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"like standing amidst a flood of paper"

Tropes of Abundance and Documentarity in *The Rings of Saturn*

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Abstract. The paper scrutinizes the role of documents and documentarity in *The Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald. It primarily focuses on those passages of the novel that represent the excessive amounts of documents via tropes of abundance and proliferation. I argue that the narrator's meditations upon 20th century history paradoxically connect the overwhelming accumulation of documents to the experience of erasure and destruction; however, certain episodes offer another approach, presenting the collection of masses of documents as an idiosyncratic, poetic practice. In these parts of the text, documents are displayed as "heaps" and "clouds" of paper: I reveal the ways Sebald's language deprives them of their referential function, calling attention to their materiality.

Keywords: W. G. Sebald, documentarity, materiality, travel writing

Written and visual documents play an important role in W. G. Sebald's entire oeuvre. His 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn* is especially concerned with the notion of the document, raising questions about the readability, reproduction, potential use and misuse of documents on several intertwining levels.

As a travelogue, *The Rings of Saturn* is embedded in a genre tradition that attributes documentary veracity to travel accounts, led by the conviction that "the travel book is a kind of witness: it is generically aimed at the truth."[1] Its subtitle—*Eine Englische Wallfahrt* (which is curiously missing from the English edition)—recalls the Romantic script[2] of the walking tour as a pilgrimage, alluding to the autobiographic travel writing of Keats, Wordsworth, and even Byron. As it has often been pointed out,[3] the novel evidently subverts the expectations stemming from this tradition, rendering the question about its fictional or non-fictional status as one of

1 Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 2.

2 Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination*, 27.

3 See for example: Edwards and Graulund, *Mobility at Large*, 101.

its indeterminacies. However, the narrator-protagonist is not only positioned as the author of the "notes" ("Now that I began to assemble my notes"[4]) taken during his journey following a route mainly along the seashore in Suffolk and comprise the book itself but is also portrayed as a visitor of libraries and reading rooms, museums, and exhibitions. ("Whenever I am in Southwold, the Sailors' Reading Room is by far my favourite haunt. It is better than anywhere else for reading, writing letters, following one's thoughts […]"[5]). In parallel with the recurring thematic motif of browsing among documents, the process of reading them is textually enacted in the novel as well, since the narration is interwoven with countless citations, figuring the first-person narrator as a reader and a commentator. It is important to note that most of the sources he reflects upon actually belong to groups of texts generally considered non-literary or non-fictional: "reports," "memoranda," "memorabilia," and "booklets." Thus, within the narrated world, reading is more often represented as a way of consulting for information than as an experience tied to the aesthetic field. Furthermore, in a fashion that famously characterizes Sebald's books, the narrative is disrupted by photographic reproductions of actual documents (manuscripts, newspaper articles, pattern books, and signed letters), and photos that can be viewed as documentations of actual experiences. As we can sense now, even this very sketchy attempt to discern the novel's various manifestations of documentariness entails a series of questions about the medial transformation of documents, documentation as a cultural technique, and its connection to the generic hybridity of the novel. In the vast international literature on Sebald, several interpretations have touched upon these issues: J. J. Long lists documentation among the "processes of archivisation"[6] whose representation demonstrate an "ambivalence" towards modernism in Sebald's novels, while Monika Kaup argues that Sebald's blending "of documentary and fictional elements"[7] signals the encyclopedic, "neobaroque" nature of its poetics.

Instead of making another attempt to delineate the novel's relation to modernism, postmodernism or post-postmodernism in the light of its use of documentary sources (or its use of sources as such), I will focus on one particular aspect of documentarity that appears early on in the first chapter. The narrator introduces his friend, Janine (a fellow literary historian), whose cramped little university office is literally filled with paper: "Janine would talk to me about Flaubert's view of the world, in her office where there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and

4 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 5.

5 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 93.

