8.

individual displacement/exile is in play. Furthermore, when Osborne notes that the ‘emigrants’ experiences of disorientation and displacement are bound in particular to the effects of encroaching urbanization and industrialisation<sup>222</sup> we can draw a direct parallel between this and an insidious anti-pastoralisation of idyllic landscapes. This reaction to urbanisation and industrialisation may also be regarded as a component of the ‘critique of modernity that emerges as a thematic concern in most of Sebald’s work.’<sup>223</sup>

Furthermore, in *The Emigrants*, Sebald also allegorises these Jewish characters’ personalised displacement<sup>224</sup> into a collective sense of exile and loss in terms of loss of Heimat. This is foregrounded by the book’s title both in English and more pertinently in German, *Die Ausgewanderten*. This inverse distillation from personal to collective loss (as in personal and collective amnesia discussed below in *Austerlitz*) can be interpreted as an example of what Empson viewed as the essence of pastoral, ‘putting the complex into the simple’ and the ‘attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.’<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Osborne, p. 300.

<sup>223</sup> J.J. Long, ‘W.G. Sebald: The Ambulatory Narrative and the Poetics of Digression’ in *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria/Expatriate Writing*, p. 61.

<sup>224</sup> Deane Blackler when discussing *The Emigrants* also notes that ‘Each of the four stories in this text is about displacement [...]’ p.216.

<sup>225</sup> William Empson, pp. 22, 25.

## 4.1 A Pastoral Past in an Anti-pastoral present

In the opening sequence of the first chapter, even before the text begins, the reader is presented with a captionless black and white photograph of a graveyard. On closer inspection of this image we note that the spreading foliage of a large tree dominates the graveyard, with its seemingly irregularly placed and in some cases teetering headstones.<sup>226</sup> Here we see the encroachment on the natural landscape by a structure, which ironically, is the representation of man's own frailty and the presence and magnificence of the great tree is emblematic of nature's permanence.<sup>227</sup> The image suggests to the reader that nature is expressing its force over the transience and vulnerability of humankind. This becomes even more poignant if we give credence to Tim Wright who suggests that the tree in this photograph of "Hingham" graveyard was inserted by Sebald and not actually present in reality.<sup>228</sup> By so doing we note Sebald's clear intention to re-pastoralise the image by mentioning its 'Scots pines and yews, up a quiet street' a short

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<sup>226</sup> In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel Sebald comments 'we have created an environment for us which isn't what it should be [...] We're living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out of it [...]' Eleanor Wachtel, p. 56.

<sup>227</sup> I am not alone in the importance attributed to this first image. Deane Blackler for example notes 'this image (the first photograph) echoes the photograph of a painting by Courbet, "The Oak of Vercingetorix" [...] is the image that the narrator tells us the painter Ferber is using as a model for one of his own paintings, so that this first photograph will become, subsequently, a hint of the last story.' And further 'it may also be that this is their (the narrator and his wife's) most lasting image, a memory of the evergreen holm oak in the graveyard [...] is a metonymic image of the vanished lives memorialised in this book.' pp.160-162.

<sup>228</sup> Tim Wright, 'Sebald's Tree: The Development of a 90% True Digital Story', in *Searching for Sebald*, ed. by Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner (Los Angeles: The Institute of Cultural Enquiry, 2007), pp. 248,249. Personal communication with Jo Catling assures me also that she has not found this tree in the graveyard. Would should, however, question whether the photo is genuinely of the Hingham graveyard.

distance from the house (E. 3) in which the narrator was soon to reside. This simple black and white image epitomises Sebald's dialectic of nature and its place in the environment as an overarching force, which is only temporarily corrupted, inevitably, and usually at a cost to mankind as a whole.

In the first chapter the narrator and his (presumed) wife are in search of a home. They are coming to start a new life in a strange (to them) part of the country, which, for the narrator himself, is also not the country of his birth.<sup>229</sup> They take an apartment in the house of Dr Henry Selwyn, the title character of this story who, like the other characters in the book, is displaced from his origins, in this case both physically and psychologically, and takes refuge in recalling events of his past. Sebald represents and expresses Dr Selwyn's contemporary existence in anti-pastoral mode and contrasts this with nostalgia for a happier past by images and examples of the pastoral.

For example, as they approach the house, with its twelve windowpanes which 'glinted blindly, seeming to be made of dark mirror glass' (E. 4) the narrator tells us that he is reminded of a chateau in France in front of which the owners had erected a replica of the façade of the Palace of Versailles, the windows of which 'had been just as gleaming and blind as those of the house we now stood before.' (E. 4) The house, in other words, was, from the exterior, reflecting back the images presented in front of it and in itself therefore, a soulless structure whose 'brickwork was green with damp.' (E. 4)

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<sup>229</sup> This in effect mirrors the status of the eponymous character of the chapter's title.

But the description of the grounds in which the house is set verges on the pastoral,

a broad, square lawn bordered by flower beds, shrubs and trees. And beyond the lawn, to the west, the grounds opened out into a park landscape studded with lone lime trees, elms and holm oaks, and beyond that lay the gentle undulations of arable land and the white mountains of cloud on the horizon. (E. 4,5)

The idyll is not however complete as we are told of areas of neglect and disrepair in the garden, supported by photographs of a disused tennis court and decrepit greenhouse, (an ironic image of a structure associated with promoting and harbouring new beginnings in life) and, in a sentence spoken by Dr Selwyn, but which holds a poignancy for much of Sebald's own dialectic, 'More and more, he said, he sensed that Nature itself was groaning and collapsing beneath the burden we placed upon it.' (E. 7) An anti-pastoral setting then for the contemporary existence of Dr Selwyn into whose household the narrator and his wife are to become incorporated.

The pastoral/anti-pastoral tensions continue in descriptions of the interior of the house. The rooms rented by the narrator and his wife are described as a 'gloomy interior' with a 'gigantic and startlingly ugly sideboard [...] mustard yellow paintwork in the kitchen and the turquoise refrigerator,' (E. 8) but all this depressing decoration 'seemed to dissolve into nowhere' when they took in 'the view from the high windows across the garden, the park and the massed cloud in the sky.' (E. 8) Again, the natural beauty of the landscape compensates for the ugliness of the artificial. They do however attempt to brighten their living quarters and when the bathroom is painted white it

reminds Dr Selwyn's wife of a 'freshly painted dovecote,' (E. 9) bringing, as it were, nature, and therefore an attempt at the idyll, into the fabric of the house itself. Dr Selwyn has also contrived to do this by transforming a flint-built hermitage in a remote corner of the garden into a comfortable place in which he spent more time than in the house and where he gave 'his entire attention [...] to thoughts which on the one hand grew vaguer day by day, and, on the other, grew more precise and unambiguous.' (E. 11) We are given an insight into what these thoughts might comprise during the passage which describes a visit from a friend of Dr Selwyn with whom the narrator and his wife have dinner one evening. This episode clearly illustrates my argument that the past is generally privileged over the present and expressed in the pastoral mode while the contingences of contemporary life are either neglected or given an anti-pastoral setting.

The friend, Edwin Elliot, is a well-known botanist and entomologist.<sup>230</sup>

Throughout the meal, of which 'almost everything was from the neglected garden', the reader is given glimpses of pastoral images almost without exception associated with past events. For example, Dr Selwyn tells us of the summer of 1913<sup>231</sup> when he spent weeks mountain climbing in the Bernese Oberland with a guide named Johannes Naegeli<sup>232</sup> of whom he grew very fond, to the extent that 'never in his life, neither before or later, did he feel as

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<sup>230</sup> This character is reminiscent of Georg Steller in *After Nature* who we have noted also conforms to the description of Raymond Williams modern day 'pastoral shepherd'.

<sup>231</sup> An important and recurring date in Sebald's work and *Vertigo* in particular.

<sup>232</sup> This name, reminiscent of neige, the French for snow, reinstates the white motif of transience and movement throughout *The Emigrants*.

good as he did then, in the company of that man' (E. 14) and the separation from whom, at the outbreak of war, Dr Selwyn says 'nothing felt as hard [...] as saying goodbye [...] Even the separation from Elli (his wife) did not cause me remotely as much pain [...] (E. 14). It should be noted that this pastoral scene of the two men spending their time, contented in each others company, climbing and enjoying unspoiled nature, is contrasted to and coincides with, the antithesis of the pastoral, the war time setting of living in barracks and receiving news of Johannes's death on the Aare glacier. Not only is the mind-set of the characters altered, euphoria to depression, but also the physical setting, natural landscape to utilitarian, unsightly buildings.

The theme continues in the following sequence, during which Dr Selwyn gives a slide show of his and Edwin Elliot's visit to Crete (E. 15). It is interesting to note that in order to make way for the slide projector, Sebald tells us that 'the Meissen figures, a shepherd and shepherdess [...] were moved aside,' in an act suggesting a negation of the pastoral, although the slides of this journey, made in the springtime some ten years previously, depict pastoral scenes: 'The landscape of the island seemed veiled in green as it lay before us,' with Dr Selwyn as a Nabokovian figure collecting butterflies and his friend Edwin 'with his field glasses and a container for botanical specimens.' (E. 15) These images of their past selves, Sebald notes, were 'for both of them [...] an occasion for some emotion' but, during the display of the last slide, again a pastoral vision of 'fields of potatoes and other vegetables across the broad valley floor, the orchards and clumps of other trees, and the untilled land, were awash with green upon green [...] the glass

in the slide shattered and a dark crack fissured across the screen.’ (E. 17) But this slide also contains an image which Sebald uses on many occasions throughout this work to suggest the impermanence of nature. Here, ‘The white sails of wind pumps’ (E. 17) which studded the valley beneath Mount Spathi infers a potential energy which might indeed, allow the land to fly away. This metaphorical shattering of the pastoral image reminds us again that, just as Dr Selwyn’s idyll with Johannes Naegeli was halted by the outbreak of war and ultimately his death, the contingencies of contemporary life for him constantly intrude upon and degrade the past.

Such tensions and contrasts are reinforced in the closing sequence of the chapter, following the departure of the narrator and Clara from the house, during a long talk between Dr Selwyn and the narrator. During this conversation, Dr Selwyn confesses that in recent years he has become beset with homesickness more and more. He also asks the narrator if he too was ever homesick but, rather uncharacteristically, he ‘could not think of an adequate reply.’ (E. 18) When pressed by the narrator on the source of his homesickness he mentions a recollection of his birthplace in a village near Grodno in Lithuania at the age of seven. This is described as a time of innocence and oneness with nature but curtailed when he and his family leave for a new life in America although they arrived and disembarked at London, not New York, as they initially believed. In England the pastoral mode returns with description of his childhood and, as we have come to recognise as a leitmotif in Sebald, an almost adulatory regard for his teacher. The aetiology of his homesickness or *Heimweh* here is clearly a temporal

nostalgia rather than spatial. Dr Selwyn's Heimat is a time past not a country or place and his physical and geographical exile has failed to annihilate it.

Although he prospers both educationally and materially, the tone of his dialogue suggests disappointment with how his life transpired and a sense of wonderment at what might have been had fate taken another turn. For two decades both he and his wife Elli lived well and spent summers holidaying in Europe. This, together with the episodes spent with Johannes and Edwin recounted above, are the only occasions of happiness in Dr Selwyn's life, or so we must presume from the narrator's account. But the past was not always a source of comfortable nostalgia. The Second World War 'and the decades after, were a blinding, bad time for me, about which I could not say a thing even if I wanted to [...] Since then, almost my only companions have been plants and animals.' (E. 21) These words, spoken by Dr Selwyn, are then our final evidence that his sense of displacement is complete, and the present is largely spent in recounting to himself those idyllic days, coexisting with nature and not his fellow human beings.

The visits and discussions between the narrator and Dr Selwyn become increasingly less frequent until, on what was to be the last occasion, he gives Clara a bunch of white roses entwined with honeysuckle. It is with these symbols of innocence, new-beginnings and remembrance that Selwyn departs from their lives. He finally loses his struggle with the contingencies of his increasingly solitary life and commits suicide using the hunting rifle he bought before his departure for India and which had never before been fired

with intent to harm. The chapter closes on an example of typical Sebaldian coincidence when, in the summer of 1986 the narrator notices an article in a Swiss newspaper bought in Zurich, describing the discovery of the body of Dr Selwyn's friend, the mountain guide Johannes Naegeli, who, as we know, caused him unremitting grief when he disappeared seventy-two years earlier.<sup>233</sup>

This first chapter establishes the theme of personal displacement from a geographical place of origin but with the resultant need to remember or the inability to forget.<sup>234</sup> The above examples, which have necessitated substantial quotes from the text, demonstrate a pattern which consists of a nostalgia for a lost Heimat, represented largely in pastoral mode, contrasted to contemporary contingencies of everyday existence which adopts the language of the anti-pastoral mode. This continues and strengthens as the work progresses. Personal displacement is represented by a tension between an unwillingness to remember yet an inability to forget. Identity bound to place has for Sebald become an identity bound to time. Sebald expresses this textually (and occasionally pictorially) using the pastoral mode. Nostalgic and episodes representing a character's Golden Age are largely examples of classic pastoral, whereas in darker, bleaker episodes, the anti-pastoral mode dominates. In the following sections I develop this further.

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<sup>233</sup> This episode could be viewed as an example of pastoral return, a subject which is developed extensively in the chapter on *Austerlitz* below.

<sup>234</sup> This inverse distillation from personal to collective loss will be developed further in the chapter on *Austerlitz*.

## 4.2 The Persecuted Shepherd

In the second chapter, the pastoral mode is again deployed, chiefly in contrast to the anti-pastoral contingency of a character's life. With the character of Paul Bereyter, in the second chapter of *The Emigrants*, Sebald introduces to the reader a figure that will come to be a recurring motif in future books; that of the teacher/mentor figure. This character is a true modern day 'shepherd' who empathises with nature and the innocence of youth. Like Dr Selwyn, he is also at odds with the world around him, and also like him has to confront his Jewishness, but unlike him, he is not a physically displaced person. He lives and works in his country and even place of origin (his local Heimat) pursuing his career of choice. Nevertheless, Sebald uses pastoral and anti-pastoral modes to depict Bereyter's specific form of displacement from his place of origin.

Paul Bereyter is described as someone whom his contemporaries viewed as never having grown up and whom the narrator describes as more comfortable among his charges than in adult company. As an adult however, he is expected to conform to social norms including religion he finds unacceptable. It is the struggle against these norms and a resistance to the loss of a past, which includes innocence, the beauty of nature and the pure arts that is his source of displacement. The description of this on-going struggle is the topic of this narrative. There is a tension located in this character as we have seen in other Sebald characters such as Grünewald and Steller, but now this tension exists because of his awareness of his displacement, and is represented in the text by a series of pastoral and anti-pastoral modes.

Almost the first information we are given about Paul Bereyter is that since his retirement he rented a room in S in a house built on land that was once a nursery and market garden. Later we are told that the Bereyter family home, where he spent a happy childhood, was located right next to this (Lerchenmüller's)<sup>235</sup> nursery garden where he 'often helped out of an afternoon.' (E. 29) Immediately then, we have the idyll of youth associated with nature and a cryptic<sup>236</sup> desire to return to this state in later life. His love of the land and nature was formulated in these early years and, as Mme Landau his companion in later years tells us, 'Paul spent a lot of time gardening, which I think he loved more than anything else.'<sup>237</sup> (E. 57) The first sign of the idyll deteriorating is when Paul goes to teacher training college following another happy period spent at a country boarding school. At this institution he was exposed to narrow-minded guidelines and a 'moribund Catholicism' (E. 46) which he only managed to survive due to being an 'absolute and unconditional idealist' (E. 47). But, having survived these assaults to his temperament he experiences another, briefer, period of contentment and probably the last before a less intense but also reassuring time with Mme Landau in his retirement. But between these two positions the narrator, in his desire to find out all he can about his primary school teacher,

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<sup>235</sup> It is interesting and pertinent to pastoral that the English translation of the nursery's name is 'lark miller'.

<sup>236</sup> I say 'cryptic' here because later we are informed by Mme Landau through the narrator that Paul 'could not abide the new flat that he was more or less forced to move in to [...] but even so, remarkably [...] he could never bring himself to give up that flat.' (E. 57)

<sup>237</sup> This trait is in sympathy with Henry Selwyn, who also spent the majority of his time in his garden, and again grounds the two characters spatially.

details other traumatic periods in Bereyter's life and which reinforce and lend detail to, the pastoral/anti-pastoral tension throughout this chapter.

The episode recounting Paul Bereyter's brief liaison with Helen Hollaender before taking up his first teaching post is illustrated by the only photographs in this chapter having a pastoral quality. The textual description of this period is slight but the photographs inform the reader that this was an idyllic time for him. Shortly after this he is dismissed from his post and the language and images immediately become more bleak and anti-pastoral in mode. We have for example a desolate group photograph showing an emaciated Paul and descriptive text depicting darkness, illness and death. Paul reflects on his childhood while recovering from cataract surgery, remembering the dim and murky interior of his father's retail outlet, whose early death from heart failure he blames on the increasing violent attacks on Jewish residents in his home town of Gunzenhausen and whose grave was allocated to the remote area of the churchyard in S reserved for suicides. On his return from France, where he worked as a private tutor, he took a job as an office worker at a garage in Berlin. Shortly after, he was called up to serve in the motorized artillery service for the duration of the war, during which he 'doubtless saw more than any heart can bear' (E. 56). After the war the narrator describes how Bereyter returns to S to take up his teaching post. As mentioned above, the teacher described here is an anti-authoritarian, a lover of the outdoors, of nature, music and the fine arts. On his retirement and subsequent friendship with Mme Landau he spends the majority of his time with her in Yverdon where, again, we are reminded of his agrarian pursuits by the amount of time

he spends, in his pastoral refuge, gardening, and sitting ‘gazing at the greenery that burgeoned all around him’ (E.57). This reminds us of Dr Selwyn’s passion for his garden and gift of white roses and together with Bereyter’s cultivation of plants and shrubs so that there was ‘not a bare patch anywhere’ (E. 58). It is clear that growth and rebirth are accented here. Towards the end of his life he becomes increasingly preoccupied with reading the works of writers such as ‘Altenberg, Trakl, Wittgenstein, Friedell, Hasenclever, Toller, Tucholsky, Klaus Mann, Ossietzky, Benjamin, Koestler and Zweig’ (E. 58) mainly Jewish and ‘almost all of them writers who had taken their own lives or had been close to doing so.’ and who ‘convinced him that he belonged to the exiles and not the people of S.’ (E. 59) This, despite his sense of Heimat and ‘that he was German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land in the foot hills of the Alps’ (E. 57). Again, the tension present within this individual is foregrounded here.

Description alone does not necessarily constitute anti-pastoral mode. But if we examine the above passages further we find evidence not only of melancholic phraseology, ‘he would always be in the gloomiest of spirits,’ (E. 57) but also of a text that achieves this by a corruption of the pastoral. As we have noted, the first thing we are told about Paul Bereyter, for example, is that he rented rooms on the land where once had been a nursery and market garden. Mme Landau later informs us that this was indeed a ‘hideous block of flats’ (E. 57) into which he was more or less forced to move. The use of this imagery clearly portrays a bleak picture which is reinforced when we consider the subtext of the invasion of a natural landscape (albeit one stylised

my human hand) by a utilitarian structure without any aesthetic attribute. Indeed, the references to this building would lend credence to Paul's conjecture, related again by Mme Landau, that 'linked the bourgeois concept of Utopia and order [...] with the progressive destruction of natural life.' (E. 45)<sup>238</sup>

Furthermore, the description of Paul's childhood exploration of his father's emporium which, at face value is without passion, on closer examination is charged with a longing for escape into the natural world. His childhood, as we know has been described as a happy one up until he went to teacher training college, and this passage of a young boy, riding on his tricycle through a department store would appear to be simply an episode illustrating this. However, the language and metaphors used in this dream-like reflection have a definite anti-pastoral bias.

Everything in the emporium seemed far too high up for him' [...] The light in the emporium [...] was dim even on the brightest of days, and it must have seemed all the murkier to him as a child [...] as he moved on his tricycle [...] through the ravines [...] amidst a variety of smells – mothballs and lily-of-the-valley [...] For hours on end [...] he had ridden in those days past the dark bolts of material [...] and the case [...] in which rolls of Gütermann's sewing thread were neatly arranged [...] in every colour of the rainbow. (E. 51, 52)

There is a suggestion here of movement through a terrain that is clearly man-made but in which nature is trying to impose itself. There are 'ravines' and

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<sup>238</sup> This is a motif identified previously in our discussion and it is tempting to infer that it is also Sebald's own conjecture.

mountains here excluding natural light but also the fragrances (lily-of-the-valley) and wonders of nature (rainbows) are in evidence to the young boy who, in later life, as we have seen, has a love of the outdoors and the natural world. This episode may well be the aetiology of his future passion.

