Remaking Literary History

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Edited by

Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan

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INTRODUCTION

HELEN GROTH AND PAUL SHEEHAN

"Remaking literary history" implies an infinite constructive questioning of the past. In the late eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried von Herder acutely identified the first questions one should ask of a work of literature. "When?" he writes, "Where? Under what circumstances? From what sources should a people do this?" (1968: 58). The continuing potency of Herder's work for contemporary debates about the relationship between literature and history lies in an epistemological shift away from the relative virtuosity of individual makers of literary texts, towards a conception of historicism as a perpetual process of *remaking* the literary text over time: "A people will wherever possible invent its drama, according to its own history, spirit of the times, customs, opinions, language, national biases, traditions, and inclinations" (1993: 51). Herder's romantic historicism brought a concern with historical period to bear on a sense of the mutually constitutive relationship between art and history. The conservative implications of this stress on periodisation, however, present as many challenges as they do answers.

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt adumbrate some of these challenges in their own historical narrative of the theoretical and institutional origins of New Historicism:

> What is the nature of the "*volk*" that Herder invokes, or "the spirit of the times"? In what sense is any era ever truly finished—who sets the boundaries and how are they patrolled? Do we not have overwhelming evidence, in our own time and in every period we study, of an odd interlayering of cultural perspectives and a mixing of peoples, so that nothing is ever truly complete or unitary? (2000: 7).

Whilst acknowledging their debt to Herder's sense of historical period, Gallagher and Greenblatt align their own version of the linguistic turn—and its historically illuminative potential—with Clifford Geertz's anthropological rethinking of cultural analysis. Shifting the emphasis towards cultural history, they suggest a new application of Geertz's "thick description": "Analysis is sorting out the structures of signification—what

Ryle called established codes, a somewhat misleading expression, for it makes the enterprise sound too much like that of the cipher clerk when it is much more like that of the literary critic—and determining their social ground and import" (1973: 9). Remaking Geertz's non-literary conception of raw anecdotes drawn from the field, Greenblatt and Gallagher formulate a revelatory aesthetics of the historical fragment, the material artefact, the body and the anecdote.

This formulation was the methodological centrepiece of New Historicism. For some commentators, it was the most contentious aspect of New Historicist practice. Sceptical about its "innovations"—its claims to be breaking radically with the historical relativism of poststructuralist analysis—they saw nothing particularly new in such methods. Claire Colebrook's recent assessment of New Historicism's contemporary critical legacy is a case in point. She analyses the institutional and cultural politics underlying Greenblatt and Gallagher's strategic disavowal of its debt to the historical Marxist poststructuralism, best typified by Fredric Jameson:

> New historicism may have initially appeared as an "answer" to the interpretive insecurity precipitated by post-structuralist theories of textuality. But new historicism itself continually encountered the problem of its own legitimation. History in general could not be retrieved as some pre-textual ground so attention was directed to all those devices and instances from which history was formed: anecdotes, artefacts, specific materials and contingent events (1997: 220).

While the celebratory "return to history" that New Historicism claimed in the 1980s may now seem overstated, a persistent stress on particularity and the local remains at the centre of contemporary literary historical praxis and cultural history. They also evince a sustained belief in the mutually instructive resonance of collections of case studies such as this.

Enquiries into the relationship between literature and history continue to stir up a great deal of critical and scholarly debate. Alongside the new hybrid categories that have emerged out of this ferment—life-writing, ficto-criticism, "history from below", etc.—there has been a welter of new literary histories, new ways of tracking the connections between the written word and the historically bound world. To clarify the multitude of issues and positions that have arisen from these debates, this collection is organised around four broad thematic categories. "Memory and Forgetting" examines the precariousness of the historical record, and the productive interplay between these two cognitive states. "Historical subjectivities" considers the ways recent cultural historical practices have reframed what it means to be subject to history. "Trauma, Displacement,

Redemption" re-evaluates the concept of the redemptive power of art in the light of recent critical work on the literature of trauma and diasporic writing. And, finally, "Historical Reinvention"—the most controversial of the four categories—offers new ways of understanding how the *overwriting* of history continues to reinvigorate the literary imagination.