6 Long, *W. G. Sebald*, 11.

7 Kaup, "The Neobaroque," 684.

other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper."[8] Through its hyperbolic rhetoric, the lengthy description of Janine's "paper universe" presents documentarity as an experience of abundance: instead of focusing on the singularity of the document, it creates an image evoking the "masses of documentation" that European societies have accumulated since the 19th century.[9] I argue that this scene serves as a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire novel that stages the proliferation of documents as an on-going, never-ending process. This effect is achieved by the richness and heterogeneity of the documentary material incorporated in the text and the complex, poetic manner of its layering. As the lines quoted above suggest, the abundance of documents is intertwined with the problem of managing them; thus documentation is understood simultaneously as a means of organizing information and as something that needs to be organized.

As remarked before,[10] *The Rings of Saturn* enters into dialogue with Foucault's *The Order of Things*: the traveller meditates upon both the "taxonomic characteristics"[11] of the classical episteme (displayed in the form of botanical gardens, collections of colonial artefacts, logbooks, and dictionaries) and the data management of modern biopoetics, although his interests also spread over earlier texts and collections that are not yet documents in the Foucauldian sense. Thus, instead of maintaining the Foucaldian divide between historically different manners of producing knowledge, *The Rings of Saturn* transforms them into poetic strategies that simultaneously complete and suspend each other. For instance, the concern with the overflowing amount of documents is demonstrated in the language of the novel—most evidently through the enumerative rhetoric that is reminiscent of the often-cited writings of the 17th century author, Thomas Browne. Sebald does not only mention or allude to Browne's lists, compendiums, and taxonomies but produces similarly detailed and elaborate catalogues that can equally cover objects in the fictional world, or the content of registers put together by other texts:

> "In addition to such astonishing writings and artworks, the Musaeum Clausum also contains medals and coins; a precious stone from a vulture's head; a neat crucifix made out of the crossbone of a frog's head; ostrich and humming-bird eggs; […] All of these things are recorded by Browne the doctor and naturalist in his register of marvels, all of these and many more that I do not propose to list in this place, excepting perhaps the bamboo cane […]"[12]

8 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 8.

9 Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 34.

10 Gray, "From Grids to Vanishing Points," 500.

11 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxiii.

12 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 273.

At this point, the novel gives an abridged list of Brown's own inventory, but the repetition ("All of these things […] all of these"[13]) also creates a kind of linguistic surplus, suggesting that the document produces something less, and, at the same time, something more than what it represents. In fact, Sebald's entire work is concerned with the circular, self-generating nature of documentation, implying that it is the accumulation of documents that produces new kinds of information to be recorded. Consequently, the impossibility of finishing a list (that is self-reflexively enacted in this sentence) is bound up with what documentary theory usually calls "indexing." As Foucault puts it, treating a discourse as a document is treating it as a "sign of something else":[14] and this something else, in *The Rings of Saturn*, often happens to be another document. This fact is foregrounded when the novel exposes its breathtakingly thick intertextual web via imitating the discourse of indexing. Interwoven with expressions like "it was related to"; "[i]n this connection one might also add", the narrative language creates the impression of an ever-expanding network of knowledge, but at the same time, it problematizes the signifying logic of the cross-references that constitute it. Let us return to the passages on Thomes Browne's *Musaeum Clausum*:

> "Among the rare books and documents in Browne's "Musaeum" are King Solomon's treatise on the shadow cast by our thoughts, de Umbris Idearum, previously reported to have been in the library of the Duke of Bavaria; a collection of Hebrew epistles, which passed between the two most learned women of the seventeenth century, Molinea of Sedan and Maria Churman of Utrecht; […] Browne's imaginary library further includes a fragment of an account by the ancient traveller Pytheas of Marseilles, referred to in Strabo […]"[15]

The wish-list contains several items that are not simply fictional (or appear so from our 21st-century perspective) but are also "reported" or "referred to" without being materially available (on a double level, since it is the novel that reports on them being reported). Thus, they exist only in terms of being referred to in another document. If, as Day explains, "[i]n modernity, documentary aboutness gives identity,"[16] *The Rings of Saturn* creates a context for the 17th-century source in which identity is being destabilized: the document preserves but also calls attention to the void that undermines its status as a place of storage. Paradoxically, it is precisely this

13 The translation follows the repetitive structure of the original German sentence: "All das ist verzeichnet in dem an Seltsamkeiten reichen Register des Naturforschers und Arztes Thomas Browne, all das und vieles noch mehr." Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturns*, 210.