Sebald foregrounds the anti-pastoral mode in the majority of the bleaker episodes in Paul's life. On his dismissal from his first teaching post he travels to Besançon, where he takes a position as a house tutor. The grainy photograph supporting the text here depicts an emaciated Paul, looking distinctly disassociated with a family alongside a grey river. There is no sense of warmth here and certainly no evidence of the pleasures of nature. His time spent in the German army is narrated with an equal monotone and almost as reportage. In his own words, during this period of his life, 'day by day, hour by hour, with every beat of the pulse, one lost more and more of one's qualities, became less comprehensible to oneself, increasingly abstract.' (E. 56) The photograph accompanying this text depicts Paul, unsmiling and wearing sunglasses.<sup>239</sup> This lends emphasis to the isolation he felt and the shielded eyes are prescient of the blindness that eventually befell him.

This section of the narrative probably best illustrates the contrast between pastoral and anti-pastoral in this chapter. We have seen the pastoral images of

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<sup>239</sup> In the German edition, this photograph is lent more credence by being positioned at the top of the page and the text 'about 2000 km away – but from where' is centred underneath it. Other authors debate the variation in page layout between original German and English translations. See for example, Florence Feiereisen and Daniel Pope, 'True Fictions and Fictional Truths: The Enigmatic in Sebald's Use of Images in *The Emigrants*', in *Searching For Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald*, pp. 162-184.

the brief time Paul spent with Helen and noted the happier times with Mme Landau towards the end of his life at whose home he was at his most content transforming the garden, and with whom he took outings up Montrond where from the summit they had ‘gazed down for an eternity at Lake Geneva and the surrounding country.’ (E. 45) But Paul’s true awareness of his displacement seems to be when he is among his young charges for whom he was ever conscious of exposing the wonders of nature and the fine arts and shielding them from corruptive influences, including formal religion. It would be difficult to find a more exacting description of a modern pastoral setting than the scene in which Sebald describes one of the many outings into the countryside on which Paul took his pupils. In a passage reminiscent of the classic pastoral mode, we have a modern-day shepherd, with his ‘flock’ hiking through the countryside, climbing mountains and observing nature. To reinforce the image we are told that Paul would whistle continuously with a sound that ‘was marvellously rich, exactly like a flute’s’ and when they rested he would ‘take his clarinet [...] and play various pieces, chiefly slow movements, from the classical repertoire.’ (E. 41) As mentioned above, this pastoral imagery is in place whenever a character’s sense of displacement is particularly acute and the anti-pastoral when the obverse is in play, when the displacement is temporarily accepted. We may, however, be inaccurate in our conclusion that the pastoral scene above is truly representative of this in Paul Bereyter’s case. Sebald, via the narrator, adds a caveat to this pastoral scene when he notes the emotion aroused in Bereyter caused his eyes to fill with tears, foreshadowing the blindness that eventually befell him, when listening to a talented violinist he had asked to play to his pupils – ‘an audience of

peasant boys'. (E. 41) So even in this temporary idyll, there is a tension between joy and sadness, and Paul's sense of identity or Heimat remains fundamentally unstable.

### 4.3 Pastoral Modes of Retreat and Return

Terry Gifford in *Pastoral* tells us that ‘travel writing and nature writing have been serving a function of pastoral retreat for their readers since their inception.’<sup>240</sup> While we cannot justly classify Sebald into either of these categories, we also cannot deny that travel and nature feature in large part throughout all his prose fiction, and in the third chapter of *The Emigrants* Sebald takes his narrator on a quest to investigate Ambros Adelwarth, the title character of this chapter. This he achieves through a series of journeys, physical and temporal, a dream sequence and the not uncommon literary device of using the character’s journal. The chapter operates on two major levels: the narrator is pursuing a physical journey of discovery and the main character, Adelwarth, is mentally retreating towards an end point from which he will not return, unlike the narrator, whose retreat is functional.<sup>241</sup> Both of them are in some way struggling to find a grounded sense of identity, not necessarily located physically, via these retreats and constant movements. I shall therefore examine this chapter from the perspective of these two points of view. Here again the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes are in operation. Through their combination and contrast, Sebald is able to explore some of the themes previously discussed such as displacement and exile of the characters. But the main argument in this section of the chapter is, I suggest, that through Ambros Adelwarth we are also exposed to a figure who takes upon himself the collective trauma of past events. In this sense then, this chapter of *The*

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<sup>240</sup> Gifford, p.78. This topic is developed further in the discussion of *Austerlitz* in which, together with pastoral return, it is the dominant theme.

<sup>241</sup> By the term function I refer to a sense of an outcome/result achieved by the retreat. Gifford puts it thus ‘a retreat to a place (physical or abstract) [...] actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates.’ p. 82.

*Emigrants* conforms to a definition of pastoral literature as ‘a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.’<sup>242</sup>

The narrator, in an attempt to discover more information on his great uncle Ambros Adelwarth, travels to North America to visit relatives who emigrated there in the years between the two World Wars. During the course of a series of encounters he pieces together the details of this otherwise enigmatic figure. We discover, for example, that he left his homeland of southern Germany for good at the age of fourteen and took a job in Montreux as an apprentice in room service at the Grand Hotel Eden.<sup>243</sup> He then took a post, again in room service, at the Savoy in London where he is said to have had a dalliance with a Mata Hari-like figure from Shanghai who, he later said ‘marked the beginning of my career in misfortune.’ (E. 79) His time in London was followed by a two-year journey by ship and rail via Copenhagen, Riga, Moscow across Siberia to Japan, in the company of an unmarried gentleman, acting as his valet.<sup>244</sup> In Japan, according to Aunt Fini who is recounting this part of the narrative ‘he felt happier there than he had been anywhere else so far.’ (E. 79) He finally arrives in America, probably around 1911 when, we are told, that as part of his job as personal attendant to Cosmo,<sup>245</sup> the

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<sup>242</sup> Empson, p.22.

<sup>243</sup> The name of the hotel is not without irony given that these were indeed happy times for the young man.

<sup>244</sup> This is the first reference to the question of Adelwarth’s probable homosexuality. Some commentators attribute more significance than is possibly justified, including it being an aetiological factor in his later psychological decline. See for example McCulloh, p. 37.

<sup>245</sup> The use of this name is significant, with its implications of an ungrounded, restless identity – a truly cosmopolitan figure.

somewhat decadent son of a wealthy Jewish banker, he embarked on a series of exotic travels. It was not until 1913<sup>246</sup> that they returned to America, shortly after which, coinciding with the outbreak of war in Europe, Cosmo suffered a nervous breakdown from which he never completely recovered. After the War Ambros and Cosmo embarked on one last journey to Egypt in ‘an attempt to regain the past’ (E. 96). On their return Cosmo had a relapse and shortly after being admitted to a sanatorium in Ithaca<sup>247</sup>, he died. The details of the travels of Ambros and Cosmo are described in the journal referred to above, which was given to the narrator by his aunt. In these descriptions we are given pastoral images such as we have seen in use for the description of past events in the other main characters’ lives in *The Emigrants*, intermingled with anti-pastoral descriptions usually juxtaposed to commentary on Cosmo’s state of health. For example, Ambros describes the scene as they set sail en route from Venice for Greece and Constantinople. Cosmo is very restless and ‘[t]he lights of the city receding into the distance under a veil of rain. The islands in the lagoon like shadows.’ (E, 128) A stormy night ensues but on arrival at Kassiopé, Cosmo ‘stands like a pilot’ and once ashore calm also descends on the travellers. ‘We lie beneath the canopy of leaves as in an arbour’ and ‘[a]t night we sleep on deck. The singing of crickets. Woken by a breeze on my brow.’ (E. 129) Mimicking Cosmo’s benign mood, the pastoral descriptions continue on arrival in Constantinople, but there is an air of impermanence which, as in the first

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<sup>246</sup> A recurring and significant date in Sebald. In *Vertigo*, for example, it is ‘In that year that everything was moving towards a single point, at which something would have to happen.’ (V. 129)

<sup>247</sup> The Homeric reference here has been noticed by other critics and is foreground particularly in *Austerlitz*. See for example Kilbourn, p. 142, 150.

chapter, Sebald suggests by eroding the integrity of natural structures. The text generates instability by the familiar white motif of mobile/fluctuating signifiers contrasted to the solid structures. In Ambro's diary the scene of the 'blue-black mountains of Albania' (white land) is interrupted by 'two white ocean-going yachts trailing white smoke' and 'Cape Varvara with its dark green forests, over which hangs the thin sickle of the crescent moon.' (E. 129) These juxtapositions serve to remind us of the intransigence of nature and indeed of ourselves, but more specifically here, they herald the darkening mood of Cosmo. As he and Ambros arrive in the Holy Land, the anti-pastoral mode is foregrounded to accentuate this, the diary entry continues; 'Cosmo very taciturn. Darkened sky. Great clouds of dust rolling through the air. Terrible desolation and emptiness.' (E. 136)

By contrast, the description of Adelwarth's later years is without any reference to the pleasures of natural landscape, rural settings or other pastoral motifs. Like Cosmo's mental torment at the outbreak of War, Adelwarth seems to be trying to exclude unwanted external stimuli.<sup>248</sup> When he is no longer in employment and therefore not fulfilling a protective role for his charge, he retreats into psychological isolation and again, as Aunt Fini says to the narrator, '[h]e was at once saving himself, in some way, and mercilessly destroying himself.' (E. 100) This then is Adelwarth's strategy for reconciling, or attempting to reconcile, past events with the contemporaneous. During his travels with Cosmo and throughout his service with the Solomons, he led a privileged lifestyle and was exposed to exotic places and cultures not

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<sup>248</sup> The symptoms of Cosmo's illness are very similar to those of a shell-shocked individual, although in his he was not, of course, exposed to warfare.

generally available to the ordinary person. Being part of the dialectical mode of retreat and return, this specific retreat which ‘actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates’<sup>249</sup> for Adelwarth, delivers insight into the culture and insipient dystopia of this historical period. The contrast between his and his employer’s lifestyles and the Europeans engaged in the horrors of the First World War, some of whom were almost certainly his fellow countrymen, would have been irreconcilable for him the more he allowed himself to dwell on the subject or, on rare occasions, actually recount his experiences.<sup>250</sup> We know that he admitted himself voluntarily to the same sanatorium in which Cosmo died and that he willingly subjected himself to a brutal regime of electro-convulsive-shock therapy. We are informed of his final days spent at the sanatorium by the former director of the institution Dr Abramsky, whom the narrator visits some fifty years after Adelwarth’s death. This figure is strikingly reminiscent of Dr Selwyn in the first chapter. He spends his life ‘out of doors here, in the boathouse or the apiary [...] and I no longer concern myself with what goes on in the so-called real world.’ (E. 110) Dr Abramsky tells the narrator that his great uncle ‘gave him the impression of being filled with some appalling grief.’ (E. 111) He had a ‘longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember.’ (E. 114) His retreat is therefore one from which he actually has no wish to return and indeed, he dies after only a short stay in Ithaca.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Gifford, p. 82.

<sup>250</sup> There are two occasions in the text where this is reinforced. Aunt Fini says ‘telling stories was as much a torment to him as an attempt at self-liberation’ (E. 100) and ‘the more Uncle Adelwarth told his stories, the more desolate he became.’ (E. 102)

<sup>251</sup> Unlike Odysseus’s welcome return to the island after which this area of New York was named.

This exposure to the details of Adelwarth's final years is part of the narrator's own pastoral retreat. Together with visiting and questioning his relatives and deciphering the travel journal, he pieces together a reasonable biography of his great-uncle. We can now identify more precisely the function of this section of the narrative in pastoral terms. If this is a pastoral retreat we should expect to gain some insight, modify our preconceptions or indeed experience some form of epiphany as a result. I suggest that Sebald does indeed achieve this through his narrator, who returns to us, the reader, the subtle but pervading message of cultural and collective amnesia. Adelwarth seems to represent the voice of the masses.<sup>252</sup> The contrasting experiences this individual undergoes, a polarity of pain and pleasure, in the text is frequently represented by pastoral and anti-pastoral imagery. Moreover, it is not without relevance that the idea for Sebald's essay on the subject of German authors' particular neglect of the damage inflicted on their country by mass bombing, was the result of an excursion Carl Seelig made in 1943 with the then inmate of a mental hospital, Robert Walser.<sup>253</sup> There are parallels between the solitary figure of Walser in his latter years at the Waldau clinic, working in the garden, and Ambros Adelwarth and indeed Dr Selwyn and Paul Bereyter. It is this inability or unwillingness to accept this past that is extrapolated to the above characters and is manifested in the difficult relationship with their

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<sup>252</sup> Peter Morgan notes this when discussing the narratorial voice of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator's 'responses to the sense of being overwhelmed by his nation's recent history are to [...] renounce ethno-national identity or Heimat, and to become a homeless exile and wanderer.' *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben ex patria/Expatriate Writing*, p. 218.

<sup>253</sup> W.G. Sebald, *On The Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. vii.

individual Heimat.<sup>254</sup> This has been articulated through pastoral and anti-pastoral modes and in Adelwarth's case, largely by a journey of pastoral retreat without a satisfactory return. The final section of *The Emigrants* also features a character, Max Ferber, who actively sought to escape his Heimat.

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<sup>254</sup> Boa and Palfreyman also discuss this 'flight from the past and from the bitter questions of guilt and responsibility' in relation to Heimat. They note, as does Sebald that some authors - Heinrich Böll for example - were part of the Vergangenheitsbewältigung (facing up to the past) group of writers and contrast this to the popularity of Heimat films of the 1950s which presented a pastoral image of the past.

#### 4.4 The Reluctant Exile

In the final section of *The Emigrants* we see all the features of the previous chapters and, as is typical of Sebald, there are several references to episodes or motifs previously mentioned in this and indeed his earlier works. The narrative centres on the artist figure of Max Ferber, who in turn, is partly based on the real life English Jewish painter, Frank Auerbach.<sup>255</sup> Like the narrator, he is an exile in England of German origin.<sup>256</sup> The narrator discovers Ferber when he comes to Manchester as a research student and develops a friendship with him over the three years of his stay. Little of Ferber's past life however, is disclosed during this time, apart from a short idyll as a child when he accompanied his father on a trip to Lake Geneva and which he re-enacted on his one and only excursion from England years later. It is not until several years later, when he has taken up permanent residence in Norfolk, that the narrator returns to see the artist in Manchester. We are now told his story through the voice of Ferber himself. For him 'Germany is a country frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place' (E. 181). The narrative mode here is almost exclusively anti-pastoral. We are told for example, that his Father had to hand over the management of his business to an Aryan partner, of his grand-mother's suicide and his Uncle Leo's dismissal from his teaching post in Würzburg.<sup>257</sup> The only contrast to this comes when recounting a visit to see the frescoes of Tiepolo, following which, he studies

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<sup>255</sup> In the German edition the surname of the character is Aurach and Ferber is probably a derivative of the German Färber, meaning a dyer or one who colours.

<sup>256</sup> John Zilcosky notes that Ferber (Aurach in the original German) had intended to move 'away from his German Jewish *Heimat* (although Manchester with its large Jewish contingent would seem a strange choice) but that he had returned against his will:' *A Critical Companion*, p. 114.

<sup>257</sup> All of which events have previously occurred elsewhere in the book.

the painter's work minutely, 'trying to see further and further into them.' (E. 185)<sup>258</sup>

In the character of Max Ferber, Sebald develops further the scapegoat<sup>259</sup> figure which we saw in embryo in the previous chapter in the figure of Ambros Adelwarth. Ferber left his native country in 1939 never to see his parents again, both of whom died in concentration camps. We are given a description of the young boy on a plane looking out of the window, taking a last look at his country of birth and we note that he sees 'a flock of sheep and the tiny figure of a shepherd.' (E. 188) This signifies a final pastoral image for the boy who, as an adult, is compelled to confront his displacement from his place of origin and who, more poignantly, never attempted to regain it but rather, distanced himself geographically and culturally from his German, Jewish background.

The narrative is conducted from three different points of view: Ferber's, the narrator's and that of Ferber's mother (Luisa Lanzberg) via her memoirs which are disclosed to the reader through the narrator. As mentioned above, Ferber's account is predominantly in the anti-pastoral mode whilst his mother's memoir, which documents her early life, is largely pastoral. The

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<sup>258</sup> It will be remembered that Tiepolo's frescoes were also a recurring pastoral motif in *Vertigo*.

<sup>259</sup> I use the term scapegoat here in the Empsonian sense but from a personal not collective viewpoint. Empson extended Sir James Frazer's thesis of God as scapegoat for man's sins and proposed that this figure survived in numerous manifestations and especially as a mock-heroic figure of the pastoral form. The 'scapegoat carries the burden of collective guilt and suffering' and this is perceived by the masses or the 'primitive mind' as annulled on his/her death. Qtd. in Haffenden, p. 386. In the current context I suggest this term is still valid albeit on a singular basis.

narrator, while chiefly acting as vehicle for these two characters, in the closing sequences of the chapter embarks on a journey to learn more of Luisa's background and fate. In so doing, he acts out an example of pastoral retreat and return as in the previous narrative concerning Ambros Adelwarth, but this is undertaken here vicariously on behalf of Max Ferber. By entrusting his mother's memoirs to the narrator, Ferber, in effect, is relinquishing any last possibility of regaining his lost Heimat. The memoir can be seen to represent a form of virtual Heimat and coming of age that might have been his if world history had taken a different course.

The opening section of the chapter details the narrator's arrival in Manchester, a city he describes as 'suffocated in ash' (E. 150) and his time there as 'a time of remarkable silence and emptiness.' (E. 153) During this period he meets and befriends the painter Max Ferber. Through this character's discourse we learn of his exile and solitary existence and of his conflicted attitude to his country of birth. Indeed, Ferber's decision to take up residence in England was prompted by not wanting 'to be reminded of my origins by anything or anyone' (E. 191). The text continues when 'I arrived in Manchester I had come home, in a sense' (E. 192) which is clearly an attempt to re-establish a connection and sense of belonging to a place of origin at the expense of excluding all memories of his past, including his mother's memoirs. The Heimat is never attained in any full sense however, and this is allegorised in his method of painting. His technique is a type of impasto but one which he constantly scratches out and paints over thus forming a series of palimpsests while the debris collects on the floor and becomes a more

permanent art form than the painting itself. The paintings are in a constant state of flux, they represent his striving for an unattainable pastoral past and the discarded paint depicts the reality of an anti-pastoral present. By giving the narrator his mother's memoir, Ferber is essentially relinquishing any further involvement in the quest for his Heimat.

The memoirs, which Ferber describes as 'truly wonderful' at times but also as 'one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks' (E. 193) describe, in mainly pastoral mode, the early life of Luisa Lanzberg.<sup>260</sup> We have, for example, a description of the countryside surrounding the village which she calls 'her real home' depicting:

meadows spread before you, the Windheim woods nestle in a gentle curve, and there are the tip of the church and the old castle - Steinach! Now the road crosses the stream and enters the village, up to the square by the inn (E. 194)

Her childhood is conveyed in similar vein with summer days spent outdoors with her brother Leo walking 'hand in hand along the Saale, on the bank where there is a dense copse of willows and alders, and rushes grow' (E. 197). The idyll continues when, as a young woman she meets her first love called Fritz with whom she recalls walking on 'a glorious summer day' and remembering 'that the fields on either side of the path were full of flowers and that I was happy' (E. 213). Inevitably, however, this pastoral scene

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<sup>260</sup> McCulloh describes the memoir as having a 'truly lyrical quality' and 'the overriding tone is of serenity and contentment.' pp. 47,48.

dissolves when, in 1913, and what we now recognise as a pivotal year for Sebald, Fritz dies suddenly and Luisa is plunged into the horrors of the First World War working as a nurse. The memoirs end with marriage to Fritz Ferber and a final glimpse of the pastoral although, as readers privileged with hindsight, we read this with a sense of foreboding and the pastoral image she draws takes on a fragile façade. As she and Fritz skated ‘in wonderful sweeping curves [...] where she sees ‘shades of blue everywhere – a single empty space, stretching out into the twilight of late afternoon’ (E.217, 218), the temporary ice-rink on which they skated on the Theresienwiese loses any sense of innocent pleasure.

If as McCulloh says ‘beauty and tranquillity characterise Luisa Lanzberg’s images from the past’<sup>261</sup> this contrasts sharply to the account of Max Ferber’s life exiled in Manchester. There is however an episode of short-lived idyll from his past that he tries to recapture on a visit to Lake Geneva, a common venue in Sebald’s prose fiction and pointedly in the Paul Bereyter chapter of *The Emigrants*. He recalls a trip taken with his father to the summit of Grammont where on ‘that blue-skied day in August I lay beside Father on the mountaintop, gazing down into the even deeper blue of the lake.’ (E. 173) On his only excursion from England in later life he attempts to recreate this pastoral scene from his past. The expedition to the top of Grammont on this occasion however instigated a mental collapse – ‘a lagoon of oblivion’ as he describes it. (E.174)<sup>262</sup> This episode acts as a final curtain on a past

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<sup>261</sup> McCulloh, p. 49.

<sup>262</sup> The text here would suggest a type of sensory overload similar to the vertiginous sensations suffered by some of the characters in *Vertigo*.

associated with any semblance of contentment and any further attempt to explore his own Heimat. It is, rather, the narrator who undertakes this task by reading Luisa's memoirs and subsequently retreating into her past by embarking on a visit to the venues of her youth, Kissingen and Steinach.