1. Memory and Forgetting

In the wake of the new critical awareness, history has been theorised as not so much a series of *events*, as a cluster of *relations*. This means that what has been repressed, overlooked or omitted from the historical record is as vital to our understanding of the past as that which has been documented. Or, in the terms of this first section, it means that processes of *forgetting* must be considered alongside those acts of *recollection* and *remembrance* upon which history is founded. Perhaps the most powerful exemplar of this new understanding of history is the German writer W. G. Sebald. In *Austerlitz*, trying to recall the details of a forgotten world, he outlines the grim clench that binds memory to its other:

> Even now, when I try to remember [the details] … I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects, which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on (2001: 30-1).

For Sebald, it is imperative that the co-dependent relationship between memory and forgetting be recognised, and that the ethical weight of that recognition be properly acknowledged.

The five essays in this section confront, explicitly or implicitly, the consequences of Sebald's disquieting assertion. Amelia Scurry tackles it the most directly, through her "somatic" reading of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. His narrator, she avers, presents historical memory as a form of (literal) embodiment: the kinaesthetic qualities of his body's movement through space are crucial to his reflections, which guide his protracted pilgrimage towards an ever-elusive end-point. Emily Finlay's essay, by contrast, assumes a more ethically oriented stance, by projecting events of recent history back to the middle of the last century. She suggests that Maurice Blanchot's enigmatic and demanding *poetics of silence*—a philosophically grounded form of forgetting—can be traced back to his earliest writings on terrorism. The historical burden of these writings raises urgent political and ethical questions, argues Finlay, which are finally bound up with the exigencies of 1940s fascism.

The section continues with Stephen McLaren's examination of the critical stand-off between formalist-autonomous readings of modernist art, and cultural-materialist views that see such works as embedded in the circuits of production. This is a false dichotomy, in McLaren's view, and he goes on to show the misconceptions at work via a meticulous reading of the "Aeolus" episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Focusing on the interplay between rhetoric and history, McLaren proffers a re-evaluation of the "nightmare of history" that is taken to be Dedalus'/ Joyce's argument in favour of forgetting, and invokes instead the terms of a different sort of historical remembrance. In a similar, albeit postmodern vein, Chris Conti undertakes a searching analysis of John Barth's 1960 novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Orthodox historical memory is amended, says Conti, through form (Barth's playful mock-epic reworking of seventeenth-century events) and through philosophical insight (the nihilism on the margins of American colonial history).

Finally, Jessica Wilkinson extends the range of this section by addressing the historical dimensions of writerly performance. Appraising the contemporary American poet Susan Howe, and her work "Thorow", Wilkinson attends to her "different tongue"—Howe's use of imprecise and unrestricted meaning, within polyvalent language, that articulates a particularly multitudinous form of "history", one that shifts and flows in a variety of directions. Wilkinson also pays close attention to the *sensory* qualities of the work, and outlines through Howe's poetics a new model for communicating the past that is also a means for resurrecting some of history's stifled narratives.

2. Historical Subjectivities

Michel Foucault's seminal contention that the self is not given to us, but that "we have to create ourselves as a work of art", still haunts historical inquiries into the shifting formations of subjectivity (1984: 31). The essays in this section variously engage with the prescriptive and transgressive dimensions of subjectivity that Foucault suggests, but also move beyond the synoptic grandiosity of his overarching theoretical paradigms. What each of these essays reveals is the vital particularity close cultural historical analysis illuminates. Gender is a consistent thread that links these essays together, moving from the subtle politics of eighteenth century domestic life to the illusions of masculinity that drive contemporary American popular culture. Each essay provides a different context for a reconsideration of the role literary formations have played in both inventing and dismantling normative subjectivities of various kinds.

Katrina Clifford's essay on the prominent eighteenth century writer Eliza Haywood rereads Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, the tale of a young girl who ultimately resists worldly temptations and embraces domestic virtue, as a far more subversive text than critics have previously assumed. Reading back through the lens of contemporary eighteenth century conduct literature, Clifford reconstructs the subtle politics of privacy that Haywood uses to performatively ironize conventions of feminine subjectivity. Analysis of the subtle politics of private life is continued in Sharon Worley's discussion of the way the dynamics of feminine influence in the Napoleanic era are enacted in the popular historical romances of Germaine de Staël and Stephanie de Genlis. Using de Staël's *Corinne* and Genlis' *Madame de Maintenon* as points of departure, Worley reveals the ways in which romance functions as Royalist propaganda in the post-Napoleonic period, marrying a progressive gender politics that situates women as proactive political agents with an anti-revolutionary agenda.