14 Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 47.

15 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 279.

16 Day, *Indexing It All,* 20.

lack, this emptiness that is connected to the experience of abundance in the novel, as another passage on the traveller's visit to Somerleyton Hall indicates: "And yet it was the sheer number of things, possessions accumulated by generations and now waiting, as it were, for the day when they would be sold off, that won me over to what was, ultimately, a collection of oddities."[17] The English translation ("won me over") retains the military undertone of the original German term "einnehmen" (to occupy, to take over one's place) that self-reflectively signals the effect of abundance. The protagonist's fascination with the multitude of things is paradoxically coupled with his self-effacing rhetoric: the language of autobiographic or subjective experiences (which is normally expected from a travelogue) literally gives up its place for that of the ever-expanding catalogue. The aporetic connection between erasure, disappearance, and the expansion of documentation becomes especially interesting in the light of the fact that Sebald's work uses the very word "Dokument" and its derivations only in the context of war, death, and massacre. The fourth chapter repeats the term "dokumentiert" twice, linking together a volume of photographic history of World War I and the war documentation accumulated by the German and Croatian armies in World War II.

> "The history of this massacre, which went on for years, is recorded in fifty thousand documents abandoned by the Germans and Croats in 1945, which are kept to this day, according to the author of the 1992 article, in the Bosanske Krajine Archive in Banja Luka, which is, or used to be, housed in what was once an Austro-Hungarian barracks, serving in 1942 as the headquarters of the Heeresgruppe E intelligence division."[18]

In this case, the multitude of documentary material is expressed via a relatively exact number ("fifty thousand") embedded in a passage offering merely factual information (the number of victims, their demographic status, etc.), adapting the stylistic features of modern historiography. However, one sentence calls attention to the relation between the events and their transformation into administrative information:

> "In this connection one might also add that one of the *Heeresgruppe* E intelligence officers at that time was a young Viennese lawyer whose chief task was to draw up memoranda relating to the necessary resettlements, described as imperative for humanitarian reasons. For this commendable paperwork he was awarded by Croatian head of state Ante Pavelić the silver medal of the crown of King Zvonomir […]"[19]

17 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 36

18 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 97.

19 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 99.

Evidently, the "commendable paperwork" ("Schreibarbeiten") done by the unnamed young lawyer (whom we can identify with the historical figure of Kurt Waldheim) metaphorizes genocide: the interrelatedness of writing and erasure, preservation and destruction is manifested in the text's elusive rhetoric. The discursive features that, since modernity, are regarded as signs of strong documentarity (the use of numbers, dates, and geographical references) gain a curiously disorienting effect, since—due to the syntactic structure of the sentence—the non-linear temporal shifts between 1945, 1992, 1942, and the narration's time are not easy to discern. The same applies to the way the sentence locates the records: "which is, or used to be, housed in what was once". "How are we to think of there?"[20]—Derrida asks about the place that is the archive or where the archive is. If we infer that the archive and the headquarters of the intelligence division had or have been in the same building (a former Austro–Hungarian barracks), we can also draw the conclusion that they allegorize the interconnectedness of modern documentary technologies and military destruction, archiving techniques, and war intelligence. However, the text subtly undermines this series of identifications, questioning the identity of the papers themselves. If modern "documentary texts […] are viewed as optimally being distinct and quantifiable,"[21] do these documents qualify this criteria, or do they mark a phase where quantity loses its relevance? Do they belong to the perpetrators or to the victims? How do we know about them if we do not know where they are? The undecidability pertaining to these questions is mirrored in the way the novel's language avoids locating the place of the fifty thousand files.