This vicarious journey undertaken by the narrator is again typical of the pastoral retreat and return. The retreat is represented by the action of stepping outside the contingences of his day-to-day existence and vicariously (on Ferber's behalf) searching for Luisa's and, by extension, Ferber's lost Heimat. This, I would argue, is not simply a piece of detective work to uncover a character's past biography. It is more a definitive quest to establish a *sense* of place, of belonging that only the word Heimat can convey. The anti-pastoral contingencies of modern life however, encroach almost immediately on the narrator and contrast starkly with the descriptions in Luisa's memoir.<sup>263</sup> He has a tortuously slow and unpleasant journey to Bad Kissingen where he arrives at a hotel whose clientele seemed openly hostile and horrified at the sight of him. The town itself populated by pensioners taking painfully slow constitutionals among which he was afraid he might be condemned to spend the rest of his life.

This ominous arrival in the town, the countryside surrounding which was the scene of Luisa's childhood, is summarised by the quote of the day in the

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<sup>263</sup> McCulloh notes this without reference to pastoral where he says 'The sight (a passenger opposite the narrator on a train journey) is a far cry from Luisa Lanzberg's image of skaters gliding in wonderful sweeping curves, and serves to illustrate the lack of dignity in the bearing, dress and appearance of contemporary people.' p. 50.

Kissingen local paper which, in turn, is a quote from Goethe, reads ‘Our world is a cracked bell that no longer sounds.’ (E. 220) He fares no better when trying to gain entrance the Jewish cemetery. The gates are locked and the keys given to him do not fit and so he climbs the wall to gain entry. The scene before him is one of neglect and of nature reclaiming the man-made edifices.<sup>264</sup> An anti-pastoral setting then which has but one redeeming feature and that is of the old German Jewish names, barely decipherable, on the tombstones, such as Blumenthal (literally meaning in German ‘valley of flowers’), Seeligman (‘blessed man’), Leuthold (‘lovely people’) and Grünwald (‘green wood’). He finds the tombstone with the names of Fritz and Luisa Ferber and includes the names of Luisa’s parents, but the only remains in the tomb are those of an aunt who committed suicide. Following several days’ stay at Kissingen and Steinach, ‘which retained not the slightest trace of its former character’ (E. 225) the narrator, feeling ‘increasingly that the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and nerves,’ (E. 225) terminates his retreat to the lost world of Luisa’s and Ferber’s past and returns to England. This episode is described by McCulloh as ‘the unsatisfactory feeling of a homecoming to a permanently altered place,’<sup>265</sup> similar to the return of the narrator in ‘Il ritorno in patria’ in *Vertigo*. This reinforces my contention that it is not truly a homecoming – the Heimat is irretrievable. It is only on his return that the narrator can close this circle – complete the pastoral cycle – when he arrives

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<sup>264</sup> We are reminded here of the photograph of the graveyard which opens the book’s first chapter.

<sup>265</sup> McCulloh, p. 51.

back to the venue of Ferber's final years of his life in exile, the Midland Hotel in Manchester.

Having struggled to complete the account of Ferber's life given to us in this section due to 'scruples that were taking tighter hold and gradually paralysing me' (E. 230), the narrator returns to Manchester to visit him in hospital where he is seriously ill and virtually unable to speak. Following this brief and final visit the narrator spends the night at the once grand and now almost derelict Midland Hotel. It is in this setting of faded imperialism that the narrator, and his audience, finally appreciates the sense of displacement endured by, not only Ferber, but all the main characters of *The Emigrants*. For even in this huge edifice of a building long associated with the heart of Manchester, the narrator himself feels displaced, '[i] suddenly felt as if I were in a hotel somewhere in Poland.' (E. 233) Here he recalls photographs of the Litzmannstadt ghetto established in 1940 in Lodz, also once known as 'polski Manczester'. The pictures depicted a life of superficial normality with people, their dreadful fate obviously unknown to them, undertaking activities such as basket making, metalwork and the image with which the book closes, three young women sitting weaving at a loom. A microcosm then of a world in which the inhabitants in a state of transition, and whose environment was artificial and tenuous, which again reflects on this narrative's underpinning structure. No sense of belonging – no sense of Heimat – a super-saturated example of the troubled psychologies of Dr Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth and Max Ferber. And this awareness of loss and of a potential but elusive Heimat, of an identity bound to place, to family and origin, is finally

signalled by the words from a song the narrator aurally hallucinates while sitting in his hotel bedroom – ‘*The old home town looks the same as I step down from the train [...] And there to meet me are my Mama and Papa.*’ (E. 234) For our emigré characters there is no hometown, but home is invariably a sense of displacement, alienation from place of origin.

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate a common thread running throughout each section of *The Emigrants*, namely that Sebald has portrayed a sense of collective and personal loss of Heimat among the exiles in the book. This has been achieved by exposing a character’s biography in which we witness geographic or psychological exile and the temporal or physical journeys undertaken in order to reconcile the consequences of this displacement. Further, I have suggested that the contrast between a characters’ vanished or potentially regained Heimat and their contemporary existence is achieved through a discourse in pastoral mode for the former and the anti-pastoral mode for the latter. The notion of a character as ‘pastoral scapegoat’ in whom the ‘conflicts of society are mirrored’<sup>266</sup> has also been briefly debated in the context of a national reluctance to recognise events of the Second World War. Specifically, in the character of Ambros Adelwarth we see the failure of an individual’s conscience to tolerate the knowledge of past events, albeit those outside his power to control. In the next chapter we discuss Sebald’s third work of prose fiction. In this work we explore the interplay of pastoral modes and the tension this creates, but in *The Rings of*

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<sup>266</sup> Boa and Palfreyman, p. 118.

*Saturn* the possibility of a pastoral equilibrium is always only a potential – it is glimpsed but never achieved.

## 5. The Deferred Pastoralism of *The Rings of Saturn*

*The Rings of Saturn*, first published in 1995 and translated into English in 1998, broke the format of Sebald's previous works of prose fiction in that instead of four separate sections, the book is divided into ten chapters which recount an essentially linear narrative in which the narrator undertakes a walking tour of Suffolk. Incorporated into the narrative are discussions on a variety of topics, or Sebaldian soliloquies, detailed in the contents page, which in the English version is at the beginning of the book but at the end in the German version.<sup>267</sup> The German edition also carries the sub-title 'Eine englische Wallfahrt' - An English Pilgrimage – which suggests to the reader that there is a definite sense of purpose attached to this narrative.

This work broadly displays a pastoral retreat and return structure, within which there is an interaction between pastoral and anti-pastoral modes such as we have seen in *After Nature* and *The Emigrants*. This juxtaposition or clash<sup>268</sup> is imposed on the travelling narrator whose attempt at a pastoral

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<sup>267</sup> The inclusion of a contents page lends a sense of structure to the narrative while at the same time disturbing its linearity. Richard Gray in his narratological examination of *The Rings of Saturn* notes that while this exhibits a potential 'sense of purpose and orientation along a chartered course' the 'tendency towards spontaneous digression, the temptation to deviate from any given plan' constantly counteracts this. The interaction of these two forces and the points at which they interact he terms 'segues' and argues that they are 'seminal, privileged places in the narrative logic of the text.' This is also another example of tension/clash within this work but which, he argues, ultimately provides cohesion in 'an otherwise disjointed text'. 'Sebald's Segues: Performing Narrative Contingency in *The Rings of Saturn*', *The Germanic Review*, 84.1 (2009), 26-58. Here, p. 27.

<sup>268</sup> John Haffenden notes that '*Clash* is arguably the key word of [Empson's] *Pastoral*' p. 379. The term denotes a conflict, examples of which I argue we

retreat is thwarted by the anti-pastoral encountered either physically or psychologically. In *The Rings of Saturn* this tension is created and structured in such a way that allows the reader to anticipate a potential idyll, but subsequently and almost immediately annihilates this possibility.<sup>269</sup> The argument of this chapter will be that by the dominance of the anti-pastoral mode in which progress, the commodification of nature and nature's own destructive inclination are foregrounded, the pastoral in Sebald's narrative is deferred to an infinite future and displaced towards an indefinite past. There is therefore a spatial dialectic whereby physical movement is instrumental in the *displacement* of a potential idyll and a temporal one that is dominant in *deferring* this possibility.

The narrator himself is a potential pastoral figure<sup>270</sup> who sets out to explore the coastline of Suffolk in what Michael Gorra describes as a 'quasi-pastoral landscape.'<sup>271</sup> The image the reader conjures is of a Rousseau-like figure whose impetus to undertake this journey is 'the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of

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see in *The Rings of Saturn* and which, by extension can be deemed a pastoral text in itself. It conforms to Empson's definition of pastoral literature as 'an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.' p. 22.

<sup>269</sup> Carolin Duttlinger also notes the lack of revelation in *The Rings of Saturn*, where she says 'Although the narrative's digressive structure contains vestiges of the earlier, [Vertigo] spontaneous form of attention, its underlying melancholy curbs any genuine moments of epiphany.' 'A Wrong Turn of the Wheel', in *The Undiscover'd Country*, p. 113.

<sup>270</sup> Raymond William's pastoral figure.

<sup>271</sup> Gorra, *The Bells in Their Silence: Travels through Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 114.

work'<sup>272</sup> (ROS. 3) This unsettled state of mind reminds us of the first lines of the 'All'estero' chapter in *Vertigo*, where the narrator travelled from England to Vienna 'hoping that a change of place would help get me over a particularly difficult period in my life.' (V. 33)<sup>273</sup> His frame of mind therefore, at the outset, is one of expectation and potential serenity, a pastoral retreat to escape the contingencies of modern life. Before the description of the journey begins however, we are told of the narrator's state of collapse and hospitalisation on the completion of this hoped for 'walking cure.' The pastoral retreat he had hoped for was only partially realised for, as he says, 'I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place.' (ROS. 3) This reinforces the point that this was the objective the narrator desired and not another opportunity for the author to subject the reader to his 'unrelenting, wholesale perception of human history and human nature as the history of destruction.'<sup>274</sup> The prose may be melancholic in voice but the narrator's intention on embarking on the journey was essentially therapeutic.

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<sup>272</sup> Richard Gray also notes the 'sense of purpose' of the narrator at the start of his journey. 'Sebald's Segues', p.27.

<sup>273</sup> This motivation to travel is in sympathy with Rebecca Solnit's suggestion that 'travel can be a way to experience this continuity of the self amid the flux of the world and thus begin to understand each and their relationship to each other.' *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>274</sup> This is Greg Bond's description of Sebald's dialectic and is sympathetic with much, if not the majority, of Sebald criticism, 'On The Misery of Nature and the Nature of Misery: W.G. Sebald's Landscapes', in *A Critical Companion*, p. 39.

## 5.1 In Search of Pastoral

Following a brief description of his hospitalisation in which the narrator likens his plight to that of Kafka's Gregor Samsa, struggling to look out of his room, we are introduced to two characters from his past, Michael Parkinson and Janine Dakyns, two unmarried lecturers in the same department of European Studies. These characters have been largely ignored by other critics at the expense of more the obvious historical ones such as Thomas Browne, Roger Casement and Swinburne – all of whom we will return to – but they are crucial because they introduce the dialectic of the whole text.

Both these characters, who knew each other, were individuals seemingly without the need for worldly trappings. They found their pleasures not in popular contemporary pastimes, largely dependent on financial affluence, but in intellectual pursuits and the natural world; seemingly innocent souls on whom the contingencies of the world impacted and not the other way round. Parkinson took long walking tours in the Valais and the area around Lake Geneva in connection with his study of Charles Ramuz.<sup>275</sup> His friend Janine, an expert on Flaubert, is described by Sebald's narrator as sitting in her office surrounded by papers, which reminded him of the angel in Dürer's *Melancholia* 'steadfast among the instruments of destruction.' (ROS. 9)<sup>276</sup>

The figure of innocence and purity juxtaposed to harshness in either the

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<sup>275</sup> Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz was a Swiss author of poetry, libretto and prose, writing in French, whose novels include *Présence de la Mort* (1922).

<sup>276</sup> It is interesting to note an intertextual reference here that does not seem to have been mentioned in other commentaries, namely that the work by Dürer refers us back to Grünewald who at one time was his teacher.

material or the natural world is implied here and resonates throughout the work.

The first example of pastoral/anti-pastoral tension occurs in the description of the narrator's visit to Somerleyton Hall, the first port of call on his journey.

While J.J. Long suggests this exemplifies 'the commodification of landscape and "heritage"'<sup>277</sup> I prefer to read this episode in terms of deferred pastoral.

We are told something of the history of this grand country estate which was rebuilt in 1852 by a wealthy entrepreneur on the site of the old demolished hall. Of interest to the current discussion is the attempt by the designer of the house to achieve 'scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior' in order that visitors 'were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began.' (ROS. 33) An attempt, so it would seem, to internalise a pastoral setting within a man-made structure – 'A corridor might end in a ferny grotto where fountains ceaselessly plashed, and bowered passages criss-crossed beneath the dome of a fantastic mosque.' (ROS. 33) The aim was clearly to achieve the 'illusion of complete harmony between the natural and the manufactured.' (ROS. 34) But the illusion cannot be upheld. It is as if the bond between nature and artificial is unstable and eventually breaks down.

The modern day visitor, the narrator informs us 'no longer sees an oriental fairy tale' (ROS. 35), which in itself is an act of architectural appropriation and subsequent displacement. An explosion in 1913 destroyed a large part of the house and the suites of rooms 'now make a somewhat disused, dispirited

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<sup>277</sup> Long, 'The Ambulatory Narrative and the Poetics of Digression', in *Schreiben ex patria*, p. 63.

impression.’ (ROS. 35)<sup>278</sup> The potential pastoral is displaced by the anti-pastoral which is epitomised by a solitary caged Chinese quail in a state of dementia and the narrator’s conversation with one of the few staff left at the house, William Hazel, the gardener. In this conversation it transpires that ‘his thoughts constantly revolved around the bombing raids then being launched on Germany from the sixty-seven airfields that were established in East Anglia after 1940.’ (ROS. 38) But it is not just these dark thoughts that Sebald wants to bring to our attention. As in all his prose works he reminds us of the collective amnesia that accompanies the history of these bombings of German cities by the English forces during the Second World War.<sup>279</sup> Hazel, the gardener, when trying to learn more of the raids, tells us that ‘No one at the time seemed to have written about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly, it was as if everything had been erased from their minds.’ (ROS. 39) This is certainly anti-pastoral but more precisely, it is a form of anti-pastoral filtering.<sup>280</sup> In essence this is based on the premise that pastoral can function as a selective, self-protective filter. Gifford gives Ted Hughes’s poem ‘Egghead’ as a modern day example of this in which he takes the metaphor literally whereby the skull<sup>281</sup> only allows information that has been ‘safely defused by his

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<sup>278</sup> The house gives itself up to nature, in a similar fashion to Dr Selwyn’s in *The Emigrants*, the narrator, with a nod to the supremacy of the natural, remarks ‘how fine a place the house seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion.’ (ROS. 36)

<sup>279</sup> For example, in *After Nature* both Mother and Father fail to recall the bombing of Nürnberg or Dresden respectively. See also Ambros Adelwarth in *The Emigrants*.

<sup>280</sup> For a full account see Gifford, p. 135.

<sup>281</sup> The image of Thomas Browne’s skull in the first section resonates more clearly once we make this association, and in this sense we could argue that it performs the role of sub-plot in this context.

perception of them.’<sup>282</sup> There is no comfort, however, to be taken in this type of deliberate amnesia for, as we have seen in other characters in Sebald and which occur again in *The Rings of Saturn*, ‘prudently excluding uncomfortable natural forces is ultimately self-destructive since the forces themselves will not be suppressed by being ignored.’<sup>283</sup>

The narrator’s search for a pastoral retreat continues to be elusive as he finds himself in the run-down coastal resort of Lowestoft. The town disheartened him and did not resemble the fond memories of his youth and it is in the Albion Hotel<sup>284</sup> where he stays for the night that the description of his evening meal, cited by Bond as an example of Sebald’s ‘involuntary humour’ to ‘uphold the melancholic gaze at all costs’ occurs.<sup>285</sup> My interpretation of this scene is that of an intentional, comic interlude, not unlike those we find in *Vertigo* that acts as a deliberate counterpoint to the otherwise bleak descriptive passages of the narrator’s present environment. Before leaving Lowestoft, as if struggling to keep the pastoral in view and not the melancholic, the narrator presents us with an image while reminiscing on the more glorious days of the town in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A ‘seaside resort lauded even abroad as “most salubrious”’ with ‘[a] broad esplanade, avenues, bowling greens, botanical gardens and sea-and freshwater baths [...] for the beautification of Lowestoft.’ (ROS. 45) His own childhood is also recalled in the closing lines of the chapter in which he passes an idyllic

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<sup>282</sup> Gifford, p. 136. Hughes is the inheritor of this form after Blake’s poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where we find the lines ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is – infinite.’

<sup>283</sup> Gifford, p. 136.

<sup>284</sup> This is the Victoria Hotel in the German edition.

<sup>285</sup> Bond, p. 39.

moment with his parents and sisters ‘surrounded by green trees and shrubs, the summer light and the beach.’ (ROS. 48) And it is with this image in mind that he continues on his journey.

A coastal walk south of Lowestoft serves as a platform for Sebald to discuss an issue that was introduced in *After Nature*; his awareness and concern about man’s effect on the natural world.<sup>286</sup> In a discourse on herring fishing, we are informed of the pollution of the North Sea by rivers bearing ‘thousands of tons of mercury, cadmium and lead, and mountains of fertilizer and pesticides,’ (ROS. 53) and somewhat ironically, as these are being virtually fished to extinction, the herring itself is held up as ‘the principal emblem [...] of the indestructibility of Nature’ (ROS. 53) and herring fishing as ‘a supreme example of mankind’s struggle with the power of Nature.’ (ROS. 54) Other critics have noted Sebald’s concern about our relationship with Nature. Colin Riordan describes Sebald’s approach as essentially ecocentric. Writing mainly about *After Nature* he argues that ‘in discussing textual perceptions, conceptions, constructions or representations of nature we are actually discussing nature itself, and simultaneously human society and our relationship with the world around us [...] nature does not exist separately from us’<sup>287</sup>; the implication being that Sebald’s observations of the destructiveness of nature and man’s destruction of it are analogous to

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<sup>286</sup> Sebald has raised this subject on more than one occasion. In an interview with Eleanor Watchel for example he says ‘[b]ecause we have created an environment for us which is what it should be. And we’re out of our depth all the time. We’re living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we’re driving ourselves out of it.’ *the emergence of memory: conversations with W.G. Sebald*, p.56.

<sup>287</sup> Colin Riordan, ‘Ecocentrism in Sebald’s *After Nature*’, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, pp. 46-47.

society's own self-destructive tendency. Greg Bond, however, suggests that Sebald's position on Nature is essentially melancholic with his descriptions of bleak landscapes and grey skies and that 'there is no alleviation to be found in nature, as the ideological view is discounted.'<sup>288</sup> Neither of these views takes note of the interplay between pastoral and anti-pastoral modes which feature prominently throughout Sebald's oeuvre. In *The Rings of Saturn*, in particular, it is the dominance of the anti-pastoral, displacing or deferring the pastoral that we see throughout the work. Repeatedly we see potential idylls give way to scenes of disquiet. One striking example of this, and one which would seem to corroborate Bond's argument, is when the narrator, on leaving the beach where the fishermen reminded him of herring fishing, he sits 'on the tranquil shore' where 'it was possible to believe one was gazing into eternity [...] the vault of the sky was empty and blue, not the slightest breeze was stirring' (ROS. 59). This is replaced, almost immediately, by the sense 'as if the world were under a bell jar [...] great cumulus clouds brewed up out of the west casting a grey shadow upon the earth.' (ROS. 59) The pastoral image is not allowed to persist for more than a fleeting moment before we are reminded of nature's other, more sinister, side.

There then follows an account of Major Wyndham Le Strange who distinguished himself during the Second World War and helped liberate the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Sebald shows us a two-page photograph

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<sup>288</sup> Greg Bond, *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, p. 39.

of piles of dead bodies at this point, (ROS. 60,61)<sup>289</sup> and describes the increasingly odd behaviour of Le Strange and his relationship with his housekeeper who he insisted took her meals with him but in absolute silence.<sup>290</sup> His estate gradually fell into disrepair and nature reclaimed the gardens and parklands which ‘encroached on the fallow fields.’ (ROS. 62) The re-establishment of nature over man’s attempt to tame it coincides with the decrepitude of man himself. Following an interlude in which the narrator encounters a herd of swine, surrounded by an electric fence, which prompts him to recall St Mark the evangelist, the chapter concludes with a short discourse on Jorge Luis Borges’s *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, in which he particularly notes that ‘there is something sinister about mirrors’ because ‘they multiply the number of human beings.’ (ROS. 70)

The beginning of Chapter IV gives us another example of what I have termed ‘displaced/deferred pastoralism’. As he continues his journey from Lowestoft along the coast he arrives in Southwold where, on his after-dinner stroll, observing a tranquil scene and what could potentially be a pastoral moment, he conjures the sea battle between the English and Dutch fleets of May 1672, which took place on the waters he now overlooks. Once again the pastoral is displaced by the destructive powers of man.<sup>291</sup> The narrator, while sitting at

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<sup>289</sup> A clear example of one of the functions Sebald attributes to photographs in his work, that of ‘verification’ or to ‘legitimize the story’. *the emergence of memory*, 41.