Lee O'Brien's analysis of the little known work of the nineteenth century poet Rosamund Marriott Watson moves the historical focus from bloodied bodies on barricades to the savage desecration of the feminine body by the definitive psychopathic killer, Jack the Ripper. O'Brien's close rhetorical analysis of Watson's mythical reincarnation of the lurid newspaper accounts of "the ripper" in the form of the werewolf exemplifies the ways in which literature productively incorporates and transforms "other" cultural forms and discourses into manifestations of collective primal fears about the animal within. Finely attuned to the rhythms of genre, O'Brien resituates the reiterative orality of the ballad form in a *fin-de-siècle* mass media ecology, resulting in a far-reaching reconsideration of the complex challenges of writing new literary histories in our current multimedia climate. Obscenity and revelations of a very different kind are the focus of the penultimate essay in this section. Sashi Nair reads Djuna Barnes' notoriously elusive novel *Nightwood* as a *roman à clef*, revealing the encrypted private and subversive references that allowed the novel to speak to two audiences simultaneously, a potentially hostile public audience oblivious to the encoded aesthetics of "sapphic modernism" and a private coterie of readers attuned to the more subversive implications of her critique of the culture of exclusion and censorship of early twentieth century Europe. Following on from O'Brien's subtle reading of Rosamund Marriott Watson's interest in liminal states, Nair's essay reveals a common preoccupation with the slippage between sex, violence and the obscene in Barnes' work.

Spectral histories and liminal subjectivities also haunt Louise Colbran's analysis of Michael Chabon's historical novel *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay*. Colbran rewrites the history of the famous early-twentieth-century escapologist and illusionist Robert Houdini through the lens of contemporary concepts of American masculinity typified by writers such as Chabon. In the process, Colbran locates Chabon's work within a far-reaching consideration of the "history-making" impulses of contemporary American fiction. Interrogating the motif of escape that lies at the core of the Houdini mythology, Colbran critiques the uneasy interplay between nostalgia and optimism that characterises Chabon's historical fiction.

3. Trauma, Displacement, Redemption

Leo Bersani's stringent critique of the widely held belief in the redemptive powers of art in *The Culture of Redemption* serves as a salutary epigraph for the group of essays in this section. Bersani argues that theories of "the restitutive or redemptive power of cultural forms and activities" render cultural forms as transparent, dismissable and "ultimately regressive attempts to make up for failed experience" (1990: 14). Bersani distrusts the idea that art can redeem what he evocatively terms "the catastrophe of history" (1990: 14). Art in this sense, according to Bersani, becomes a form of moral monumentalism enlisted to serve history rather than to serve those who are subject to its exigencies. The essays in the following section, while disparate in topic, share a common vigilance in their treatment of literary retellings of moments of historical trauma and displacement that resist the moral monumentalism Bersani reviles. Spanning from Bligh's journal accounts of the mutiny on the bounty through to two contemporary case studies of Korean and Palestinian diasporic writing, this section exemplifies the ways in which various literary forms of writing bear testimony to those who are "subject to history".

Bligh's notoriously intemperate use of language has been written out of official histories of the mutiny of bounty, with the exception of Greg Dening's recent study of the incendiary effects of the abuse of his crew in *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992). Judith Barbour takes Dening's analysis one step further, providing an intriguing close reading of the rhetorical ambiguities that characterise contemporary transcriptions of Bligh's addresses to his crew and subsequent journal accounts of events leading up to the mutiny. The resulting argument exposes the dangers of the redemptive impulses of conventional accounts of this iconic moment in

British Imperial history, revealing the ways in which alternative versions of events are encrypted in momentary slips of the tongue, syntactic occlusions and semantic ambiguities. In contrast, Lindsay Tuggle's reading of the integral place the Civil War occupies in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* takes a more positive line on the aesthetics of redemption. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, Tuggle interprets Whitman's work as an infinite act of mourning, but not an absolving one. Tuggle is more interested in reconsidering the tradition of analysis of the unrepresentable or unknowable aspects of traumatic historical events. The corpses piled high in the burial pits of Falmouth Virginia cannot be redeemed by narrative form. The stark broken syntax of Whitman's journal entries as he wanders through the ravaged post-civil war landscape enact the untranslatability of an eye-witness experience that resists understanding or the reconstructive coherence of historical narration.