The novel juxtaposes the machinations of the German war administration with a series of textual and photographic images that, via depriving documents of their distinctive properties, call attention to the physical material they are inscribed on: paper. For instance, the description of Janine Dakyn's university office is rhetorically organized by the emphatic repetition of the word "paper," which highlights the never-ending "accretion" of its referent in the narrated world:

> "[…] there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper. On the desk, which was both the origin and the focal point of this amazing profusion of paper, a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys. […] Years ago, Janine had been obliged by the ever-increasing masses of paper on her desk to bring further tables into use, and these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe."[22]

20 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 9.

21 Day, *Indexing it All,* 20.

22 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 8.

The mental image evoked by this passage is reminiscent of two photos in the book that have supposedly been taken in the home of Michael Hamburger (Sebald's translator, scholar, and poet); one displaying his abandoned bureau with several stacks of writing material on it and another one showing a huge stack of paper by his pantry door. We may add that these photographs also enter into dialogue with another descriptive pause in the narrative that depicts Lady Ashbury's flower seed collection:

> "Mrs Ashbury collected flower seeds in paper bags. Once she had written the name, date, location, colour and other details on the bags, she would clap them over the dead heads of the blooms […] and tie them up with string. Then she would cut off all the stalks, and bring the bagged heads indoors and hang them up on a much-knotted line that criss-crossed what was once the library. There were so many of these white-bagged flower-stalks hanging under the library ceiling that they resembled clouds of paper, and when Mrs Ashbury stood on the library steps to hang up or take down the rustling seed-bags she half vanished among them like a saint ascending into heaven."[23]

The passages on Janine's office and Mrs Ashbury's collection play upon the metonymical usage of the word "paper" in colloquial English and German, inducing a reverse semantic process; referring to documents as mounts, heaps, and tangles of paper. The metaphors of "flood" and "cloud" naturalize the material, enhancing the effect that its proliferation does not depend on human agency and interference. Richard T. Gray, who first called attention to the motivic link between these parts of the text and the two photographs mentioned above, argues that they are set against the "rigid taxonomies of rational systems"[24] symbolised by the recurring grid-like patterns (or, we can add, German war documentation). He suggests that they "flesh out an idea of an alternative form of order, an inscrutable one that underpins a seeming chaos."[25]

We can also note that these alternative systems of order are private, idiosyncratic and bound up with creative work as opposed to the paperwork associated with the official archives. Moreover, they do not lose their organizing capacity, since Janine, for example, always finds what she is looking for: "the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a perfect kind of order."[26] According to Gray, the recurring image of the heaps of paper serves as the emblem of the novel's two most important

23 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 211.

24 Gray, "From Grids to Vanishing Points," 507.

25 Gray, "From Grids to Vanishing Points," 504.

26 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 9

intertextual sources: the above mentioned *Musaeum Clausulum* by Thomas Browne and Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (which also alludes to Browne's *Urn Burial*). Although the parallels are evident, we may notice certain differences between the paper landscapes of *The Rings of Saturn* and Borges' "Tlön," a place whose inhabitants "conceive the universe as a series of mental processes which do not develop in space but successively in time" […] Amongst the doctrines of Tlön, none has merited the scandalous reception accorded to materialism."[27] As opposed to the short story's haunting imaginary planet, Janine's "paper universe" is first and foremost spatial and material; paper does not stand as a metaphor for texts to be deciphered, to be understood, or to stimulate the imagination, but appears in a literal sense, as a mass of material that occupies her working space. The narrative does not show us Janine as reading or consulting her documents; the only act attributed to her is "scribbling" ("kritzelnd"), an act of inscription and not reading; hence reinforcing the impression that the alternative world in her office is not made of meaning but the very materiality of "all this paper." However, the textual manoeuvres that present paper as such are obviously metaphoric, playing upon the vocabulary of geology, which is especially curious, since the understanding of time as a process of geological layering is actually bound up with a certain documentary tradition. As Geoff Bowker has concluded in his research on 19th century geological epistemology and classification, "documentary systems and empirical temporal forms may be enfolded in very explicit manners, with evidence of geological time through geological layering read according to the very archival arrangements of the records and the records read according to geological notions of layering."[28] As a result, with treating the elements of the paper universe as evidences of the passing of time, the documentary gaze re-enters the narrative: "these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe."[29] (In this context, the word "table" in the English translation might even invoke its figurative meaning as a synonym of "chart.") Therefore, the moment it cancels representational, documentary logic, the text simultaneously reinvigorates it: nevertheless, we can observe a slight shift from the concern with the document as a source of meaning towards the interest in the document documenting itself.