<sup>290</sup> I am reminded here of Elias Canetti’s character Keim in *Auto da Fé*, who demanded that his wife remained silent during meals.

<sup>291</sup> John Beck also comments on this in *The Rings of Saturn* when he notes that ‘the text does not posit a benign non-human world entirely at the mercy of human violence. The viciousness of capitalist extravagance is matched by nature [...]’. ‘Reading Room: Erosion and Sedimentation in Sebald’s

Gunhill overlooking the 'German Ocean', continues to travel in his mind, both in temporal and geographic dimensions. This allows him to embark on musings which again often depict the instability of a pastoral landscape. He tells us for example of Diderot's travels in Holland where 'even in the heart of the largest of them (cities) one still felt one was in the country' (ROS. 84) whereas the narrator himself on a visit to Holland, felt 'in the shadow of tall apartment blocks as if at the bottom of a ravine.' (ROS. 84)

The entire chapter is narrated as if from a bird's eye or 'voice from on-high' perspective. On several occasions the narrator is 'looking down' at scenes below as in the artist's perspective from Jacob van Ruisdael's painting *View of Harlem with Bleaching Fields*. This allows him not only to make grand observations of cities and landscapes but also to become omniscient and at the same time removed from the descriptions of less palatable instances of man's inhumanity.<sup>292</sup> And this narrative point of view is pertinent to pastoral structure and particularly here as displacement. By placing the narrator at a distance Sebald is reinforcing the tenuousness of the pastoral idyll. But this positional distancing does not leave him unaffected as we know; this journey finally leaves him both physically and mentally exhausted. Again, any attempt at a pastoral retreat is soon countered by anti-pastoral reality or memories. Towards the end of this chapter, for example, having returned to

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Suffolk', in *A Critical Companion*, p. 76. He does not, however, make the pastoral/anti-pastoral connection.

<sup>292</sup> John Beck also notes this narratorial stance and likens it to Thomas Browne's who, Sebalds writes, looked upon the world 'with the eye of an outsider, one might even say of the creator.' in *A Critical Companion*, p. 83. This is not, of course, confined to *The Rings of Saturn*; we have only to remember the dreams of flying in *The Emigrants* and the closing sequence of *After Nature* to find further examples.

his hotel in Southwold from visiting The Sailors' Reading Room, where '[f]or some time I had the feeling of a sense of eternal peace [...]' (ROS. 96) he reads of the atrocities committed by the Croatian militia on the Serbs, Jews and Bosnians at Jasenovac Camp. Sebald here, for seeming veracity, includes a blurred but disturbing photograph of bodies hanging 'like crows or magpies' at this point in the text. (ROS. 97)

## 5.2 Pastoral Scapegoat

In chapter 5, we are introduced to the real life character, Roger Casement, by way of a discussion on Joseph Conrad. In the figure of Roger Casement we once again see the Empsonian mock-hero or pastoral scapegoat who were to feature in much of the Elizabethan pastoral plays and poetry. As becomes apparent, in this particular scapegoat figure we also have examples of displacement in terms of sexuality, and transgressions of political and national loyalties. Moreover these are indeed, ultimately, attempts to achieve/restore a pastoral equilibrium which, once again is never achieved. More significantly, I would argue that, through the narrator's attempt to piece together the details of the Casement episode, Sebald writes an exemplary piece of literature in the post-pastoral mode. This more contemporary, evolved pastoral, has strong social and political resonances. Furthermore, I would also argue that these elements set in motion a displacement/deferral mechanism. As we shall discover, Casement's attempt at, in effect, a utopian status, whether it is national/political stability or an individual's freedom, is initiated by his consciousness that appeals for an environmentally sensitive local and global management and demonstrates concern for, and empathy with, the exploitation of people but is displaced, although history shows us, also deferred, by the lesser motives of self-serving individuals in positions of authority. However, by referring to Gifford's model, I do not wish to detract from the political issues raised by Sebald; on the contrary, my model might be seen to bring these into sharp relief.

Sebald takes as his cue to introduce the writer Joseph Conrad and subsequently the political activist Roger Casement, a television programme on the meeting of these two characters in the Congo. The narrator has been wandering around Southwold during the day and falls asleep while watching the programme. This unconscious, almost subliminal, event inspires him to discover the story of a character whose motives were driven by a highly developed awareness and conscience of others' misfortunes.

The remainder of the chapter describes the narrator's attempt to piece together the details of the story. Both Conrad and Casement are characters with a conscience, and have in common disgust for the manner in which the indigenous population and slave workers were employed in the colonisation of the Congo. We are told of horrendous examples of the Belgian government tyranny of, not only the people who were made to work until they died from exhaustion or starvation, but also of the despoliation of the land itself. At one point, the narrator tells us that 'during this period Korzeniowski (Conrad) began to grasp that his own travails *did not absolve him from the guilt* which he had incurred by his mere presence in the Congo.' (ROS. 120) [my italics] Roger Casement took up the banner on behalf of more than one exploited group of people. Not only did he take the case for hundreds of thousands of slave labourers being worked to death in the Congo to King Leopold but also reported to the Foreign Office of whole tribes and entire regions of South America being decimated. This 'unconditional partisanship for the victims' (ROS. 128) earned him respect at the Foreign Office and he was subsequently knighted. However, he was soon to fall foul of the British authorities when

‘[t]he injustice which had been borne by the Irish for centuries increasingly filled his *conscience*.’ [my italics] (ROS. 129) His involvement in the ‘Irish question’ gave cause for the British government to make a scapegoat of him and he was found guilty of treason, stripped of his honours and eventually executed for treason. His plight was deepened and all hope of appeal quashed by his homosexuality as evidenced by the so-called ‘Black Diary’ that he kept of his exploits.

These political and historical resonances would suggest that this section conforms to the definition of post-pastoral literature. In addition I have argued that these also function as displacement/deferral mechanisms. Moreover, it could further be suggested that this can be read as a pastoral version of utopian politics whereby an anti-pastoral condition constantly displaces/defers any attempt at national or global equanimity. We can, of course, extrapolate from individual examples as in the Casement episode, to collective ones and this returns us to Sebald’s continuing dialectic of national/collective amnesia. The next chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* will return us to other examples of this with the inclusion of further examples of the post-pastoral in the form of man’s destruction of his environment and nature’s own relentless destructive powers. Underlying this is the narrator’s continuing pilgrimage in pursuit of tranquillity.

In this chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* two significant elements of pastoralism have dominated the text: namely, the Empsonian concept of a pastoral

‘scapegoat’<sup>293</sup> in the guise of Roger Casement, and the post-pastoral mode in the discussion of anti-imperialism and colonialism. In the following section Sebald again turns our attention to the destructive force of nature and man’s own attempt to corrupt it, yet at the same time, create a benign idyll within this seemingly endless turmoil.

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<sup>293</sup> If we accept Empson’s view of the ‘scapegoat’ as a mock-pastoral figure or hero, we must regard its inclusion a defining statement of the overall anti-pastoral nature of the text.

### 5.3 An Elusive Golden Age

Through a dialogue initiated by the narrator's discovery of the bridge crossing the Blyth river between Southwold and Walberswick built for a narrow-gauge railway, along which ran a train originally built for the Emperor of China, we learn of the civil war in China, the internal disputes of the royal family and of the British involvement in China's political upheavals during the mid-nineteenth century. Sebald here is again suggesting, through connections and associations across time and space, the unachievable nature of a pastoral equilibrium between man's creations and nature. While Sebald's use of temporal/historical and spatial/geographic narrative modes is of course a ubiquitous feature of his prose fiction, in *The Rings of Saturn* they are specifically employed to suggest a sense of lost or unachievable pastoral, which contributes another facet to the displacement/deferral model.

For instance, in chapter six the narrator takes the bridge at Blyth as a narrative springboard to recount aspects of the Taiping rebellion in Southern China during the mid nineteenth century. What is pertinent to our argument however is the language used when describing the rebels' cause. The objective of this civil uprising was, as indeed most rebellions of the masses are, an attempt to establish a utopian society. In Sebald's words 'a glorious future in which justice prevailed [...] Fired by the prospect of a golden age.' (ROS. 140) History tells us that the rebellion was suppressed (with the help of British forces) and no idyllic state was achieved. Further on in the chapter, as if to reinforce this denial of utopia, the narrator informs us of the destruction, by the allied troops, of the garden of Yuan Ming Yuan near Peking. This

supernatural place with its 'countless palaces, pavilions, covered walks, fantastic arbours, temples and towers' and which the narrator describes as 'this earthly paradise' (ROS. 144), was completely destroyed by the hand of man.

This also suggests the instability of any likelihood of a sustainable pastoral and one which furthermore has curiously been physically displaced into the East Anglian locale. Some critics, of course see this as typical Sebaldian melancholy. Examined more closely, however, we see not merely a continuous melancholic voice but one whose hope and desire to recognise man's altruism is never completely silenced but constantly deferred and therefore remains potentially attainable. The lost town of Dunwich symbolises the transience of humanity. In the on-going struggle between the elements and man's desire to conquer nature, the reclamation of this, formerly important port in the Middle Ages, by the destructive force of the sea, is a timely reminder by Sebald to the reader that it is we who are always, ultimately, the losers of this battle. This is not to say that there are not occasional glimpses of pastoral, but as we are again reminded, these are fleeting, unstable and never permanent.

The episode about town of Dunwich also acts as a departure point for a short discourse on the Victorian poet Algernon Swinburne. Specifically, the narrator suggests that it is 'the immense power of emptiness' that may have

acted as a ‘place of pilgrimage<sup>294</sup> for melancholy poets of the Victorian age.’ (ROS. 159) It is not without relevance to this thesis that Sebald chose Swinburne to discuss, in that here was a poet only too aware of the tenuousness of human life. The poem *By the North Sea* (1880), which is described in the text as ‘his tribute to the gradual dissolution of life’ (ROS. 160) is clearly in sympathy with Sebald’s dialectic.<sup>295</sup> But, also pertinent to our current debate, is the repeated attempt to displace the melancholic note. Once again, we are given an example of a manufactured Arcadia. As in the magic garden at Yuan Ming which was destroyed by the British forces when quelling the Taiping Rebellion, the narrator ventriloquises Swinburne when he describes the latter’s vision of the Palace of Kublai Khan inspired by the sight of a greenish glow out at sea which he glimpsed whilst visiting the All Saints churchyard at Dunwich. Sebald is also careful to remind the reader of the connection between the two artificial idylls since he refers us back to the previous example, Somerleyton Hall. The present passage also reminds us of Somerleyton Hall in its heyday, by pointing out that Kublai Khan’s palace was once on the site later occupied by Peking – situated close to the magic garden – and also that Swinburne’s life<sup>296</sup> was coterminous with that of the Dowager Empress Tz’u-hsi. It could also be argued that the purpose of recounting these narratives in this context is to reinforce the narrator’s own

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<sup>294</sup> The absence in the English edition of the sub-title to *The Rings of Saturn* is pertinent here.

<sup>295</sup> Swinburne’s poem *The Forsaken Garden* could also be cited here as typical of the lost pastoral motif.

<sup>296</sup> An interesting biographical note pertinent to this discussion is Swinburne’s known predilection for flagellation and therefore another example of the scapegoat figure in Sebald’s work.

discourse throughout his travels, in that his journey is a form of pilgrimage<sup>297</sup> which he set out on in the hope of a pastoral retreat but which constantly eludes him. The description of man's attempt at ordering and improving nature and in turn nature's own destruction of itself invariably enact a displaced/deferred pastoral which in this section of *The Rings of Saturn* has explicit national and political resonances.

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<sup>297</sup> As previously noted the German edition of *The Rings of Saturn* carries the subtitle 'An English Pilgrimage' not included in the English translation.

## 5.4 Dreams Pastoral and Anti-pastoral

As the journey continues, the narrator, by his description of place and character, presents another facet of Sebald's use of pastoralism. Again, it is a world of deferred pastoral or when fleetingly glimpsed, a pastoral soon destroyed or forgotten. On his departure from Dunwich, following an episode in which he becomes hopelessly lost in heathland near the ruins of Grey Friars' monastery, he recounts a dream sequence in which he again becomes lost in a maze. In this dream some months later, the maze, he tells us, represents a cross-section of his brain, suggesting his confused state of mind. But also we are told that he observes this from a vantage point sitting in a Chinese pavilion, another reference to the pavilion in the maze at Somerleyton. From this elevated position he observes scenes which 'reminded me of the War', a ruined house, the 'strangely contoured bodies of the people who had lived there.' and 'a solitary old man with a wild mane of hair was kneeling beside his dead daughter' (ROS. 174).<sup>298</sup> This is, as some critics point out, an allusion to the scenes of piles of bodies at Bergen-Belsen described previously or the atrocities during the Serbian civil war. This sequence reminds the reader also of the gardener Hazel at Somerleyton and links us to the following episode at Michael Hamburger's house. These are very clearly strongly anti-pastoral images which again instil in the reader a sense of insubstantiality and transiency of the pastoral especially if we accept the description a few sentences on in the text of the Sizewell power plant, 'its Magnox block a glowering mausoleum,' (ROS. 175) as the potential source of this and ultimately man's destruction.

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<sup>298</sup> A reference to Shakespeare's King Lear which Sebald reinforces with a quote from Act V, scene III.

His visit to Michael Hamburger, a writer, poet, translator and German Jewish exile living in England, is no less disquieting. Following a short biographical description of Hamburger's Berlin roots, the ambience is swiftly established by Michael's description of the month of August 'as if everything was somehow hollowed out. Everything is on the point of decline.' (ROS. 181) This is followed by yet another description of a garden in decline and as if to reinforce the point we are told of the coincidences that Michael saw between himself and the German lyric poet Hölderlin who, it is said, rejected happiness and whom Hamburger had spent a lifetime translating into English. The tone of this meeting would conform to other critics' analysis of Sebald as a writer principally of melancholic prose but once again there is an attempt to lift the mood, to glimpse the pastoral. This comes in the form of a dream recounted by Hamburger's wife Anne at the end of the chapter.

Just before the narrator's departure, Anne describes the dream she had that same afternoon. She describes the narrator helping her into a taxi in which she appeared to float rather than drive. The journey took her through a forest, which she remembered, in meticulous detail, with its 'hundreds of flowering plants and lianas from branches that reached out like the yard-arms of great sailing ships, festooned with bromeliads and orchids.' (ROS. 190) She goes on to say how difficult it was to describe the sensation of travelling in this dream and notes that 'I only have the indistinct notion of how beautiful it all was.' (ROS. 190) This contrasts dramatically with the description the narrator has given shortly before, of Hamburger's own garden and indeed suggests

that it is only in dreams that such idyllic surrounds can be found. The use of dreams and other subconscious activity are devices of which Sebald makes full use in his prose fiction and here it serves to highlight the deferred status of the pastoral. It is this aspect of the human mind, encompassing both consciousness and sub-consciousness, that I wish to develop further with reference to the deferred pastoral in *The Rings of Saturn*.

## 5.5 The Tenuous Fabric of Pastoral

As we have already seen, many of Sebald's narrator's observations and discussions of topics initiated by these, have at their centre elements of natural or man-made destruction. Here, the narrator, while searching for a cure for his melancholy, finds confirmation of his pessimistic thoughts with only sporadic episodes which lift the melancholic mood. These are often historic events no longer extant or dream sequences which are further exacerbated by a narrator with a highly developed sense of conscience. It is, I suggest, precisely this conscientiousness, this empathy with nature and awareness of man's fallibility towards it and himself, that prevents the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* from achieving his goal - or some reassurance that there exists at least an equilibrium between the natural and the artificial if not a true utopia. As we follow the narrator's journey through Suffolk, it becomes evident that not only are his experiences often of a post-pastoral nature but also they are implicit in engineering the deferral of a classic pastoral condition. I hope to clarify this by further examples from the text.

In his discussion of the writer Edward FitzGerald, we again encounter a solitary, somewhat eccentric, otherworldly character on whom the contingencies of the world impact rather than the obverse.<sup>299</sup> His story is one of the inability to conform to society and of the gradual dissimulation of his property and other worldly goods at the expense of his pursuit of an unattainable and unsustainable lifestyle. This is probably best summarised by

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<sup>299</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the two characters Michael Parkinson and Janine Dakyns epitomise this character trait.

the only completed project of his lifetime, his translation of the *Rubaiyat* by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam. As the narrator informs us,

The English verses he devised for the purpose, which radiate with a pure, seemingly unselfconscious beauty [...] draw us word by word, to an invisible point where the medieval orient and the fading occident can come together in a way never allowed them by the calamitous course of history. (ROS. 200)

There is a sense here then of utopia, in the shape of a global, multicultural pastoral, but again counter-pointed by an anti-pastoral reality. As with the majority of characters in *The Rings of Saturn* who pursue, in their naivety, but dictated by conscience, a constantly shifting utopian end-point, the outcome is one of frustrated ambitions. In this character's case it is fitting for the purposes of this discussion to note that Sebald, through his narrator, informs us that Fitzgerald died while on a visit to his friend the vicar of Merton in Norfolk, George Crabbe, the namesake and grandson of the poet known for his volumes of anti-pastoral verse.

On arrival at Woodbridge, the narrator puts up for the night at The Bull Inn where, in a room that reminds him of being at sea in a ship's cabin, he dreams of being at a country estate in Ireland where he had stayed some years previously. This episode in the narrative allows another discourse on the downfall of a family seat and its dynasty. In this particular instance it also refers back to the Roger Casement episode and the Irish 'question' of the early twentieth century. Once again we are given a description of a house and gardens in decline. The house in disrepair and the land overgrown, the books

from the library and the paintings sold to help the upkeep of the fabric of the house. The narrator imagines the battlefields of Lombardy ‘and, all around, a country laid waste by war.’ (ROS. 210) Typically however, amidst the desolation, we are given an insight into happier times, before English landowners were driven from the country or their properties made unsaleable, when the narrator is shown an old home movie in which ‘[n]owhere was there a sign of neglect.’ (ROS. 213) This is a brief interlude however in an otherwise sorry story of decline narrated by Mrs Ashbury, the owner of the property. So again, the pastoral here is deferred into a past, lost but without evoking a sense of nostalgia. The Ashbury sisters’ constant reworking of the fabrics they had sewn has its counterpart in Ferber’s repeated removal and repainting of his canvasses. It is an allegory of deferred pastoral with the illusion of a sustainable or achievable pastoral implied by the sisters undoing what they had sewn because ‘in their imagination they envisaged something of such extraordinary beauty that the work they completed invariably disappointed them.’ (ROS. 212)

As the journey continues from Woodbridge to Orford the theme of destruction continues but the narrator’s description of the attempts of newly rich Victorian landowners to establish their own idea of a pastoral existence, is achieved, somewhat ironically, by typical anti-pastoral discourse. As he walks towards the coast, the text is in classic pastoral mode in the narrator’s description of his surroundings. ‘This sparsely populated part of the country has hardly ever been cultivated, and, throughout the ages, was never more than a pasture for sheep reaching from one horizon to the other.’ (ROS. 222)

However, when mentioning the intervention of the landowners, the prose immediately changes to anti-pastoral.

When the shepherds and their flocks disappeared in the early nineteenth century, heather and scrub began to spread. This was encouraged as far as possible by the lords of the manors [...] in order to create favourable conditions for the hunting of small game, which had become fashionable in the Victorian age. (ROS. 222)

The genuine pastoral is therefore displaced by an anti-pastoral act in an attempt to expose the ideological concept of pastoral held by the Victorian oligarchs.<sup>300</sup> This in turn had an impact on the rural population whereby those not actively engaged in maintaining the estates ‘were forced to quit the places they had lived for generations.’ (ROS. 223) As we now know, these grand houses, run by vast numbers of servants, seemingly for the sole reason of providing pleasure and entertainment for their employers and their friends, were short-lived. As the narrator tells us, by way of the example of one particular land baron, Cuthbert Quilter, who forged relations with the German Kaiser and employed a German workforce, the commencement of the First World War put an end to the reign of the nouveau riche and their stately homes were either left to ruin or commissioned for other uses such as insane asylums, old people’s homes or reception camps for refugees. The tone of this chapter and, perhaps the dialectic of the entire text, might well be encapsulated by the words the narrator uses to summarise this section, a phrase that denotes both spatial and temporal dimensions, ‘whenever one is

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<sup>300</sup> The destruction of hedgerows and field enclosures was, of course, common at this time when industry was beginning to flourish. And represents a very anti-pastoral period in this country’s history.

imagining a bright future, the next disaster is just around the corner' (ROS. 226). The remainder of this chapter is devoted to destruction, either natural or man-made.<sup>301</sup>

As he approaches Orford, the narrator is enveloped by a sandstorm from which he has to take refuge. Once this has passed, 'a deathly silence prevailed.' He thought '[t]his [...] will be what is left after the earth has ground itself down.' (ROS. 229) It is interesting to note here that this phrase does not imply the intervention of human forces in this desolation of our planet. However, when he encounters Orfordness, with its history of secret military developments, this is precisely what occupies his thoughts. The coastal formation at Orfordness he tells us, had an 'extraterritorial quality about it' which the local fishermen tended to avoid 'because they couldn't stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere.' (ROS. 234) The surrounding area had been the site of several establishments belonging to the Ministry of Defence researching into various means of mass destruction. The offshore establishment, which a fisherman ferries him to, has a particularly sinister impact on the narrator. In the narrator's words 'It was as if I was passing through an undiscovered country [...] I felt, at the same time, both utterly liberated and deeply despondent.' (ROS. 234) It is the dichotomy of feelings we should note here, always a sense of potential hope underlying the nihilism. As he awaits the ferryman to take him back to the mainland, away from this place of destruction, as he thought of it, his mood

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<sup>301</sup> Richard Gray describes *The Rings of Saturn* as 'a critically subversive narrative of destruction, desolation, socio-political and economic mastery, and brutal subjugation;' 'Sebald's Segues.' p. 55.

lightens somewhat. Here he ‘thought, I was once at home. And then [...] I suddenly saw, amidst the darkening colours, the sail of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind.’ (ROS. 237) The pastoral, as part of home and belonging, is glimpsed briefly once again. It is quickly replaced by another attempt to create a manufactured version when he meets Thomas Abrams.