The focus on the literature of trauma is sustained in Honni van Rijswijk's inter-disciplinary analysis of legal and literary engagements with traumatic accidents in the early twentieth century. Drawing on legal history, van Rijswijk identifies a pivotal legal case that established a new precedent for attributing responsibility for traumatic accidents. *Donoghue vs Stevenson* (1932) involved a woman who sued a ginger beer company after being served contaminated ginger beer at a café which resulted in an illness that left her unfit for work. While this case appeared minor, it was the first case to establish a clear definition of a relationship of duty and corporate negligence in English tort law. Van Rijswijk convincingly tracks the implications of this case through a selection of modernist texts, arguing that conventional critical understandings of the shock effects of modernity have failed to recognise an equally novel stress on the attribution of responsibility and the politics of negligence in literary representations of traumatic railway accidents and the exorbitant price paid by the victims of war.

The aftershocks and displacement of war are also the focus of the final two essays in this section. Sung-Ae Lee's analysis of three Korean texts that address the after-effects of Japanese colonisation and the Korean war tracks the synthesis of history, autobiography and fiction in three self-consciously hybrid narratives. Lee begins with the reception history of *Waiting for Mama*, a popular political allegory of Korea's desire to be free of Japanese rule, culminating in its recent illustration and republication as a popular children's book. Lee argues that this reception history is symptomatic of a perception of endemic displacement that also characterises contemporary Korean historical fictions about the Japanese occupation, exemplified by Richard E. Kim's *Lost Names* and Susan Choi's *The*

Foreign Student (1991). Lee argues that to be Korean is to be perpetually caught within a matrix of blame, hatred and reconciliation that fundamentally destabilises the foundations of home in the writings of diasporic Korean writers. Jumana Bayeh continues this theme while making a more broadly theoretical claim for diasporic literature as counter-historical. She makes this case through a close analysis of the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf's most recent novel, *Origins* (2008). In *Origins* Maalouf delves into his own family history by writing about the migratory stories of his paternal kin. Through the use of a well preserved archive (letters written by family members and an assortment of official documents stored in a trunk) this memoir, as Ghassan Hage argues, "is a highly important contribution to the field of diasporic literature" not just for a specifically Lebanese audience but also a global one (2004: 221). What *Origins* does is provide insights into a particular notion of diaspora, one that is interested in displacement as a lived condition and sensibility.

4. Historical Reinvention

Perhaps the most controversial after-effect of the proliferation of new literary histories is what goes by the name of "historical reinvention". It suggests a two-sided program: first, the by now axiomatic notion that all literary works, even the most recondite and self-reflexive, contain historical sediments or traces; and second, the more controversial claim that the critical-historical writer, as much as his or her creative counterpart, must draw on the techniques of the novelist, the poet and the dramatist to make legible the mass of facts and events (or relations between events) that can be salvaged from the wreckage of history. The outcome, then, is that history is as much a literary project as it is an empirical one, and reinvention is a part of its remit. Robert Rosenstone writes, in *Experiments in Rethinking History* (2007), of an increasing tendency for historians "to express something about our relationship to the past which has hitherto been inexpressible, to include in history things which have long been excluded, to share information or insights or understanding that cannot be carried by traditional historical forms" (2). A similar desire underlies the five critical pieces that comprise "Historical Reinvention".

The section begins with an essay by Peta Mayer. Approaching Anita Brookner and her 1990 novel *Brief Lives*, Mayer applies to it a fruitful method that she calls "performative Romanticism". Her focal point is the figure of the nineteenth-century dandy: how it is produced both figuratively and literally in nineteenth-century texts, and their contemporary

readings; and how narrative formations surrounding the dandy are subsequently theorised in textual interpretations. "Performative Romanticism", as Mayer outlines it, is a tool that can shed considerable light on the vexed relationship between literature, history and criticism. Jodi Gallagher's essay also addresses this relationship, and demonstrates how "reinventive" techniques can be made to work even in the context of contemporary Australian history. Focusing on late works by Peter Carey and Kate Grenville, Gallagher examines the politics and influence of the Australian historical novel in its relation to the recent Australian "history wars", and the aftermath of the failed republican Referendum of 1999. At a time when the question of an Australian Republic comes once again to the fore of public life, Gallagher outlines what is at stake by re-routing it through the literary-historical imagination.