Following this motivic link, it may be fruitful to re-examine the two photos inserted in the episode of the narrator's visit to Michael Hamburger. The similarity between the two images is obvious: standing after each other, they may illustrate different phases of the constant and ongoing proliferation of paper. However, what seems so similar turns out to be non-identical from the narration's point of view, since

27 Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," 9–10.

28 Day, *Indexing it All,* 26.

29 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 8.

on the basis of the text, we can identify the subject matter of the first photo with "the spectacles cases, letters and writing materials"[30] abandoned on Michael's mahogany bureau, while the second captures "the jiffy bags and packages stacked in a corner by the pantry door awaiting reuse."[31] In her discussion of the intermediality of Sebalds's works, Lilian Louvel employs the term "the pictorial third," referring to the "in-between moment when the text reaches out to the image and when the image moves towards the text."[32] The "feeling of aporia" she associates with Sebalds's text-image constellations becomes especially haunting in this case, as the sameness suggested by the image (stacks of paper) and the difference stated by the text (personal documents versus their packaging material) creates an unresolved tension and problematizes the concept of the document as a container. It is precisely the notion of "containing" that constitutes a semantic link between the items in the narrator's chain of thought that again takes the form of an inventory: "the quite outlandish thought crossed my mind that these things […] the jiffy bags, the fruit preserves, the seashells and the sound of the sea within them had all outlasted me, and that Michael was taking me round a house in which I myself had lived a long time ago."[33] In light of his other self-reflexive remarks, the narrator's meditation upon his sense of displacement can be understood as a refusal of an autobiographic reading that frames him as the content of the novel, while reducing the book to the status of a container.

Similarly to Michael's jiffy bags, Mrs Ashbury's paper bags literally re-concretize the idea of paper (of document) as a container, although with another twist, as they are not empty but contain exactly what is written on them. The inside and the outside, the signified and the signifier are bound together in a satisfying unity, which is ironically emphasized by the fact that the paper bags replace the missing books on the library shelves. Nonetheless, Mrs Asbury's quite brutal treatment of flowers (she would "tie them up with string") is reminiscent of the photograph and the description of the "Serbs, Jews and Bosnians," who were "hanged in rows like crows or magpies,"[34] while the image of the flower seed refers back to a passage that rephrases Thomas Browne's thoughts on evanescence in *Hydriotaphia*:

> "To set one's name to a work gives no one a title to be remembered, for who knows how many of the best of men have gone without a trace? The iniquity of oblivion blindly scatters her poppyseed and when wretchedness falls upon us one summer's day like snow, all we wish is to be forgotten."[35]

30 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 183.

31 Sebald. *The Rings of Saturn,* 184.

32 Louvel, "A reading event."

33 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 184–85.

34 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 97.

35 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn,* 24.

In conclusion, Sebald's novel links the trope of the abundance of documents to performative, creative events. As the metaphor of "still-life" indicates, these masses of paper possess a poetic potential that is emphatically connected to their materiality; to their not being viewed as documents. However, the figurative language of their description re-introduces the idea of documents pointing outside of themselves, and simultaneously calls attention to the textual operations generating a totalizing reading strategy that would attribute affirmative power to the non-semantic "recycling" of paper. In reality, Janine is gradually squeezed out of her office by the paper, while Mrs Ashbury almost "vanishes" behind the paper-bags, and the comparison to a saint ascending to heaven turns her into another mirror image of the spectral, ghost-like figure of the narrator. As a consequence, *The Rings of Saturn* suggests that neither the normative, administrative, nor the individual, idiosyncratic, performative way (manifest in the novel) of reusing documents can endow them with the power of preserving one's self.

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