## 5.6 Towards an Artificial Pastoral

This character, Thomas Abrams, a farmer, based on the real-life friend of Sebald, Alec Gerrard, has been constructing a scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem for the past twenty years. It is an accurate model encompassing ten square metres which has been meticulously fashioned out of individual blocks of stone and painted by hand. We are told that it is alleged to be the most accurate replica of the Temple and has attracted the attention of many scholars worldwide. It is however, a project destined never to be completed due to the constant updating of known information of the Temple's architectural details. Whilst this is an interesting observation, and despite the Biblical, redemptive reference, I would suggest that this is also a metaphor for an Arcadia that is once more, displaced spatially and geographically and deferred temporally by inference to a pastoral vision of the past, but also to an unfulfilled, incomplete future. So again, here is an attempt to manufacture a utopian object that in all probability will never succeed, in the same way that Sebald's narrator fails to find the solace he searches for throughout his pilgrimage. As he gazes at a photograph of the Temple site in its contemporary setting there is a further slippage from the original Temple to the model and now a photographic image. And, in order to firmly establish the impossibility of the idyll, the Golden Dome of the Rock is replaced in the narrator's mind by the anti-pastoral depiction of the 'new Sizewell reactor' (ROS. 248). The knowledge also that utopia is fallacious is signified by the narrator's hope that his journey with Thomas Abrams 'would never come to an end, that we could go on, all the way to Jerusalem.' (ROS. 249)

The relationship between a French nobleman of the nineteenth century and a country vicar's daughter is the theme of the next section of this chapter. The narrator gives voice to this story while sitting in the churchyard of St Margaret at Ilketshall. The provocation for this discourse of thwarted love seems to be not for its own sake but again, to remind the reader that a Golden Age, whether collective or personal, remains a potential pastoral always deferred. Possibly, we are also to consider how the course of history could have been altered but for a seemingly insignificant difference in an individual's narrative. The relationship between Charlotte, the Reverend Ives' daughter, later to become Lady Sutton and the French nobleman, who, we are informed later is the author Vicomte de Chateaubriand, may well have been cemented if he had not already been married when he travelled to England and became her tutor. In his memoirs he dwells upon what might have been if he had indeed settled down as:

a gentleman chasseur in the remote English county [...] How great would France's loss have been, he asks, if I had vanished into thin air [...] Is it not wrong to squander one's chance of happiness in order to indulge a talent? (ROS. 253)

This is, in a sense, a form of anti-pastoral, whereby the 'greater good', the 'worthwhile' is always achieved at a cost. While this mode of pastoral traditionally refers to the labour and hardship expended by the workforce - shepherds, land-workers - in maintaining a classic pastoral existence, my extension of this and its application in a broader context is justified here and maintains the underlying ethic of the mode. In this example it is suggested

that it would have been to the detriment of French literature and culture if Chateaubriand had followed his heart and settled in England; thus representing another instance of international displacement and exile. Other examples of this pejorative pastoral can be found later in the chapter when, for instance, the narrator, while waiting for his wife Clara to collect him from the Mermaid in Hedenham, reflects on the ruling elites' landscaping of their estates into boundless parklands 'where nothing offended the eye'. This had 'a considerable impact not only on the landscape, but also on the life of the local communities.' (ROS. 262) There are parallels here, of course, with the pre-First World War land barons' demolition of property in order to establish their own Golden Age in miniature, mentioned earlier. The message is however, the same; the pastoral, however transient, is overridden by the anti-pastoral in the expense of its attainment. The chapter concludes by reinforcing this.

When Chateaubriand buys a summer house in the Vallée aux Loups, the narrator tells us it was his 'modest attempt to realise the ideal of nature' (ROS. 263). In his memoirs, the source from which Sebald quotes, he tells of his love of trees and of the many hundreds he planted and tended with his own hands on his estate near Aulnay. He feels 'a bond unites me with these trees; I write sonnets, elegies and odes to them [...] my only desire is that I should end my days amongst them.' (ROS. 263) Sebald, however, does not allow his narrator to dwell on this serenity as this memory of Chateaubriand immediately prompts him once again to recall the transience of a pastoral state and the destructive force of nature. The closing passages of the chapter

recount two of nature's recent demonstrations of its destructive potential. A photograph of the narrator taken of him standing against a cedar of Lebanon prompts him to bemoan the complete annihilation of Elm trees by a virus carried by airborne beetles<sup>302</sup> and known as Dutch elm disease in the mid 1970s. This epidemic not only affected elms but, as the narrator recalls, many other species also, including ash, oak and beech. The conclusion describes the devastation of over fourteen million of the remaining trees by the hurricane which originated in the Bay of Biscay and affected Northern France and south-east England in 1987. As the narrator stands in his own garden in the early hours following the storm he describes what could be the dawn of a dystopian future:

The rays of the sun, with nothing left to impede them, destroyed all the shade loving plants so that it seemed as if we were living on the edge of an infertile plain [...] there was now not a living sound. (ROS. 268)

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<sup>302</sup> The beetle motif sends the reader back to the visit to Michael Hamburger when the narrator saw 'a beetle rowing across the surface of the water, from one dark shore to the other.' (ROS. 190) There would also appear to be an intertextual reference here to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* and Kafka's *Hunter Gracchus*.

## 5.7 The Possibility of a Pastoral Reinvention

In the final chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*, by way of a discussion of Thomas Browne's *Musaeum Clausum* (1684), the reader is exposed to motifs that have recurred throughout the text in one guise or another. Thomas Browne's *Musaeum Clausum* is an encyclopaedia of a largely fictitious collection of items by the author.<sup>303</sup> The silk and sericulture motif is perhaps the most dominant example and, as McCulloh says is figuratively '[t]he final thread of the book'.<sup>304</sup> By this 'thread' we are able to observe connections between characters, for example, Thomas Browne whose father was a silk merchant, Algernon Swinburne, who is described as 'the ashy grey silkworm [...] because of how he munched his way through his food' (ROS. 165) and the Ashbury sisters who had made 'a bridal gown made of hundreds of scraps of silk embroidered with silken thread' (ROS. 212). And with its implied 'stitching' motif, the thread also has implications in a textual sense. However, the structure developed by this stitching is ephemeral and, like the Ashbury sisters' embroidery and Ferber's canvases, unstable and always deferred.

The history of silk manufacture that is recounted here is at the same time presented as the story of an invasion. We are told that the spread of sericulture was initiated by two Persian monks who smuggled the eggs of the silkworm moth from China to the Western world in a piece of bamboo cane. Up until this event, the Chinese had a monopoly on silk production and trade and of course, the wealth this brought. Following the establishment of

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<sup>303</sup> Richard Gray notes that the 'pseudo-encyclopaedic character of Sebald's narrative' is suggested by Thomas Browne's texts and also Jorge Luis Borges. p. 39.

<sup>304</sup> McCulloh, p. 82.

silkworm husbandry in Greece, it slowly spread via Sicily to northern Italy and France by 1600. With the revocation of the Edict of Nantes at the beginning of the eighteenth century, more than fifty thousand Huguenots, who were experienced in breeding silkworms and the manufacture of silk goods, fled to England and Norwich in particular, where they continued their trade and became 'the wealthiest, most influential and cultivated class of entrepreneurs in the entire kingdom.' (ROS. 281) In the recounting of the development and geographical distribution of this industry, Sebald is eager to make clear to us that there was a sinister side to its history. Again, he is keen to foreground the cost in human terms of technological advances. The narrator's account of silk production derives from a film, shown to him when at primary school, of German silk production. This film 'was of a truly dazzling brightness' and 'promised the best and cleanest of all possible worlds.' (ROS. 292) The words the narrator uses to describe the methodology are far from benign however. The killing of the larvae for example is described in barbaric tone with batches of cocoons steamed for hours over boiling caldrons described as 'the entire killing business.' (ROS. 294) The political subtext of the film and German sericulture is also not lost on the young narrator in hindsight. The study of silkworms and selective breeding includes, we are informed, 'extermination to preempt racial degeneration.' (ROS. 294) The relation to human eugenics will not be lost on the reader. Nor indeed will the motive for the high priority given to indigenous silk production in the 1930s which is 'the importance silk would have in the dawning of aerial warfare and hence in the formation of a self-sufficient economy of national defence.' (ROS. 293) The more sinister aspect of silk

production, in an anti-pastoral sense, is also not overlooked in this account. In order to achieve materials ‘of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty [...] as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds.’ (ROS. 283) prior to the Industrial Age, ‘a great number of people [...] spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames [...] and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages.’ (ROS. 282) The weavers in particular, we are told ‘tended to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it’ (ROS. 283).<sup>305</sup>

This final chapter therefore, while seemingly an isolated discourse on silk production and its effect on the course of history, encapsulates and distils all the elements of the previous chapters. Specifically, by ensuring that the reader has established the ‘thread’ of the silk motif running throughout the text, the book can be seen as a cohesive whole and not a series of interesting but unconnected musings undertaken at the whim of a narrator as he wanders the countryside. More importantly for the purpose of this thesis however, is that this chapter, by establishing this cohesion, concretises the principle of deferred pastoral central to this text. As McCulloh says, throughout *The Rings of Saturn*, ‘aesthetic encounters of every ilk confront Sebald’s narrators. They encounter exquisite gardens and splendid palaces, but also architectural and interior design of the most tasteless stamp.’<sup>306</sup> The narrative of these ‘aesthetic encounters’ be they with man-made or natural landscapes past and

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<sup>305</sup> Sebald also includes scholars and writers as a group together with the weavers ‘with whom they had much in common’ suffering from these ailments (ROS. 283). This strikes me as another example of Sebald’s somewhat ‘tongue in cheek’ sense of humour, but also an oblique reference to text, texture and narrative thread.

<sup>306</sup> McCulloh, p. 78.

present, shows that the pastoral is always counterpointed to its obverse. The narrator has been actively searching for these pastoral moments but they eventually elude him because the moment cannot be sustained. The destructive power of nature and mankind intercedes and displaces the thought or the reality of Arcadia. I would argue that the image of the silk thread and its potential to create fabulous materials represents the elusive pastoral in *The Rings of Saturn*. It is invariably mentioned in and framed by an anti-pastoral context; its fineries always weighed against its cost. When finally it loses any connection to pastoral and becomes the emblem of death and mourning. Indeed, in the closing sentences, the narrator echoes these sentiments:

Now, as I write, and think once more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities, it occurs to me that at one time the only acceptable expression of profound grief [...] was to wear heavy robes of black silk (ROS. 296)

but, as has been typical of this narrative, Sebald, in the final sentence gives the reader a sense of hope. Invoking the custom of draping silk ribbons over mirrors and canvasses depicting pastoral scenes, in the houses of the recently departed, the text suggests the possibility of an afterlife, or at least remembrance by a later generation, something that goes to the heart of Sebald's overall aesthetic project.

*The Rings of Saturn* in its deployment of pastoral and anti-pastoral modes is a book about the desire to return to a pre-lapsarian state of utopia. A world where the contingencies of modern life do not adversely impact on an

innocent desire to live without the inevitable corruptions of modern existence as briefly glimpsed in the guise of the two characters mentioned at the beginning of the book. Janine Dakyns and Michael Parkinson embodied these principles for the narrator, and throughout his journey this pastoral status was the ultimate but unachievable goal. In the next chapter the eponymous hero of *Austerlitz* is also on a quest, but this is one of a more intrinsic nature and is represented, almost without exception, by a series of pastoral retreats and returns which contribute significantly to the title character's destabilised identity.

## 6. The Returns of Austerlitz: Narrative Discourse and Pastoral Form

*Austerlitz* was the final work of prose fiction published by Sebald before his untimely death in 2001. Unlike his previous prose fiction, *Austerlitz* was published in German and English in the same year. It is also unlike his previous fiction in that it is a continuous narrative with an identifiable plot. It is probably for the latter reason that it is considered to be his most accessible work for the general reader.<sup>307</sup> An anonymous narrator tells the story of the biographical trajectory of the eponymous hero. This is mediated through a series of encounters between narrator and protagonist spanning a period of thirty years. Although, superficially, this seemingly straightforward narrative can be read as one man's search for his origins, it is as complex, both structurally and thematically, as Sebald's earlier prose works.

*Austerlitz* has generated a great deal of attention from Sebald scholars and most critics have focussed their attention on the interrelated issues of memory and history.<sup>308</sup> Given the intricate narrative structure Sebald uses in *Austerlitz*

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<sup>307</sup> See for example, J.J. Long, 'W.G. Sebald: A Bibliographical Essay on Current Research' in *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), p. 27. Scott Denham 'Foreword: The Sebald Phenomenon' in *W.G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p.1.

<sup>308</sup> J.J. Long, discusses *Austerlitz* in terms of the 'archival subject', W.G. Sebald: *Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Russell J. A Kilbourn, concentrates on the representation of memory through architecture and cinema 'Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*' in *A Critical Companion*, p.140-155.

to represent these issues, neither memory nor history is in any way static or stationary. We can therefore identify an over-arching theme of movement.<sup>309</sup> Movement takes many forms in *Austerlitz*, among which movement across physical or geographic space is perhaps the most prominent. In *Austerlitz* this kind of movement almost always indicates some form of mental/psychological movement as well. In the light of the novel's concern with history and time (the concept of which is a troubled and complex leitmotif in *Austerlitz*) movement inevitably takes on a temporal dimension. The significance of Sebald's concern with movement in this novel has not gone unnoticed. For example Peter Arnds is one of numerous critics who discusses the poetics of wandering in *Austerlitz*, where he notes

The paradigms of wandering in Sebald's work extend to the urban and rural landscape through which his characters roam, the architectural constructs with which they engage emotionally and intellectually, and

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Carolin Duttlinger discusses the particular role of photographs in a discourse of loss and trauma in 'Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical media in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*' in *A Critical Companion*, p. 155-175. Mark R McCulloh interprets *Austerlitz* in terms of identity, exile and coping with loss, *Understanding W.G. Sebald* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 108-137. Mark Islemann discusses melancholy, natural history and the image of exile in *Austerlitz* 'Going Astray: Melancholy, Natural History, and the Image of Exile in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*,' in *W.G. Sebald : History-Memory-Trauma* eds. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 301-314.

<sup>309</sup> Railway stations with their obvious connotation of movement feature prominently in *Austerlitz*. The Parisian ones which Austerlitz 'regarded as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune.' (A. 45) appear therefore to take on their own pastoral/anti-pastoral dichotomy.

their homelessness in labyrinthine places, reflecting their aimless wandering, imprisonment, even insanity.<sup>310</sup>

Alan Itkin also discusses the allusion to the journey of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, which we have also noted in other works, and the journey to the land of the dead motif.<sup>311</sup>

The very first sentence of *Austerlitz* should alert the reader not just to the theme of travel or movement, but to the fact that it is closely associated with the pastoral trope of retreat and return: 'In the second half of the 1960s I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for reasons which were never entirely clear to me' (A. 1). And when the narrator meets Austerlitz again, after a number of years, at Liverpool Street Station, and begins his narrative, the initial movement is a pastoral retreat into his past. There is an underlying purpose in this act of retrieval as Austerlitz's words to the narrator suggest, that 'he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story' (A. 60). The inference here is the potential for a form of catharsis achieved in the recounting of these biographic excerpts. Although these opening scenes which introduce us to the narrator and protagonist lack any overt pastoralism, they do share some of the key characteristics of pastoral retreat whose function is often to deliver a cathartic return, to change previously held conceptions; in this case, they

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<sup>310</sup> Peter Arnds, 'While the Hidden Horrors of History are Briefly Illuminated: The Poetics of Wandering in *Austerlitz* and *Des Ringe des Saturn*,' in *The Undiscover'd Country: Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. Maekus Zisselberge, (New York: Campden Huse, 2021), p. 322.

<sup>311</sup> Alan Itkin, "'Eine Art Eingang zur Unterwelt': *Katabasis* in *Austerlitz*", in *The Undiscover'd Country*.

point to the unstable physical and psychological backgrounds of protagonist and narrator alike which then form the basis for an ever-more complex series of narrative retreats and returns.

My purpose in this chapter is as follows. I intend to show how the multiple forms of movement in *Austerlitz* conform to the key trope of retreat and return, and thus contribute to the novel's pastoralism; this kind of analysis will be part of a broader argument intended to demonstrate that the pastoralism in *Austerlitz* manifests itself not just on a thematic level but on the level of form and discourse as well. As suggested in the previous paragraph, by setting up the theme of repeated retreats and returns, via movement across space and time, Sebald embeds this thematic in a narrative structure, or discourse, which involves, and impacts on, Austerlitz, the narrator and the reader. This structure resembles in some respects the deferred pastoralism discussed in the previous chapter. The argument here, however, is that in *Austerlitz*, Sebald brings pastoral form in much closer proximity to narrative discourse, so that the narrative framework of *Austerlitz* can be read as an exemplar of pastoral retreat and return. Similar to *Vertigo*, though in a more complex and rewarding form, Sebald's last work presents us with pastoral in its guise of formal or structural literary device. This is not to say some of the more straightforward pastoral modes are not in evidence in this text. We have seen typical anti-pastoral/pastoral tensions, double-plot devices and elements of the post-pastoral mode for example, in his earlier works and these can also be found here. Indeed, the presence of these is essential to the retreat and return construct. In *Austerlitz*, however, these are subjugated to the

dominant formal device derived from traditional retreat and return techniques found originally in pastoral poetry and novels. We should perhaps familiarise ourselves again with this technique before identifying its function as formal device in Sebald's final prose.

Perhaps the easiest way of understanding pastoral retreat is to first examine what we mean by pastoral return. As Gifford says, 'Whatever the locations and modes of pastoral retreat may be, there must, in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood.'<sup>312</sup> The purpose of the retreat therefore is to undergo an exploration and ultimately deliver an insight or provide knowledge previously lacking. This involves movements between geographical 'locations' in the form of physical travel or psychological journeys which are very closely related to memory and amnesia and indeed they occur frequently in *Austerlitz* and crucially, have a progressive impact on both the protagonist and the narrator. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald uses the literary construct of pastoral retreat in his narrative of the hero's quest for knowledge of his past. At times this can be framed in the conventional mode of the idyllic or classic pastoral while at other times anti-pastoral modes come to dominate. Just as I extended Empson's device of the double plot in *Vertigo*, I take this liberty again with regard to the technique of pastoral retreat and return. In the following section I make the case for Austerlitz's unfolding narrative of his childhood to the narrator as a serial discourse of pastoral retreats. The remaining sections in this chapter go on to discuss the implications of this discourse for the narrator

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<sup>312</sup> Gifford, p. 81.

and the reader, closely tracking the interplay of pastoral form and narrative discourse.

## 6.1 The First Retreat

The narrator first encounters Austerlitz in Antwerp's Central Station while on one of his several trips to Belgium from England in the late 1960s. The conversation between the two characters on this occasion is predominantly about architecture, the protagonist's main interest, but also we find themes from previous works briefly touched on, such as King Leopold and Belgium's colonialism in the Congo, cameos which, as we know, are again common features in Sebald's prose fiction. It is also in the opening section that we are introduced to the concept of time, with the description of the great clock in Antwerp station and Austerlitz's belief that 'there is something illusionistic and illusory about the relationship between time and space as we experience it in travelling,' (A. 14) This concept of time and Austerlitz's problem with it, reflects on his desire to reverse it and to *return* the dead who had been 'struck down by fate untimely, who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life'. (A. 75)

The pair meet again the following day and pick up their conversation from where they left it the day before and several further meetings take place subsequently, some of which appear coincidental. We are introduced to the structure of fortress design and the Palace of Justice on Gallows Hill in Brussels<sup>313</sup>, a labyrinthine, obsolete building of Borgesian dimensions, which Austerlitz found fascinating, particularly for the masonic ceremonies that were allegedly once performed there. This section of *Austerlitz* closes with

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<sup>313</sup> It interesting to note here that this visit was precipitated by a chance meeting of the two characters in The Café des Espérances – the poignancy of the name of which we should surely note, as indeed the Salle des pas perdus.

another coincidental meeting on their return to England aboard the Zeebrugge ferry. Here, the narrator learns that Austerlitz is a lecturer in art history in London and a description of his study, accompanied by a photograph, depicts a ‘crowded study, which was like a stockroom of books and papers with hardly any space left for himself.’<sup>314</sup> (A. 43) At this point in the story the narrator returns to his native Germany where he intends to settle. The year is 1975 and he tells us that during the entire course of his conversations with Austerlitz, there was no mention of his personal life. It is not until 1996, when the narrator has been living and working in England for nearly two decades, that the relationship with Austerlitz is re-established, again through a seemingly fortuitous meeting at the Great Eastern Hotel prior to boarding his train from Liverpool Street station.