Continuing the section, Geoff Parkes conducts a revealing dialogue between Albert Camus and Michel Foucault. Parkes' focus is the notion of the "life work", and the different ways each writer advanced it—Camus' post-Nietzschean aesthetic endeavour, set against a (late-)Foucauldian ethics of the self. This comparative critical manoeuvre, as Parkes stage it, affords some bold insights into the historical genesis and literary exposition of the modern self. Will Noonan continues in this vein by addressing Foucault's laughter, which he uses as a metaphor to break open the bonds that unite narrative, history and literature. Through an incisive double-reading of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, Noonan attends to the metafictional reinvention of history, showing how the reflexive characteristics of humour can give insights into textual proliferation. Finally, Andrew Yerkes launches a full-scale critique of the "history industry" for its abiding belief in positivist historical research, and its promise to recover the past "as it really was". Taking Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* as a case-study, Yerkes demonstrates how the genre of historiographic metafiction can be used to mobilise contingency, unreliability and stylistic verve—the traditional "enemies" of historiography—to plot a path back to the vicissitudes of long-forgotten everyday experience.

This volume demonstrates that a post-relativist engagement at the interface of "literature" and "history" need not imply a return to a linear, homogeneous, monolithic historicist sensibility. New historiographies, drawing on numerous extra-historical resources, point to a plurality of approaches, to a perpetual making and remaking of frameworks, shedding light on the irregular cultural matrices out of which literary history emerges. Indeed, any "return to history", at this late stage, cannot but

involve continual movement across disciplinary boundaries, whether they be literary, political, philosophical, geographical or scientific.

In addition, this volume exemplifies the primacy of the case study as the most effective intervention in ongoing debates about the distinction between the literary and the non-literary, the positioning of literary discourses of various kinds within the larger cultural sphere, the dialogue between different national literatures, and the relative status of the literary text in relation to other cultural forms within the growing field of interdisciplinary studies. The range of essays in this volume is deliberately broad and intentionally various in kind to ensure its relevance to cutting-edge debates within the dynamic and heterogenous field of literary criticism. We find ourselves in a moment when literary criticism has begun to enter into a much wider debate about the nature of our understanding of the world. The essays in this volume recognise this expanded scope, intersecting with recent research in the fields of trauma studies, media studies, diasporic studies, and literary and legal studies.

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PART I:

MEMORY AND FORGETTING

MELANCHOLY AND HISTORY IN W.G. SEBALD'S *THE RINGS OF SATURN*

AMELIA SCURRY

Melancholy is by now a familiar critical topos for secondary readings of W.G. Sebald's prose works.[1] However, consideration of melancholy as a key thematic concern of Sebald's work, and of his third prose work *Rings of Saturn* in particular, have not been extended to equally salient discussions of melancholy's structural, temporal and rhetorical aspects. Melancholy is deeply implicated in Sebald's imagination of history and *Rings of Saturn* explores this connection through the presentation of history as a site of epistemological instability. While generally considered contiguous with the earlier prose works *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*—a relationship premised on both the chronology of their production and what critic Arthur Williams terms the "aesthetic kinship" of the shared autobiographical persona of the narrators (Williams 2001, 82)—*Rings of Saturn* is marked by a reorientation of narrative structure, a new and intense focus on historical and geographic topographies, and a greater investment in linguistic and mnemonic digression which can be understood as part of an introjection of melancholy into the text.

Melancholy is defined as the experience of extreme sadness and a sense of intense bereavement without an object.[2] In contrast to mourning, which is the loss of something loved or desired, melancholia is the experience of loss without the modifier of an object capable of connecting the grief referentially to the world. Confronted by unbounded sense of loss the melancholy subject may retreat into inactivity and non-engagement, or be forced to undertake a process of what Julia Kristeva terms the "*modification of signifying bonds*" (Kristeva 1989, 10, emphasis original). This process of modification refers to the visual, semantic, rhetorical and performative modes of engagement that connect the subject referentially to the world through systems of meaning-making. The subject attempts, through strategies of sublimation, signification, displacement and substitution, to approach a relational proximity to an object which has been lost to consciousness and present memory. This process of modification

finds a most eloquent and apt expression in the signification born of creative investment in literary and poetic language. For Kristeva the exploration of "melody, rhythm, [and] semantic polyvalency" situates language as a "poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole 'container' seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing" (Kristeva 1989, 14). Rhetoric under the sway of melancholy results in instances of linguistic play and a sense of over-signification in the face of an absent, or melancholy, object.