While on a visit to London to keep an appointment with an eye specialist, the narrator unexpectedly meets Austerlitz in the saloon bar of the Great Eastern Hotel. He is reminded of Ludwig Wittgenstein when he sees the solitary figure, with his rucksack, sitting on the edge of the agitated crowd.<sup>315</sup> He has, he informs the narrator, spent the afternoon looking round the Hotel, concentrating mainly on the freemasons’ temple incorporated into the building by the directors of the railway.<sup>316</sup> Following a brief description

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<sup>314</sup> This is reminiscent of Janine’s study in *The Rings of Saturn*.

<sup>315</sup> Sebald has disclosed his deliberate intention to model the character of Austerlitz on the famous philosopher. See transcript of conversation with Kenneth Baker, ‘W.G. Sebald: Up Against Historical Amnesia’, 07/10/2001, <http://www.sfgate.com>, [accessed 11 March 2009]

<sup>316</sup> Austerlitz’s fascination with the freemasons may in part be due to, in turn, their own obsession with the architecture of King Solomon’s Temple, to the extent that their nomenclature for a divine being is ‘the great architect of the universe’.

of the tour undertaken with Pereira, the hotel's business manager, Austerlitz confides in the narrator that he feels impelled to relate his own story 'which he had learned only in the last few years and for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been in Antwerp, Liège and Zeebrugge.' (A. 60) Thus, we are told of his early childhood up to the point of his departure, as a young man, embarking on his career as an art historian. It is this first account of autobiography that I interpret as the book's first discourse of pastoral retreat. It is a retreat in embryo, a microform as it were, which has announced some of the major themes of the book and given an insight into the peculiar traumatised psychology of the adult Austerlitz. The following episode develops this further.

Austerlitz tells the narrator and the reader that '[s]ince my childhood and youth [...] I have never known who I really was.' (A. 60) He was brought up by foster parents in the small country town of Bala in Wales. His 'father' was a Calvinist preacher named Emyr Elias married to a 'timid-natured' Englishwoman. He is, however, aware that he has a past prior to his current condition and attempts to 'conjure up the faces of those whom I had left, I feared through my own fault,' (A. 62) At this time he was known as Dafydd Elias and had no knowledge of his real name. The picture he paints of his days spent in the vicarage with his foster parents is a bleak one, largely fostered by the depressive personality of Emyr and the solitary nature of his existence during this period. When we read the descriptions from this period of his life, it is not difficult to understand the troubled persona of the adult Austerlitz. If the account of his childhood memories in Wales represents a

temporal form of pastoral retreat, then the purpose of this discourse of the past is to return a sense of the present; on Austerlitz's part, to come to terms with 'who he is' and to find an identity that is stable across time and tied to a place or places of origin. There is an effort here, as with other Sebald characters, to establish what we might describe as a pastoral identity, which places the figure in a secure topographical and cultural setting.<sup>317</sup> The retreats we encounter in this work however operate on several levels. Firstly, as mentioned, they are a personal quest for the protagonist. Secondly, they impact on and therefore have a different meaning and different return, for the narrator. And finally, using the narrator as conduit, these narratives of retreat are naturally interpreted differently by the individual reader.<sup>318</sup> For example, by the retreat into his past, Austerlitz establishes his credentials as a displaced persona whose psychological development and contemporary character are a direct corollary. In addition, the narrator's description of events and in particular the ways in which he temporally sequences, in other words, historicises them, allows us to recognise a vital function of pastoralism in *Austerlitz*, which the remainder of the book will flesh out, namely the idea that the past *informs* the present.

The recollection by Austerlitz of his childhood continues with one of the strongest metaphors in this work; that of a cryptic otherworld, a different kind

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<sup>317</sup> Remembering his past in order to reclaim his identity, but without the pastoral association, is noted by Alan Itkin in "Eine Art Eingag zur Unterwelt": *Katabasis in Austerlitz*, in *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, p. 161.

<sup>318</sup> The 'death of the author' would of course be the conclusion for a Structuralist reading of this statement. Deane Blackler also notes the 'birth of the reader' as predicted by Roland Barthes's "death of the author' in Sebald's work. *Reading WG Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience*, p. 15.

of world from that of realism, usually represented by a descent into an alternative realm such as the image of the drowned village of Llandwddyn beneath the manmade lake at Vyrnwy described by Elias. For McCulloh this is confirmation for the boy that the past and therefore the dead are co-existing and occasionally intersecting with the living ‘the border between the living and the dead is more permeable than we think.’<sup>319</sup> In the text, however, Austerlitz makes the association of the deaths of some villagers, killed by a stray bomb one Sunday, who, in Elias’s mind had failed to keep the Sabbath a holy day, with the submersion of Llanwddyn as a ‘mythology of retribution’ which ‘gradually built up in my head.’ (A. 70) This ‘mythology of retribution’ or just return/reward for the perpetration of evil deeds could be extended to and is symptomatic of, Sebald’s dialectic of a cultural failure to debate the atrocities, including those of the allies in the Second World War, and which we first encountered in *The Emigrants* and indeed, as he himself has stated, was also present in *After Nature*.<sup>320</sup> But there is also a pastoral association operating here and it is twofold. The villagers’ refusal to acknowledge or celebrate the Sabbath reminds us of the original sin and subsequent banishment of man from Eden - the inability to attain a pre-

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<sup>319</sup> McCulloh, p. 116.

<sup>320</sup> In the interview with Christopher Bigsby, Sebald notes in particular, the failure by German writers to address accurately the representation of Jewish lives post WWII and that his attempt to redress this was present in ‘the long prose poem I wrote in 1988’ [*After Nature*] and suggests that *Austerlitz* might also be described as a sequel to *The Emigrants*. *Writers in Conversation*, Volume 2, (Norwich: EAS and Pen&inc, University of East Anglia, 2001), p. 162. The question of Heimat again raises its head in this context. As Boa and Palfreyman point out, the popularity of Heimat films of the 1950s and 1960s was due to the ‘escapist mentality of a broad swathe of the German public’ and that a minority of German writers such as Heinrich Böll and Gunter Grass sought to redress this with the literature of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (facing up to the past). *Heimat: A German Dream*, p. 10

lapsarian state of pastoral idyll. Furthermore, the submersion of a village to establish a man-made lake alludes to the anti-pastoral mode. The destruction of nature to make an artificial replica of it is surely taking the necessity of sacrifice to create an idyll to the extreme. Outside this one example, the metaphor of physical descent for the dredging of memory and the subconscious is however a significant and common one in *Austerlitz*.

Up to this point in the story, Austerlitz's existence has been primarily a solitary one with the exception of his foster parents and other occasional adult company. Although there are sporadic pastoral images and, as suggested above, these are associated with intra-narrative retreats and returns, until now the narrative is mainly melancholic and anti-pastoral in mode. We find instances of this in Elias's mood swings. For example, the description of journeys to and from other parishes to preach his sermons accompanied by Austerlitz, the outward trip is invariably bleak with the minister in 'the blackest of moods' while on the return 'his spirits rose, just like they did at home on Sunday afternoons;' (A. 67) These changes in Elias's character are reflected in the surrounding landscape so that once more, as is common in Sebald, nature and its temperament are represented as complementing and reinforcing man's predicament. One scene in particular deserves attention as it depicts 'nothing on the hillsides to the right and left of us but crooked bushes, ferns and rusty-hued vegetation', 'banked clouds towering high in the west, and the rays of the sun cast a narrow beam of light down to the valley floor lying at a dizzying depth below'. (A. 68)

As Austerlitz says ‘Where there had been nothing a moment ago but fathomless gloom, there now shone a little village with a few orchards, meadows and fields [...] and everything grew lighter and lighter’ (A. 68). While this may be seen as a fairly conventional device of using nature to mirror ‘mood’, in terms of the underlying pastoral construction we see how the anti-pastoral opposes the pastoral, and how the individual retreat is followed by the return. Although it could be said that this is simply an example of someone ‘snapping out’ of a bad mood I would argue that this is an example of intra-narrative retreat/return device. That is, Elias, by delivering his sermon based on The Old Testament texts, has undergone a personal, transient retreat and undergone a psychological transformation on return. We could also extrapolate these from Freudian pastoral illusion, the desire to escape from mundane contingencies of everyday life by creating an illusion of pastoral landscapes, further examples of which we find below in the young Austerlitz’s ability to isolate himself from the unpleasant side of school life and homesickness experienced by his peers.<sup>321</sup> For the grown man recounting this story, however, the retreat continues.

When he enters his period at the boarding school, Stower Grange, life for the young man becomes less solitary and more liberated. The narrator tells us that Austerlitz calls this period his ‘escape route’. (A. 84) It is another example therefore, of an intra-narrative retreat, and again Sebald adds

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<sup>321</sup> Laurence Lerner argues that the conventions of pastoral are intimately linked to the Freudian sense of illusion as wish-fulfilment and develops this theme in ‘The Pastoral World: Arcadia and the Golden Age’ in *The Pastoral Mode*, ed. Bryan Loughrey (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 135-154.

complexity to this structure by adding several pastoral episodes. Even though these episodes foreground Austerlitz's relationships with teachers as mentors or fellow pupils, the key element here is his progressive ability to retreat into the self-protection of his own mind which, at this time, was still unaffected by the torment of his lost personal history. He read voraciously and created in his mind 'a kind of ideal landscape.' Thus, he had a form of 'safety net' protecting him from the melancholy which affected many of his colleagues. As he puts it 'As I could move into that world at any time I liked [...] I never fell into the depression from which so many of the boys at Stower Grange suffered.' (A. 85) He had a personal pastoral which he could conjure and retreat into at will. It was only when he had to return home that his mood changed.<sup>322</sup> On one of these school vacations, Austerlitz tells the narrator, his foster mother died. Sebald takes the opportunity to introduce another recurring motif in his works at this point when describing the bedroom where she spent her last days. The spectacle of fine dust - talcum powder in this case, snow or dust in others - covers the entire room and reminds him of a description of a similar scene in the memoirs of Nabokov he has recently read. The metaphoric link of this image of a fine white covering to the imagined image of 'wonderful formations of icy mountain ranges' (A. 88) he sees on the bedroom window panes, continues the splendour and overarching resonance of nature. On his return to school following the death of his foster mother and Elias's entry into Denbigh

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<sup>322</sup> The text at this point specifies a particular instance on All Saints Day when he felt as if his life 'were once again under the unlucky star which had been my companion as long as I could remember.' (A. 85,86) As we know, All Saints Day and the 'unlucky star' (Saturn) have featured in previous works in similar contexts associated with untimely events – see for example *After Nature* pp. 33,86 and *Vertigo* pp. 63, 64, 65.

asylum, Austerlitz is informed by the headmaster of his real name which, it appears, is only disclosed in order for his examination papers not to be invalidated. This is a major development not only for the protagonist but also within the narrative as a whole. The retreat continues but now, references to historical events and places take on greater significance for the young Austerlitz.

Teachers and mentors of one form or another are common figures in Sebald's prose fiction and in this work, the young Austerlitz falls under the spell of the history teacher André Hilary. Through this character he not only acquires his life long interest in history but also experiences something of an epiphany - as he tells the narrator 'The more often Hilary mentioned the word Austerlitz [...] the more it really did become my own name [...] I saw what had at first seemed like an ignominious flaw was changing into a bright light always hovering before me,' (A. 102) This epiphany also represents another example of what I term micro-pastoral retreats. Through the rhetoric of this charismatic teacher, recounting amongst others, the battle of Austerlitz, the young man metaphorically returns, changed in his perception of himself and his future. As we are again told 'I owe it to him first and foremost [...] that I far outstripped the rest of my year [...] and could go on my own way into freedom,' (A. 104) This 'freedom' however, comes with a caveat in that, while his future may appear clear at this point, his past, as we shortly discover, becomes the all consuming passion of his later life.

The other main character to feature in this section Austerlitz's story is his schoolmate Gerald Fitzpatrick who is assigned as his fag. A firm and close friendship develops between the two to the extent that Austerlitz makes several trips to Gerald's family seat, Andromeda Lodge, and is introduced to his relatives by whom he is 'adopted' and in turn adopts as something of a surrogate family.<sup>323</sup> The introduction of this character allows us to identify a further pastoral element here in the form of a temporary and intermittent Arcadia.<sup>324</sup> It is on visits during the school vacations that Austerlitz experiences some of his happiest moments. He is also introduced to the wonders of nature at first hand as he learns of the lives of creatures such as moths and butterflies, the uncanny ability of homing pigeons and the anthropomorphism of cockatoos. Key here, though, are the spectacular pastoral landscapes, such as the view from his bedroom 'mainly of cedars and parasol pines and resembling a green hilly landscape going down from the road below the house to the river bank.' (A.134) Another scene exemplifies how any form of grounded or located pastoralism becomes transient, thus conforming to the impermanence of memory in Sebald's last work:

on bright summer days [...] the separate surfaces of sand and water, sea and land, earth and sky could no longer be distinguished. All forms and colours were dissolved in a pearl-grey haze [...] from which only the most fleeting of visions emerged and strangely [...] it was the very

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<sup>323</sup> He was assigned his own bedroom at Andromeda Lodge.

<sup>324</sup> Gisela Ecker refers to Andromeda Lodge as the construction of an Ersatzheimat or Heimat substitute for Austerlitz which, in pastoral terms, is a personal Arcadia. 'Heimat oder die Grenzen der Bastelei' in *W.G. Sebald: Politische Archäologie and melancholische Bastelei*, ed. by Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006), p. 84.

evanescence of those visions that gave me [...] something like a sense of eternity. (A. 135)

McCulloh suggests these 'idyllic' visits by Austerlitz to Andromeda Lodge demonstrate 'the need for our empathy with all beings as well as the integrated oneness of nature.'<sup>325</sup> This is also axiomatic of post-pastoral which emphasises our consciousness and therefore conscience in our ability to have empathy towards nature and the environment and which we have seen most in evidence in *The Rings of Saturn*. In *Austerlitz* these scenes also structurally reinforce the objective of the pastoral retreat by an exacerbation of the protagonist's need of a sense of grounding identity in place. However, this attempt at self-identity on Austerlitz's part is unstable and, as so often in Sebald, associated with absence and denial. As he gazes at the landscape from his bedroom window, the scene is constantly changing and the familiar motif of 'snow-white slopes and steep precipices displacing one another' reminds us of the intransigence of life and benign nature. (A.134)

Following the recounting of this pastoral episode in Austerlitz's life to the narrator at Liverpool Street Station, there is a hiatus in the story. During this, at the narrator's request, he is shown to a somewhat grand room of faded elegance on the first floor, in which he which he writes up his notes on the foregoing conversation until the early hours of the morning. This hiatus serves to remind and reinforce to the reader that this discourse by Austerlitz is reported speech. It is, moreover, particularly relevant to our present topic in that the return achieved following the discourse can never be truly known on

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<sup>325</sup> McCulloh, p. 118.

Austerlitz's behalf. As we shall see below, several assumptions must be made on behalf of the narrator and Austerlitz, on the effect of these revelations. The only verifiable interpretation, of course, is that of the individual reader.

The narrator's rendezvous with Austerlitz the following day is at the Greenwich Observatory, at the beginning of which he tells of a story he read that morning of a suicide by a particularly elaborate but efficient method, and when recounted to Austerlitz, enables Sebald to give us a further insight into his protagonist's own psychology when he says 'what could be worse than to bungle even the end of an unhappy life?' (A. 139) The setting of Greenwich Observatory also prompts a dialogue from Austerlitz on the abstract nature of time, at the end of which, with Sebald's typically nuanced humour, the narrator notes that '[i]t was around three-thirty in the afternoon and dusk was gathering as I left the Observatory with Austerlitz.'<sup>326</sup> (A. 144) There then follows a pastoral depiction of the grounds at Greenwich via the description of paintings of the area. This not only counterpoints the rural with the urban but also the past to the present, so we have again a spatial/temporal contrast using pastoral and anti-pastoral images. The pictures of past centuries showed

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<sup>326</sup> The subject of time in Sebald is extensive and in particular the importance of Walter Benjamin's concept of historical time and his insistence on the past being recognised by the present as one of its own concerns is not without relevance in *Austerlitz*. See for example, Andrew Benjamin, 'Benjamin's Modernity' in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 112.

green lawns and the canopies of trees, usually with very small, isolated human figures in the foreground, generally ladies in brightly coloured hooped skirts carrying parasols, and a few of the white, half-tame deer kept in the park at that time. (A. 145)

This is contrasted to the urban surroundings; ‘the city of uncounted souls, an indefinable shape, hunched grey or plaster-coloured, a kind of excrescence or crust on the surface of the earth’ (A. 146). These pastoral/anti-pastoral descriptions of park and city are made immediately following contemporary descriptions which compare unfavourable to those of the past. Here, the ‘hollow grinding of the city’ could be heard and planes from Heathrow are likened to ‘strange monsters’. (A. 144) Setting this scene in Greenwich, the home of time as it were, reinforces the equivocal nature of the concept and in particular Austerlitz’s perception of it. The past for him is something he feels has not passed away, and that he can ‘turn back and go behind’ (A. 144). It is both pastoral and anti-pastoral and dependent upon the retreat experienced and the return delivered. This blurring of spatial and temporal axes continues as Austerlitz reveals more of his past to the narrator.

Pastoral episodes are often achieved via the description of landscape either, as in this example, experienced at first hand or through works of art. Following a description of a visit by Gerald and himself to a run-down stately home, which had been requisitioned during the War as a convalescence home,<sup>327</sup> Austerlitz takes a painting of Lake Lausanne by Turner, as a cue to recollect the idyllic last walk with Gerald through the vineyards on the banks of lake

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<sup>327</sup> It is tempting to see the recurring motif of the abandoned or derelict stately house as a metaphor for the loss of a bygone era – of The Golden Age.

Geneva. The description of the painting and the walk with Gerald segues into the imagined pastoral landscapes envisioned in the ballroom of Andromeda Lodge, which he and Gerald's mother Adela would see in the images cast on the walls by the last rays of the setting sun. There are, in effect, several layers of virtual pastoral – the painting and its description, the photographic representation of it, the walk through an idyllic landscape and the imagined landscapes glimpsed through a trick of the light. Such imagined pastoral scenes are often featured when the narrator or the protagonist are in situations in which the pastoral would be otherwise unsustainable. Examples of this include the description of mountain scenery when visiting his dying foster mother or his ability, as a schoolboy, to retreat into an internal world conjured from his extensive reading. We might even term these as Sebaldian metaphors for pastoral, as textual constructions which bind together dialectical opposites of psychological perspective. One cannot however resist the assumption that, like Max Ferber's constant scraping away the layers of impasto on his canvases (E. 161), these 'layers' of pastoral are also atemporal and further underline Austerlitz's views on the insubstantial nature of time – 'by far the most artificial of all our inventions.' (A. 141)

This first episode of retreat draws to a close when the narrator and Austerlitz meet the following day at Liverpool Street and he resumes his story. The talk is mainly of Gerald, who assumes the role of the protagonist's 'alter-ego' and his own attempts to escape the contingencies of his day-to-day life. This, Fitzpatrick achieves mainly in fantasies and actual experience of flying. He describes how his pet homing pigeons uncannily find their way

home from the remotest locations and how he himself finds tranquillity in flying his own Cessna aircraft. This natural homing instinct and Gerald's distancing himself from the mundane is, as we shall see, highly relevant to Austerlitz who, on the contrary, is striving to locate his origins and in the process is very much grounded in the past. This section, which marks the end of this instalment of his story, the first pastoral retreat, closes with the death of Gerald in a flying accident and Austerlitz's first episode of mental decline which he describes as 'a withdrawal into myself which became increasingly morbid and intractable with the passage of time.' (A. 165)

At this point we should perhaps reflect on what effect this first pastoral retreat has had so far and what sort of return has been achieved. For Austerlitz, as will be reinforced by the turn of events below, the retreat resulted in denial. As he says above, he withdrew into himself, but more than this, he chose not to explore his past, his natural parents or indeed, the broader context of his social and cultural background. His choice of career is ultimately decided by his reluctance/inability to recognise modern history beyond the nineteenth century.

As readers, Sebald exposes us to this discourse in order for us to be sympathetic to the book's protagonist, or at least to have an insight into his adult psyche. But there is a broader context. From the character of Austerlitz, we can extrapolate from the personal to the collective. Austerlitz's voluntary (albeit subconscious) amnesia becomes a collective amnesia, which in turn extends beyond the boundaries of a single nation or

culture. Whilst it is clear in *Austerlitz* that Sebald is directing his criticism towards the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, the non-German reader will surely also accept their own nations' failings during this period, but this is probably pre-empting further revelations below.

Superficially, it is difficult to comprehend what is returned to the narrator by Austerlitz's story so far. But what we have to remind ourselves is that what we are reading *is precisely* the effect of the discourse on the narrator. The text is, after all, the narrator's interpretation of Austerlitz's story. Even though he is constantly reminding us that it is reported speech, as noted above, he is not recording words verbatim. Sebald's narrator tells us that he writes Austerlitz's story from memory and therefore inevitably brings his own interpretation, possibly unconsciously, to the narrative.<sup>328</sup>

It is also pertinent at this juncture to emphasise that the individual retreats and returns, irrespective of level of operation, represent a true *discourse* of pastoral form. The content of *Austerlitz* is structured with the intention of past events enabling a greater understanding of the present, or indeed, of a potential imagining of an alternative future. For example, what would have happened if Austerlitz was not on the Kindertransport, or if his real name is never identified? These are examples of the questions Sebald wants us to ask and prompts us to ask by exposing us to this discourse of retreat and, as such, represent our returns as distinct from Austerlitz's or the narrator's. On this basis alone, *Austerlitz* is firmly situated as a pastoral text.

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<sup>328</sup> Deane Blackler, discusses the role of interaction between narrator and reader in *Reading W.G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience*, pp. 93-97.

## 6.2 Attempted Return: Sensory Overload

Almost three months pass before the narrator meets Austerlitz again, at his modest home in the East End of London. Here in this sparsely furnished house Austerlitz resumes the recounting of his story to the narrator. Before he commences we note that there are several photographs on the large table that we assume have been taken by Austerlitz on his travels, of Belgian landscapes, the Jardin des Plantes, ornate dovecotes and heavy doors and gateways among others; these, he tells the narrator, he spends hours studying and rearranging. This recalls the almost obsessive compulsive disorders described elsewhere by Sebald such as the quail in the *Rings of Saturn*, (ROS. 37) the racoon at the Nocturama (A. 2,3) repeatedly washing a piece of apple and later in *Austerlitz*, a porter at Liverpool Street Station.<sup>329</sup> (A. 188)

Austerlitz resumes his story by describing his nervous breakdown which occurred shortly after his retirement after thirty years of university teaching. This trauma took the form of an inability to read or write, self-imposed isolation, nocturnal wanderings and fitful sleep during which he often felt that he was at the heart of a star-shaped fortress.<sup>330</sup> At one point he tells the narrator, in a scene reminiscent of Ambros Adelwarth in *The Emigrants*, that he would have gone meekly to a place of his execution ‘without so much as opening my eyes.’ (A. 174) And shortly after, he has the compunction to ‘go

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<sup>329</sup> The metaphor in operation here however, is surely a physical attempt to organise his thought processes.

<sup>330</sup> Star-shaped structures are a common recurring motif in *Austerlitz* and while the association to asylums and places of incarceration, Terezin and Breendonk especially, is obvious, we are also reminded of the Jewish symbol of the Star of David.

to the third-floor landing of a certain building in Great Portland Street [...] and throw myself over the banisters into the dark depths of the stairwell.<sup>331</sup> (A. 177) This mental collapse suffered by Austerlitz is aligned with a form of pastoral retreat. It generates a return that causes a transformation in his psyche. In the disused ladies' waiting room at Liverpool Street station, where he was led by impulse, he realises that he was brought to the same waiting room as a child, escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport. In his words 'a terrible weariness came over me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death.' (A. 194) This, seemingly Damascene revelation awakens in him the realisation that up until now he had subconsciously avoided all knowledge of modern German history and the Nazis' attempted conquest of Europe and also, of course, all knowledge of his own personal history. After his breakdown, these circumstances change completely and having overheard a radio programme, whilst in a second-hand bookshop, on the evacuation of children to England in 1939, he undertakes another retreat, this time a physical as well as mental one, when he travels to Prague in order to establish what had become of his mother.

The section devoted to his stay in Prague introduces yet another narratorial level intimately linked to the pastoral narrative structure dominant in *Austerlitz*. As noted above, the text is the narrator's memory of Austerlitz's story. When he meets his Mother's friend Vera<sup>332</sup> Rysanova who also looked

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<sup>331</sup> Sebald is clearly alluding to the 'suicide' of Primo Levi.

<sup>332</sup> It is probably not coincidental that Vera was the name of Vladimir Nabokov's wife.

after the child Austerlitz and lived in the same building, another layer of narration is introduced.<sup>333</sup> During this visit he learns that his Mother, Agata and Father, Maximilian were not married and that he spent a large portion of his pre-nursery school days with Vera during which time they took ‘idyllic’<sup>334</sup> walks together ‘over the meadow slopes of the Seminar Garden among the pear and cherry trees.’ (A. 218) He spends time in her company speaking mainly in French but also Czech which Austerlitz suddenly recalls speaking fluently. The period spent with Vera, learning about his past, is another example of intra-narrative pastoral retreat and is signalled mainly by his ability to once again speak Czech and in particular, foregrounds the spatial dimensions of the retreat; the crossing of boundaries here represented by different languages. The meta-retreat however continues when Austerlitz takes up his story the following day, the narrator having remained overnight in the house in Alderney Street. Yet another layer of narration is introduced when through Vera we are told of Maximilian’s experience of the rise of Hitler’s Germany via the newsreels of the time. The gradual disenfranchisement and persecution of the Jewish population is recounted through Agata’s own experiences as a Jew in Prague, some of which are expressed in anti-pastoral terms, such as the exclusion from parklands and gardens. In Agata’s words, ‘All the green places are lost to me’ (A. 243). At this point Austerlitz learns that he was indeed sent to England on the

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<sup>333</sup> Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau gives a detailed discussion of the role of the narrator in “‘A Time He Could Not Bear to Say Any More About’”: Presence and Absence of the Narrator in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, in *W.G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 141-155.

<sup>334</sup> JJ Long’s description of the walks they took together. *W.G. Sebald – Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 160.

Kindertransport in 1939 when only four years old. His Father meanwhile was living in France, not in communication with his Mother. These revelations and finally, the knowledge that his mother was sent to the Terezin ghetto on the outskirts of Prague, spur him on to find out what had become of her. The visit to Terezin is another retreat for Austerlitz.

Before he embarks on the trip to Terezin, Vera has shown him a photograph of his four-year-old self which in turn provoked a dream in which, unseen, he visits the flat and sees his parents. This destabilises him to the extent that 'I have always felt that I had no place in reality' (A. 261). The following day he travels to Terezín, and the description of his journey conforms to the anti-pastoral mode, which reflects this place's disturbing history. The countryside is empty, it is a cold, grey morning and even a field is described as 'poison-green' in colour (A. 263). The photographs accompanying the text do nothing to dissuade the reader from this melancholic outlook. Once again we have the star-shaped structures and images of doors and gates foregrounding the mood of enclosure and the 'agricultural exploitation of the open areas behind the ramparts.' (A. 279) This physical and mental retreat however has its return when, as he says 'the history of the persecution which my avoidance system had kept from me for so long [...] surrounded me on all sides.' (A.278) His return journey to Prague is described in equally bleak terms as was his outward journey, conveying a sense of disquiet - 'descending a kind of ramp into a labyrinth' – passing through 'flat, empty country all round.' (A. 282) The textual and pictorial imagery here reflects not only Terezín's disturbing history using anti-pastoral modes but also Austerlitz's psychology. His

‘avoidance system’ is another example of the particular anti-pastoral mode of ‘protective filtering’ seen before in characters such as the narrator’s parents in *After Nature*.

As so often in Sebald’s work, dream sequences follow on from the story of the weary traveller. And indeed, on his return from Terezin, Austerlitz has a nightmare featuring the Bohemian landscape, the town of Dux where Casanova<sup>335</sup> was incarcerated and extinct volcanoes which, he wished, ‘would erupt and cover everything around with black dust.’ (A. 286) Dreams may also function as retreats but they do not necessarily provide a return to the dreamer. This dream, culminating as it does with a desire (unachievable) for annihilation, would suggest a final coming-to-terms with his awareness and recognition of past atrocities and, as he tells Vera, he must now retrace his journey from Prague to London.

But, before this, we have another retreat initiated by Vera’s remark that they - Vera, Austerlitz and his parents - had once holidayed for three blissful weeks at Marienbad in the summer of 1938. From Agata’s description, even taking into account its relaying first through Austerlitz and then the narrator, it is clear that this was a truly pastoral episode in all their lives. She talks of ‘wonderful, almost blissful weeks there [...] an extraordinary peacefulness [...] long walks in the country around Marienbad in the afternoon.’ (A. 289, 290) Austerlitz has no recollection of this holiday but it prompts a memory of another holiday at the spa town in 1972 when a beautiful companion, Marie

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<sup>335</sup> See also the ‘All’ estero’ chapter in *Vertigo*.

de Verneuil, accompanied him. This later holiday however, was no idyll, but he now understands why he sank into depression during that later visit although at the time, much to Mme de Verneuil's chagrin, he could not explain it. This memory, it could be argued, is a form of Freudian 'substitute memory' which had replaced the original. But here it is not replacing a traumatic episode but, quite the reverse, an idyllic, pastoral moment that was equally hard to come to terms with. We might however define this failure to recall or subconscious erasure of events as an incomplete or faulty pastoral return mechanism which eventually functions once the retreat has been completed as it does here due to Austerlitz's visits to Vera.

Although there are pastoral moments and images such as the landscaped gardens and 'the rare sense of happiness that I felt as I listened to my companion talking,' (A. 296) there is also an undertone of despair. He wakes with 'an abysmal sense of distress' and feels that the decrepit state of the once magnificent buildings 'precisely reflected my own state of mind, which I could not explain either to myself or Marie.' (A. 298, 299) At this point in the narrative, the reader knows why he felt 'that something or other wrenched at my heart here in Marienbad' and that his childhood and all its associations were slowly returning to his consciousness or, as he puts it 'weakened the resistance I had put up for so many years against the emergence of memory.'<sup>336</sup> (A. 300, 301) So, once again through a discourse of retreat, yet another small aspect of his past is revealed to have extensive bearing on his contemporary condition.

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<sup>336</sup> Lynne Sharon Schwartz uses this last phrase as the title for a book of interviews/conversations with Sebald.

The description of his journey from Prague through Germany to London reflects his fluctuating mood at this time. He initially loses his way in the former Wilsonova station where he eventually buys his ticket for the Hook of Holland. He tries to imagine what it would have been like when he was first there as a child in his Mother's arms 'But neither Agata nor Vera nor myself emerged from the past.' (A. 308) The description of the landscape as he travels on ranges from bleak descriptions of lowering skies, lime works 'uniformly covered with pale-grey and sinister dust' (A.310) and empty roads devoid of vehicles and humans, to pleasant countryside with well-managed woodland and 'cheerful patches of sunlight lit up the country here and there', with the train itself actually appearing to travel quicker and easier once they left the Czech side of the border and entered Germany (A. 312). At Nuremberg station where he changes trains, he notes the well regulated orderliness of the city but also his complete unfamiliarity with Germany having 'always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history or modern German life' (A. 313). It is also here that he suffers another panic attack.<sup>337</sup> Once on board the train again as he travels up the Rhine Valley the scenery he recalls 'that what I now saw going past outside the train was the original of the images that had haunted me for many years.' (A. 316)

This further awakening of his past life is reflected in the description of the landscape as 'the setting sun broke through the clouds, filled the entire

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<sup>337</sup> These attacks or overwhelming of the senses are similar to the descriptions the so-called Stendhal Syndrome described in *Vertigo*.

valley with its radiance, and illuminated the heights on the other side' (A. 318) But the terrain through which he is moving also reflects his ambivalence at his newly regained knowledge of his past. The 'eastern mountains' were 'mere camouflage for an underground industrial site covering many square miles.' (A.318) The narrative here is alternating pastoral and anti-pastoral images, echoing Austerlitz's mixed emotions at the revelations of his past. Both Austerlitz and the reader now understand why railway stations, mountain scenery - real or imagined as on panes of glass or shadows on a wall – and layers of fine dust, as in the talcum powder in his foster mother's room, held such a fascination for him. And it is this strong psychological dimension that we find repeatedly occurring in *Austerlitz* underpinned by the narrative structure of retreat and return.

This discourse of retreat - the Prague episode - duly delivers its return in the form of another mental collapse of Austerlitz. Quite clearly, the revelations of his past have taken their toll and he collapses and is taken to St Clements Hospital where he endured 'nearly three weeks of mental absence' (A. 323) although his stay in hospital was considerably longer. During this period his benign frame of mind is chemically induced and while he often thinks of his foster father lapsing into madness at the Denbigh Asylum, he 'found it impossible to think of myself, my own history, or my present state of mind.' (A. 325) At the advice of the last doctor he saw at the hospital he takes a light manual job at a council-run garden nursery as an assistant gardener.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> The agrarian role which so often in Sebald recalls a reference to Wittgenstein, is also a metaphor for a form of clearing of the past or new beginning.

As his mental recovery continues he once again turns to the past and, in particular, study of the Theresienstadt ghetto where he hoped still to find some trace of his Mother, Agata. By careful study of a book on the ghetto by H.G. Adler, he learns of the development and internal organisation and, eventually, of a film made by the Germans, for propaganda reasons, of life in the ghetto that, of course, did not reflect the reality of the horrors which took place there. The horticultural work over a two-year period has the desired effect of normalising him and he eventually tracks down a copy of the Theresienstadt film with the hope of recognising his mother in it. He trawls through footage many times and in slow motion and finally thinks he has found an image of her as an audience member listening to the first performance of a piece of music written in the ghetto by Pavel Haas. At this point, he tells the narrator, he went again to Prague to visit Vera who, by this time had become frailer. Together they visited some of the sights that had been favourite destinations of his parents, including the star-shaped house built for the summer residence of the Archduke Ferdinand.

It is during this brief visit that Austerlitz discovers by chance a photograph of his mother whilst searching through the Prague theatrical archives. He is not sure it is his Mother but, Vera, having dismissed the figure in the Theresienstadt film, confirms that this one is genuine. The narrator and Austerlitz take leave of each other at this point with the latter remarking that he intends to go to Paris in search of traces of his father, while he himself felt that his life in England had been lived under false pretences and that 'he

did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world.’ (A. 354)

The final section of *Austerlitz* sees the narrator travel to Paris to meet Austerlitz who has taken an apartment in the thirteenth arrondissement. This again is an episode of retreat, both physical and intellectual, but here it is one which ties together previous such episodes and thus reinforces the overall discourse of pastoralism in *Austerlitz*. We learn, through the narrator, of his attempts, through various archival searches, to find any evidence of what became of his Father who once lived in the same district of Paris. We are also told by Austerlitz how he first met Marie de Verneuil in the records department of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The passages describing their time spent together, in an otherwise urban setting, borders on the pastoral with many walks taken in the Jardin du Luxembourg, the Tuileries and the Jardin des Plantes. It proved however to be a somewhat tenuous happiness as he explains that on one of Marie’s absences from Paris he suffers yet another mental breakdown after visiting the museum of veterinary science. The clue which the reader may pick up forecasting this ‘hysterical epilepsy’ is the old Moroccan selling tickets at the entrance who, Austerlitz notes, is wearing a fez (A. 370). Agata’s father, we recall, once owned a factory producing this type of headwear. He was taken to Salpêtrière hospital which he describes as a ‘fortress-like’ structure where ‘the borders between hospital and penitentiary have always been blurred,’ (A. 376) This symbolism together with the ‘peaks of the mountains towered snow white in the background, with a wonderful blue sky above them,’ (A. 377) which, he

imagines while in his delusional state, are symptomatic of his past. Marie de Verneuil, is eventually contacted and after several weeks of rehabilitation, Austerlitz, the narrator tells us, gradually ‘regained my lost sense of myself and my memory’ (A. 379) His relationship with Marie continued with some further pastoral interludes during which at times he was unsure if ‘my heart was contracting in pain or expanding with happiness for the first time in my life.’ (A. 383) This section of the narrative is being recounted to the narrator at the Brasserie Le Havane and temporarily breaks off at this juncture. This pastoral retreat has both a physical displacement of the setting to Paris and an intellectual destabilisation culminating in mental collapse as a form of return and Austerlitz is moved further towards regaining fragments of his lost past. It is this spatial dimension of pastoral retreat that figures most prominently in *Austerlitz*. The returns from such retreats, delivered as informed memories, and /or mental instability, are primarily the result of spatial shifts.<sup>339</sup> Dora Osborne notes in her discussion of *Austerlitz* and Foucault that ‘Sebald creates a network of what might be understood as heterotopic spaces in order to show the slippage between the real and fantasy, and to show how memory manifests itself only in this instability.’<sup>340</sup> These ‘spaces’ seen by Osborne in Foucaultian terms as ‘relations among sites’<sup>341</sup> are also pastoral or anti-pastoral sites, through which Sebald moves his protagonist within a meta-structure of pastoral retreat and return.

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<sup>339</sup> As previously noted, these need not necessarily involve physical or geographic movement.

<sup>340</sup> Dora Osborne, ‘Projecting Heterotopia in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’ in *The Politics of Place in Post-War Germany*, ed. by David Clarke and Renate Rechten (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen press, 2009), p. 48.

<sup>341</sup> Michael Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, trans, Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), p. 23.

When the two characters meet again the following day, Austerlitz takes as his topic the new Bibliothèque Nationale, which he abhors and discovers to both his and the readers' distaste, has been built on the site which was used by the Nazi to store and catalogue the possessions they had looted from the homes of the Jews in Paris. There is one more final meeting between the narrator and Austerlitz on the following morning. During this brief meeting Austerlitz tells the narrator that he must go to Gurs in the Pyrenean foothills where, so he has been informed, his Father was sent to a concentration camp in 1942. Before they take their leave of each other, Austerlitz gives a description of the Gare d'Austerlitz where he had a premonition that he was coming closer to his father. At this point, some of the common motifs recur. For example, 'whiteness', which has thus far encompassed, snow on mountains<sup>342</sup>, ash, talcum powder and dust, real or imagined, is taken up here in the 'white clouds of smoke rising from the locomotive' that Austerlitz tells the narrator he imagines seeing, are paradigmatic of impermanence and death. As indeed is the description of the railway station itself, 'that sinister wooden structure' with 'dark patches, of leaked axle grease, perhaps, or carbolineum, or something altogether different, one can't tell.' (A. 407)

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<sup>342</sup> James Martin quotes Anja K. Maier's description of 'Sebald's use of ice and snowscapes as a yearning for an unambivalent wholeness of nature beyond history and human society,' which I have also suggested depict the impermanence of the pastoral. 'Campi deserti: Polar Landscapes and the Limits of Knowledge in Sebald and Ransmayr' in *The Undiscover'd Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselsberger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), p. 146.

The book ends with the final parting of the two characters and the narrator, is given the safekeeping of Austerlitz's London house while Austerlitz himself continues his quest, revisiting the Antwerp Nocturama and the fortress at Breendonk. The closing passage is of him reading a book given to him by Austerlitz, *Hershel's Kingdom* by Dan Jacobson, which is a true life account of the author's search for traces of his grandfather, a Rabbi who died immediately prior to the First World War and in so doing, indirectly saved his family from persecution. We are told that he reads to the end of chapter 15, which details one particular, harrowing, episode of the "Final Solution".

### 6.3 Endless Returns

As Austerlitz's story unfolds, the 'return' from the initial discourse of his childhood and early youth, in which his real name is revealed, is demonstrated by a desire to explore deeper into his past and in particular, to find any trace of what became of his Mother. The discourse then turns to one of quest and movement with glimpses of pastoral images interspersed.<sup>343</sup> The dominating 'return' from these journeys is, however, invariably, mental distress. It is as though the details revealed to the protagonist during these episodes of retreat are too much for him to bear and enforce a mental stasis. But these narratives of retreat do not only impact on Austerlitz. As the revelations take on a more global nature - not restricted to Austerlitz alone - the reader, via the conduit of the narrator, experiences their own 'return'. In other words, Austerlitz's discoveries are not confined to his past alone, but they reflect national and international conflicts and atrocities as well and point to a collective amnesia of them and their sequelae. And here, we must return to Empson and his concept of pastoral as 'putting the complex into the simple and as the attempt to 'reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored,'<sup>344</sup> Sebald's Austerlitz is, to be sure,

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<sup>343</sup> This narrative structure, with its underlying tension, which I have argued is a pastoral form, is similar to that discussed by Peter Arnds. His suggestion that the 'field of tension' generated by travel or wandering in *Austerlitz* between *arborescence* on the one hand, representing 'concealment, forgetting and destruction,' versus the *rhizome* as disclosure of the concealed, forgotten or destroyed,' on the other hand, has its direct parallel in anti-pastoral in the former and pastoral in the latter case. Peter Arnds, 'While the Hidden Horrors of History are Briefly Illuminated: The Poetics of Wandering in *Austerlitz* and *Die Ringe des Saturn*', in *The Undiscover'd Country*, p. 323.