Seeking to order that which is disordered and dissociative for the melancholic subject, the temporary structure or "container"' provided by the broader syntagmatic logic of language enables the production of temporary and fictional points of referential orientation. In the case of Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, the text's investment in serialisation, substitution, elaborate metonymy and metaphor, symbolism and linguistic play, attests to a poetics of heterogeneity which amounts to a refusal of referentiality. It is the epistemological uncertainty born of melancholy loss which unsettles any easy accord between signifier and signified. The pervasive sense in the text that everything is connected (Zilcosky 2004, 102) finds expression through the text's investment in language as melancholy markers of attempted signification when confronted by the irrecoverable absence of history.

As critics such as J. J. Long have argued, a dominant characteristic of *Rings of Saturn* is the structuring principle of "metaphorical similarity and substitutability" (Long 2007, 143). While for Long this is manifest in the trope of equivalence, something which he sees as a key feature of the text-as-archive that renders all events ultimately interchangeable,[3] this trope demonstrates at the same time the production of melancholic chains of signification which refuse to provide any positive referential basis, implying that meaning is always to be found elsewhere. Arguably, the melancholy lost object of this text, and that which wends its way throughout Sebald's oeuvre, is the lost living, breathing body of the historical other capable of completing a dialogic reciprocity between past and present. Confronted by this absence, material, oral, textual and topographic histories become objects and sites invested with both signifying and semantic potential, and it is these objects that the text incessantly sets in motion.

In this way *Rings of Saturn* creates, through syntactic proximity and linguistic heterogeneity, sequences of temporary and contingent referential relationships. For example, the narrator's statement that "Today, as I bring these notes to a conclusion, is the 13th of April 1995" (Sebald 2002, 294), is followed by a litany of historical events and anecdotes bearing the same

date. The text suggests through syntactic proximity that these may offer the reader historical antecedents to the production of the text. However, any positivist connection is refused, and it remains unclear as to whether or not these constitute meaningful points of hermeneutic orientation. Formulated retroactively, the list begins with Maundy Thursday, and moves sequentially to "three hundred and ninety-seven years ago" to "two hundred and fifty-three years ago" to "two hundred and twenty-three years ago" to "one hundred and thirteen years ago" finally culminating in the narrator's present day on which a close friend's "father, shortly after being take to hospital in Coburg, departed this life" (Sebald 2002, 294-5). Thus, hyper-signification, repetition and a feeling that everything connects, can be seen as the attempt to fashion language and the written text as the means of producing semiotic and "*symbolic* equivalents of what is lacking" (Kristeva 1989, 23).

The production of language as a marker of melancholy follows broader thematic and textual structures of melancholic witnessing as an attempt to proffer testimony on that which is no longer present. *Rings of Saturn* describes a journey taken on foot by the narrator at the end of the summer of 1992. Beginning with a train-journey out of Norwich to Lowestoft, and ending on foot near Ditchingham, the narrator's criss-crossing perambulations refuse to provide any discernable sense of narrative telos. Resisting linearity, the text assembles a collection of digressive and associative instances of journeying to various sites and spaces, many of which are former hubs of industrial, commercial and social activity, but which the narrator encounters in various stages of decomposition and disrepair. It is a topography turned reliquiary, and the narrator's journey offers a form of historical testimony to these sites' retroactive historical potential.