<sup>344</sup> The quote here, although referenced to Empson, is taken from Boa and Palfreyman *Heimat A German Dream*, p. 118. Their discussion relates Empson's concept of pastoral to the dilemma faced by Franz Xaver Kroetz of presenting Heimat literature and plays to rural working populations.

just such a figure whose search for a stable identity and Heimat is conveyed by a complex network of pastoral retreats and returns that take the form of geographical and temporal movements.

While the collective and ethical dimensions are evident in *Austerlitz*, the narrative discourse of pastoralism we have analysed here would suggest that these are expressed in terms of an individual's quest for his lost past and identity, which in turn is achieved through a series of retreats and returns which have been represented in spatial and temporal terms as well as internal/psychological ones which, in some instances, may be simply a dream-sequence or mood swing. For the protagonist, however, the retreat may be the ultimate one. As the book draws to a close and the narrator and Austerlitz take their final leave there is a strong sense that Austerlitz will never return. He gives the keys to his house to the narrator and tells him to visit whenever he wishes and study the black and white photographs which, 'one day would be all that was left of his life'. (A. 408) This, together with his instruction for the narrator to visit the Jewish cemetery which, he had only recently discovered adjacent to his house, strongly implies that Austerlitz was never to return – alive.

## 7. Epilogue: *Campo Santo*

Of the writings collected under the title *Campo Santo*, published in 2005, it is the four short pieces at the beginning of the book which fall within the remit of this thesis in that they resemble Sebald's previous works of prose fiction, while the remainder are essays in the true sense of the form. Although only fragments, these texts demonstrate many of the pastoral tropes we have examined, a brief discussion of which follows.

These preliminary writings on a 'book about Corsica'<sup>345</sup> were commenced shortly after publication of *The Rings of Saturn* and in form they certainly resemble this work to the extent where we could imagine a completed work set in Corsica rather than Suffolk. There are the familiar Sebaldian tropes of travel and soliloquies on various topics usually inspired by the narrator's surroundings. So, in the first piece 'A Little Excursion to Ajaccio' the narrator takes the opportunity to elaborate on biographical details of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was born in this town on Corsica's west coast. But, in addition to the factual material we can also detect an underlying sympathy for a time long past and an escape from the contingencies of the present. The narrator's imagining of living in one of the stone buildings and being 'occupied to my life's end solely with the study of time past and passing' (CS. 3) reflects this frame of mind. Although acknowledging a troubled history, as we have seen Sebald's characters often have a nostalgic recollection of their past compared to the present. This is usually represented

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<sup>345</sup> Sven Meyer, 'Foreword' to *Campo Santo* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p. ix.

by textual description and images in pastoral mode for the former and anti-pastoral for the latter. This was most in evidence in *The Emigrants*. In *Campo Santo* these modes are in operation once more, often as subtle antimonies in the description of place and objects, natural or artificial.

The narrator's description of a painting by Pietro Paolini in the Musée Fesch, perfectly encapsulates this dialogue between past and present. He tells us that in this picture of a mother and daughter, the mother, representing the past, 'protectively embraces her small daughter' who has 'a grave face upon which the tears have only just dried' (CS. 5). The child is holding a soldier doll, 'whether in memory of her father who has gone to war or to ward off the evil eye we may be casting on her' (CS. 5). This scene depicts an unstable present and dystopian future, represented by the child and her doll, as an anti-pastoral image of conflict and misery. The past (the mother) is benignly looking on with 'melancholy eyes' and impotent protection.

Following his visit to the museum, the narrator spends some time in the Place Letizia, which is a pastoral setting 'among tall buildings and containing some trees, with eucalyptus and oleanders, fan palms, laurels and myrtles forming an oasis in the middle of the town.' (CS. 8) From here he visits Napoleon's birthplace followed by an evening walk along the Cours Napoléon. However, it would appear that Sebald cannot leave the reader quiescent. As the chapter draws to a close, the narrator notes the 'white cruise ship' anchored at sea, combining the now familiar white metaphor for instability with a vessel which, by its very nature, is destined to be nomadic. Any potential pastoral

state is then shattered when ‘everything fell silent, just for a few seconds, until one of those bombs that frequently go off in Corsica exploded.’ (CS. 15)

Aside from the drawing of the old school yard at Porto Vecchio, which accompanies the final piece ‘La cour de l’ancienne école’, there are no illustrations in *Campo Santo* and we can only speculate that the finished work would have contained more. But, as the above example demonstrates, and as we have seen throughout his work, the pieces of art-work Sebald chooses to describe are poignant loci of pastoral/anti-pastoral tension.<sup>346</sup> Description of place and events have also been shown to involve this differential play between these two modes and, as a technique effectively reinforces Sebald’s concern for the stability of nature and what Rüdiger Görner has called ‘the incongruity between Man and nature’ in his works.<sup>347</sup> In *Campo Santo* there are further examples of this.

In the description of the graveyard at Piana the attempt at commodification of the dead is clearly painted in anti-pastoral mode. As the narrator says on entering the cemetery, ‘you have the impression not so much of an antechamber to eternal life as of a place administered by the local authority for the secular removal of waste matter from human society.’ (CS. 18) This sentiment is compounded by noticeable general dereliction of the place and the attempt by man to replace nature. For example, there was ‘not a shrub or a tree to give shade anywhere, no thujas or cypresses of the kind so often

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<sup>346</sup> The most obvious examples being those in *After Nature* in which the works of Bruegel, Altdorfer, Grünewald and photographs are described depicting these traits.

<sup>347</sup> Görner, p. 75.

planted in southern cemeteries' (CS. 19). Nature and its man-made representation are contrasted by 'the artificial purple, mauve and pink flowers [...] made of silk or nylon chiffon, of brightly painted porcelain, wire and metal' against the 'the weeds – the vetch, wild thyme, white clover [...] and many other grasses that had grown around the stones to form actual herbariums and miniature landscapes' (CS. 19). This anti-pastoral/pastoral tension is something with which we are now familiar in Sebald's work. This graveyard is also a microcosm of society and the narrator notes that even in death there remains a social hierarchy. The more wealthy the inhabitant was in life, the greater and more elaborate the funerary structures; ranging from those adorned with pediments down to a metal cross or crucifix made of metal tubing painted bronze or gold. This is, of course, not an uncommon phenomenon in the majority of cemeteries, but the point here is that the inequities of the western world have perpetrated even one of the smaller rural populations in Europe. In the narrator's words,

In this way the graveyard of Pianu, a place where until recently only the more or less poverty-stricken lived, now resembles the necropolises of our great cities in reflecting all gradations of the social hierarchy as marked by the unequal division of earthly riches. (CS. 22)

The above anti-pastoral representation of this Mediterranean island's graveyard is contrasted to their cultural attitude to the burial of the dead prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. Before this date, Corsicans were reluctant to remove the dead from the land they owned. This land was passed down from one generation to the other and burial on the site was 'like a

contract affirming inalienable rights to that land,'(CS. 24). The actual burial sites are contrasted strongly to those described in the Piana graveyard.

You find little dwellings for the dead everywhere, da paese a paese: burial chambers and mausoleums, here under a chestnut tree, there in an olive grove full of moving light and shade, in the middle of a pumpkin bed, in a field of oats or on a hillside overgrown with the feathery foliage of yellow-green dill. In such places, which are often particularly beautiful and have a good view over the family's territory, the village and the rest of the local land, the dead *were always in a way at home, were not sent into exile* and could continue to watch over the boundaries of their property. (CS. 24) [my italics]

This then, is not only a pastoral description of the places of rest for the dead but this also represents the retention of an individual's Heimat after death. There is no displacement, either spatially or psychologically; their identity is firmly grounded, literally, in their place of burial and in the memory of their surviving family who will one day follow in their footsteps.

The third chapter, 'The Alps in the Sea', again discloses Sebald's concern with our environment and ecology. This chapter therefore qualifies as post-pastoral discourse. The narrator informs us that 'Once upon a time Corsica was entirely covered by forest.' (CS. 36) But, as he goes on to say, the first settlers on the island 'steadily forced the forest back again' (CS. 36) and he laments this destruction by way of quoting Etienne de la Tour's history of the forests of France which blamed 'mismanaged exploitation' for this annihilation. (CS. 36) Sebald again, channels his 'ecocriticism' through

historical voices from the past. Here he recruits the English landscape painter Edward Lear to his cause. This character, the narrator tells us, travelled to Corsica in the summer of 1876. He delighted in the forest of Bavella in particular, but noted the increasing felling of the trees for commercial gain. The Dutch traveller and topographer Melchior van de Velde agreed with Lear in his praise of the Bavella forest but warned ‘if the tourist wishes to see it in its glory, he must make haste! The axe is broad and Bavella is disappearing!’ (CS. 39)

Underlying this description of the erosion of our natural environment is, as I have suggested above, Sebald’s own concern for the preservation of nature. And this empathy is the essence of post-pastoral literature: ‘[f]undamental to post-pastoral literature is an awe in attention to the natural world. Such respect derives [...] from a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things.’<sup>348</sup> This is in sympathy with the text under discussion. The narrator continues this theme by turning our attention to the ritual of the Corsican hunting season and the inevitable eradication of wildlife this entails. The allegory of St Julian in which the tension between good and evil is played out by the story of his passion for hunting as against his desire for sainthood, serves as a vehicle to foreground the post-pastoral concern for Mother Nature. This tale of ‘the despicable nature of human violence,’ (CS. 46) in which the huntsman eventually achieves sainthood, in addition to its moral didactics, also conforms to Empson’s tenet of pastoral literature as ‘a social process [...] an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of

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<sup>348</sup> Gifford, p. 152.

society will be mirrored.<sup>349</sup> This section, therefore, is located firmly in the pastoral tradition on at least two counts. Sebald's description of the gradual destruction of the forests of Corsica and the depletion of its wildlife adheres to a post-pastoral reading of the text, together with expressions of moral consciousness developed via an individual's psychological conflict, such as we have seen in his longer prose fiction, conforms to Empson's socialising function of pastoral literature.

The chapter ends on what superficially appears as a pastoral scene, but as in 'A Little Excursion to Ajaccio' the spectre of its transience once more raises its head. The 'snow-white ship' the narrator tells us, with its 'warm glow in the cabin windows [...] but no other sign of life at all' [...] turned and moved away as slowly as it had come. (CS. 47,48)

The final chapter in this short collection of prose, 'La cour de l'ancienne école', is no more than three pages long, but contains the only image in this text which, we assume, is the 'drawing showing the yard of the old school of Porto Vecchio', mentioned in the text. (CS. 49) The text is too brief to develop any significant pastoral themes but does illustrate an example of the many 'coincidences' that occur in Sebald's work and which Tim Parks notes 'are important in this writer's work.'<sup>350</sup> This drawing, which the narrator kept on his desk and was for him somewhat disquieting, but for no obvious reason, disappeared one day only to unexpectedly return in a letter from one of his correspondents, Mme Séraphine Aquaviva. And it is not without coincidence

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<sup>349</sup> Empson, p. 22.

<sup>350</sup> Tim Parks, 'The Hunter', in *the emergence of memory*, p. 28

that the writer of the letter is herself from Porto Vecchio in Corsica where, as she informs us, she attended the school in the drawing and was ‘taught various anecdotes about the rise and fall of the Emperor Napoleon.’ (CS. 50)

By recounting this episode, Sebald’s narrator refers the reader back to the contents of the previous chapters. Indeed, by extension, in drawing our attention to earlier subjects and themes by the power of coincidence, we are reminded of one of the dominant themes of Sebald’s work: the unstable nature of the boundary between past and present. This could not be depicted more graphically than by the inclusion of the drawing at the end of the chapter, a gateway with no indication of anything beyond, a boundary between the known and the unknown, between the present and the future.

## 8. Conclusion

To suggest that W.G. Sebald was an author of pastoral novels would be an idiosyncratic assertion.<sup>351</sup> His works of prose fiction defy classification in terms of genre. At best they may be described -and have been described by a plethora of critics - as a hybrid of history, travel, documentary and the extended essay as well as true fiction, and this thesis has not sought to add 'pastoral' to this list of descriptions and has included his long poem in this oeuvre. The argument developed here has been primarily a debate on the use of pastoral modes within Sebald's work and how these function to structure his narratives and contribute to and expand on the well established themes and tropes identified by other critics.

Chapter One has given an overview of pastoralism in order to familiarise ourselves with the various modes. We have also demonstrated an evolution in its complexity and contributed some further refinements in terminology. In particular, the Empsonian model of the double-plot device foregrounded in Sebald's *Vertigo* can be demonstrated as functioning within the text on several levels. An extension of Empson's 'play within a play' format, we have seen this device given a hierarchy from intra-paragraph to whole volume level. A similar treatment has been given to the concept of pastoral retreat and return of which Sebald's *Austerlitz* is an exemplar. These episodes of retreat

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<sup>351</sup> Although this may not appear quite so incongruous if we give credence to Dominick Finello's comments in his analysis of *Don Quixote*, where he says 'journey, such as pilgrimage [...] is another primary and spatial device tied to pastoral narratives,' and with reference to Quixote himself 'his scintillating conversation with people [...] whom he meets along the way may involve friendship and consolation, typical of the pastoral novel.' *Pastoral Themes and Forms in Cervantes' Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994), p. 25.

and return, traditionally physical movement from the metropolitan environment to a more rural, tranquil one can also be demonstrated in psychological and temporal dimensions and textually, on macro and micro levels. The effect on the narrative, its characters and readers is, however, consistent with the original premise.

In Chapter Two on *After Nature* we have taken the received notion that this is an elegiac poem, but presented an argument that this is largely achieved through anti-pastoral landscapes of nature and character counterpointed to their pastoral opposites. This tension is central to all three sections of the poem. The characters Grünewald and Steller and the narrator of the final section are all variations of pastoral figures placed in anti-pastoral environments of one form or another. This produces a dynamic that accentuates their, and by implication, man's at times difficult interface with nature, the environment and world history. The elegiac component is reinforced by the anti-pastoral overwhelming the pastoral equilibrium. As a result, this is a poem whose very form illustrates the modern idea of the pastoral as an 'increasing incongruity between man and nature.'<sup>352</sup>

Chapter Three examines Sebald's first work of prose fiction, *Vertigo*. This book is divided into four sections which, on the surface, can be read as four self-contained narratives.<sup>353</sup> Critics have noted however that far from being isolated stories there is more than one common thread linking all four.

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<sup>352</sup> Görner, *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, p. 75

<sup>353</sup> As previously noted, 'All'estero' has been published as a short story in *Granta*.

Carolin Duttlinger for example notes ‘one such linking device is a travelogue which makes various ghostly appearances throughout [...] Kafka’s fragment “Der Jäger Gracchus” (The Hunter Gracchus)’.<sup>354</sup> This thesis also acknowledges the interrelatedness of the stories but extends this to propose a more subtle dependency in the context of a pastoral double-plot structural device. Kafka’s *Hunter Gracchus* ‘fragment’ for example acts as a sub-plot to the book’s overarching main-plot of loss and exile. Furthermore, I argue that the sub-plot/main-plot interaction, underpinning the double-plot, can be refigured on several levels. The two chapters narrated in the first-person by a wandering man-of letters are juxtaposed to the two chapters narrated in the third person to provide a double-plot device. The effect of recognising this device is to foreground the psychology of the wanderer and destabilise any sense of belonging or Heimat.<sup>355</sup> On a more subtle level, sub-plot/main-plot interaction may function within a small section of the narrative. Sebald’s predilection for digression and textual meanderings may function as sub-plots for example to detract from the melancholic landscape by providing comic interludes or to accentuate the narrator’s paranoia. *Vertigo* exhibits therefore a highly developed narrative construction centred on the double-plot device which in turn is primarily predicated on pastoral/anti-pastoral syncopation.

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<sup>354</sup> Carolin Duttlinger, “‘A Wrong Turn of the Wheel’: Sebald’s Journeys of (In)Attention”, in *The Undiscover’d Country: W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselsberger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), p. 96.

<sup>355</sup> Jo Catling has also noted the motif of the *Wanderer* and its formal role which she says ‘plays as a structuring principle in much of the work’, ‘Gratwanderungen bis an den Rand der Natur: W.G. Sebald’s Landscapes of Memory’, in *The Anatomist of Melancholy*, p.22.

In Chapter Four of this thesis, *The Emigrants* is discussed with a particular emphasis on personal displacement and the loss of Heimat. I argue that displacement is often depicted in terms of pastoral and anti-pastoral modes. There is a direct correlation between the anti-pastoral mode and a character's loss of Heimat and the pastoral mode when the Heimat is either restored (usually only temporarily) or the refusal to dissociate from it is suspended. Each of the four chapters in *The Emigrants* introduces four closely drawn characters each of whom are in some way displaced either geographically in exile or psychologically distanced from their Heimat. The pastoral mode is usually invoked when a character's Heimat is stable, which is often when the past is recounted, and anti-pastoral landscapes drawn when they are physically or temporally displaced from it. Throughout the work as a whole we also note that Sebald portrays a sense of collective and personal loss of Heimat through a character's biography which is vocalised through another figure or vehicle. For example, Ambros Adelwarth through his diary detailing his travels with Cosmo or Max Ferber through the memoirs of his mother. There is therefore not only a motif of displacement within the characters of *The Emigrants*, but there is an additional textual displacement.

In *The Rings of Saturn* we again encounter pastoral and anti-pastoral modes and there is something of a rural/urban divide as Sebald's narrator pursues his lone pilgrimage around the county of Suffolk. The pastoral modes here are mediated through his encounters, observations and musings on subjects as diverse as herrings and the philosophy of Thomas Browne. The silk motif running through the text allegorises the ethereal properties and transience of

all things human and man-made. Furthermore, and this is the basis of my exegesis of this work, *The Rings of Saturn* provides a discourse of impossible pastoral. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the pursuit of an idyll is constantly rebuffed by its negation represented by anti-pastoral images and commentary. The narrator embarks on a pastoral retreat with the hope of lifting his mood following the completion of long episode of work. However, the walking cure he hoped for never manifests and this is signposted in the opening pages when his mood swings between feelings of freedom, and horror when faced with scenes of destruction. This epitomises my argument that this work, while setting up a potential pastoral, almost immediately and unfailingly annihilates the possibility with the anti-pastoral once more dominating.

In Chapter Six we turn our attention to *Austerlitz* and argue that the overarching theme of movement, in all its guises, is disclosed by a series of pastoral retreats and returns undertaken by the book's protagonist. Like the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, Austerlitz is on a quest. His goal is not a catharsis, however, but an endeavour to recover his past and uncover the fate of his parents. His story is mediated through a narrator and at times the narratorial voices replicate whereby occasionally the discourse is several removes from the original narrator. This allows for a layering of retreat and return in that not only do we see Austerlitz experience this pastoral construct but also the narrator and the reader, via these multiple voices. As with double-plots, I have refigured and extended the concept of pastoral retreat and return but still maintained its central tenet that '[w]hatever the locations of pastoral

retreat may be, there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood.<sup>356</sup> During the course of *Austerlitz* we encounter several episodes of retreat followed by return. Some are both spatially and temporally large scale while others reflect fleeting changes or fluctuations in a character's mood. They all however contribute to the book's construct and may therefore justify describing *Austerlitz* as a pastoral work.

Chapter Seven briefly discusses the four short pieces at the beginning of *Campo Santo*, a collection of short stories and essays published posthumously in 2005. In these preliminary writings which would probably have developed into a full-length book about Corsica, we find the familiar Sebaldian tropes of travel and soliloquies on topics inspired by the narrator's surroundings. His imagining of living in one of the stone buildings and occupied with the study of time past in all its manifestations, reflects a pastoral frame of mind and is reminiscent of Austerlitz's preoccupation. It is also suggestive of an elusive pastoral and we very soon encounter anti-pastoral sentiments. The narrator's description of a painting by Pietro Paolina in the Musée Fesch, for example is a depiction a scene of anti-pastoral imagery. The anti-pastoral mode continues in his description of the graveyard at Piana, with its artificial flowers and brightly painted ornaments, but is contrasted to the indigenous population's tradition of burying the dead in the land they owned in simple graves. The description of these is certainly pastoral and exhibits another example of

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<sup>356</sup> Gifford, p. 81.

textual tensions in Sebald's work. The third section, 'The Alps in the Sea', by its ecocentric discourse on man's concern with nature and the environment is an exemplar of post-pastoral writing. Themes of destruction and colonialism reinforce Sebald's own concern with these as we have noted earlier in the thesis. While this section appears to end on a pastoral note, the now familiar 'white' motif representing movement and transience appears here in the form of the cruise ship moored in the harbour at Ajaccio, which reminds us once again of the illusion of pastoral and the idyllic state.

This thesis has not sought to identify traditional pastoral conventions in Sebald's texts. The same criticism of Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* that it 'avoids even mentioning the more straightforward forms of pastoral'<sup>357</sup> could probably be levelled here. I have not discussed the rural/urban divide for example or the traditional idyll with its conventional focus on the motif of love. These may be topics for future research. I hope however to have contributed to the growing corpus of Sebald studies and, in particular, to the knowledge and better understanding of some of the intricacy and complexity of narrative form in his work.

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<sup>357</sup> Stonier, 'Complexity', pp. 568-570.

## Primary Bibliography

Note: German texts are listed in order of their first publication in Germany. The English translations are those cited in the thesis and are not necessarily first editions.

### 1. Critical Works

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