Thematically, the text forges associative relationships between these different and disparate sites. Through linguistic and thematic echoes the "relics" of agrarian cultural life in Halvergate and Lowestoft mirror those found in Covehithe, Halesworth and Dunwich (Sebald 2002, 30, 69, 138, 155). These geographical sites which the narrator sees and to which he adds a historiographic "semantic density" (Long 2007, 144),[4] consist of the coastal and inland regions found to the southeast of Norwich. Scarred by history and the physical effects of time, the ruins scattered across this largely desolate tract of coast bear out the implications of the nominal "English pilgrimage" of the text's original German subtitle, *Eine Englische Wallfahrt*.[5] For *Rings of Saturn*, the narrator in the landscape becomes a transient historical datum able to measure, gauge and convey a sense of the proximal tensions between past and present. The sense that,

thematically, his perception of the past is over-determined by an apocalyptic sense of history as ruination, leads to what Peter Morgan describes as the intense "telescoping" of one time into another (Morgan 2005, 85). For Morgan the term telescoping, which signals in psychoanalysis the collapse of identity as a result of inter-generational trauma, is furthered here to encompass the text's figuration of history as a topography in which the narrator "loses himself in places and times" as if in an ever-expanding "referential labyrinth" (Morgan 2005, 80). More than Long's trope of equivalence, there is in *Rings of Saturn* a sense of metonymic accretion in which the past is figured as unending referential deferral, opening out to a myriad of other times and places. Unravelling a sense of linear history through digression, the text is marked by instances of anachronism and anatopism which enable moments of chronological rupture. In this way the "few dozen dead trees" which lie at the bottom of Covehithe Cliffs become for an instant "the bones of some extinct species, greater even than the mammoths and dinosaurs, that came to grief long since on this solitary strand" (Sebald 2002, 64). Deferral in *Rings of Saturn* is fundamentally referential. The text's refusal to provide any chronological or spatial orientation references the absolute defeat of any stable sense of historical epistemology. Indicative of a melancholy logic, the dead-end of melancholic non-representation is here resited through figuration, temporal displacement and projection.

The narrator's journey takes roughly a year to complete. On his return he finds himself unable to resist the onset of a "state of almost total immobility", a physical and emotional collapse possibly triggered by his witnessing the "traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place" (Sebald 2002, 3). Admitted to hospital at Norwich, it is only after the dissociating effects of pain and medication administered as a result of his severe psychosis have begun to recede that the narrator is able to begin re-visioning and recollecting his journey. It is another year before this journey begins to take written form.

Implicit in this broad narrative sketch is a temporal structure that is symptomatic of melancholy. The text narrates an original experience (the journey) that is lost as a result of the narrator's collapse. This experience seeks expression in modes of figuration and signification, first via recollection and memory, and subsequently through the formal structures of language which result in the production of the written text. Intimated in this structural logic is the suggestion that the text is itself a material trace born of melancholic witnessing. Beginning with the loss of the original experience of the journey, and its experiential immediacy as the lost first-hand experience of history, the narrator finds on his return he is unable to

process the experience. While this references broader questions of historical and referential truth within the text, it remains the case that *Rings of Saturn* embeds the narrator's (lost) experiential journey at the centre of the text's linguistic and mnemonic figuration. It is only in the suggestion of repeated re-remembering and the re-association of material sites with events, times, and the painful assemblage of the narrator's fragmented recollections, that the text approaches through language what was lost to consciousness the first time around.

This logic is borne out in the opening passages of the text. As the narrator writes:

> In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the country of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work…I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect 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. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages (Sebald 2002, 3).

If the narrator of *Rings of Saturn* is recognised as the autobiographical persona of the earlier texts (an assumption which relies on an ontological author/narrator dyad), then the "long stint of work" suggests Sebald's second prose work *The Emigrants* – a haunting quartet of biographical fragments which the narrator collects and pieces together. The reference to *The Emigrants* activates an intertextual frame while setting up an extratextual point of hermeneutic orientation for the reader through an implied connection between the completion of the earlier work and the subsequent "emptiness" as an acute onset of melancholy. While the narrator suggests that he is a frequent sufferer through the adjunctive use of "whenever", the exacerbation of his condition is intimated to be, in part, concatenate with the subject of his earlier work. *The Emigrants* constituted an attempt to recover something of the individuality, presence and humanity of its subjects through the collection and arrangement of biographical fragments. Through biographical traces the narrator attempts to instantiate an (impossible) dialogic reciprocity with the historical other via a poetics of the material trace. *Rings of Saturn* can be seen to extend

this concern, and these terms of reference. Exploring history on an expansive scale this text poses the question as to whether or not an epistemological framework able to accommodate the embroiled interconnectedness of human, natural and cosmic history is possible. Within this, the fate of the sensate body, its visibility or invisibility to history, remains a key concern; indeed, it constitutes one of the central objects of melancholic witnessing which the text explores. In this way, the narrator's lost experience signifies structurally the irrecoverable absence of history, while narratologically his journey is offered as a form of melancholic witnessing.

The theme of the visibility of the body is taken up repeatedly throughout the text, but most notably in the opening chapter in the text's consideration of the fate of Aris Kindt (alias "the Kid") who was the subject and object of *Dr Tulp's Anatomy Lesson* which was recorded by Rembrandt in Amsterdam in 1662. The two references to this large painting constitute a structural, thematic and figurative instance of melancholic witnessing within the text.

Rembrandt's famous image of the anatomist Dr Tulp is first discussed and reproduced in black and white in the opening pages. The narrator's experience of viewing the work is recalled only as the memory of the experience, a recollection which does not take place until some eighty pages further on. The narrator's moment of recall takes place while he is sitting atop Gunhill in Southwold, gazing out across the ocean towards Amsterdam. The expanse of water triggers the recollection that "just one year earlier" he had been gazing on this very ocean from the other side, looking back "across to England from a beach in Holland" (Sebald 2002, 80). The sense of "telescoping" one time into another, and the projection and displacement of meaning this entails, triggers the narrator to recount how he came to see *The Anatomy Lesson* in The Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis.

Standing before the portrait, the narrator states that:

> Although I had gone to The Hague especially to see this painting, which would occupy me considerably over the years to come, I was so out of sorts after my bad night that I was quite unable to harness my thoughts as I looked at the body being dissected under the eyes of the Guild of Surgeons. Indeed, without knowing why, I was so affected by the painting that later it took me a full hour to recover, in front of Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*. The flatland stretching out towards Haarlem is seen from above, from a vantage point generally identified as the dunes, though the sense of a bird's-eye-view is so strong that the dunes would have to be veritable hills or even modest mountains (Sebald 2002, 82-3).

The narrator's "bad night" references his general feelings of unease while wandering the "extraterritorial" streets of The Hague at night; an uneasiness heightened by a near collision with a man running in "sheer terror" from another man wielding a knife (Sebald 2002, 81). Caught briefly between hunter and the hunted, the narrator imagines for a moment that the "long glinting knife" held in the second man's hand had pierced "between [his] ribs". Disturbed by the sensorial hallucination and by the violent intent evident on the man's face, the narrator states "I was therefore not in the best of states next morning at the Mauritshuis when I stood before the large group portrait, *The Anatomy Lesson*" (Sebald 2002, 82).

The associative logic of the passage positions these two factors as the foundation of the narrator's dissociated feelings when confronted by the large canvas. The contraction of his vision to what appears to be cognitive paralysis suggests an empathic doubling of the experience of being subject to the "point" of the anatomist's/vivisectionist's blade, a feeling alleviated only by the "falsification of perspective" (Sebald 2002, 125) provided by the aerial vantage point of the van Ruisdael work. The imagination of distance and height provides the narrator with temporary respite. We, "the survivors" of history, are able to "see everything from above, see everything at once…still we do not know how it was" (Sebald 2002, 125). Nevertheless this passage suggests meaning as the "single, blind, insensate spot" of contracted melancholic perspicacity which rendered the narrator unable to "harness his thoughts" before the large canvas (Sebald 2002, 4, 83).

The Anatomy Lesson is first mentioned in the opening chapter of *Rings of Saturn*, although chronologically this takes place later in the order of narrated events. Nearly four years on from his visit to The Hague, the narrator has contextualised Rembrandt's work as historical testimony on the "history of subjection" suffered by the body at the hands of social, civic, religious, and in this case, scientific discourse and method. The Cartesian denigration of non-cognitive functions to the level of mere automata[6] here prompts Ann Fuchs' recognition of the broader discourse of bio-politics which runs through the first and third chapters of the text (Fuchs 2006, 173).[7]

The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp was commissioned by the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons in 1662 to honour the appointment of Dr Nicolaes Tulp to the position of *praelector anatomiae*. Responsible for the annual public dissections undertaken each year during the Leiden winter, the *praelector* was for all intents and purposes a master of ceremonies at the annual event which constituted a prominent date on the city's social calendar (Schama