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W. G. Sebald's Zoopoetics: Writing after Nature

> If you grow up not with toys bought in the shop but things that are found around the farmyard, you do a sort of bricolage. Bits of string and bits of wood. Making all sorts of things, like webs across the legs of a chair. And then you sit there, like the spider. (Sebald qtd. in Lubow 159)

Introduction: Sebald's Poetics of Connection

From the prose poetry of *After Nature* (*Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht*; 1988) to the hypotactic clauses of *Austerlitz* (2001), W. G. Sebald's distinctive prose style often relies on a single thematic and formal motif: connection. Paths cross, worlds collide, and for those paths and worlds that do not cross or collide, Sebald's synoptic narrators are there to assure us of their linking, and of the interconnectedness of all things. As Sebald himself remarks, "I have slowly learned to grasp how everything is connected across space and time" (*A Place* 149). The word connection, then, designates the tentatively totalizing perspective of Sebald's narrative style, whereby the internal plot of a given work is sparked and organized by an archival drive in which phenomena are discovered and linked together. Within this hyper-connected system of experience and memory, Sebald's literary style itself becomes an exercise in connection, a performance of "making in prose a decent pattern out of what comes your way" (Sebald and Turner 24), in which historical events, intertextual markers, extended digressions and grainy images are connected together through uncanny coincidences in the present-tense event of narration. Scholars of Sebald's work have been quick to study this aesthetic form–what I will call the author's *poetics of connection*–as a crucial methodological device.[1] As early as 2003, for instance, Mark McCulloh described the poetics of connection as Sebald's "guiding principle" (63), and in 2014 Timothy Bewes argued that "the question of connection, the problem of connection, might be said to be the central preoccupation of [Sebald's] writing" (3). Over this long decade of Sebald scholarship, many

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[1] On the growing body of work devoted to Sebald's poetics of connection, see in particular: Friedrichsmeyer 2006; Fuchs, "Zur Ästhetik der Vernetzung"; Ryan "Fulgurations"; Gray.

of the most convincing studies have traced Sebald's poetics of connection back to its influences from Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School, and the historical-materialist praxis of constellating discrete ideas and images.[2] Such a spatiotemporal linking, the argument suggests, enables Sebald's prose fictions to visualize and connect historical catastrophes together with a view towards generating a reconstituted ethics in the post-Holocaust world.

Think of the closing pages of *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*; 1995). Here Sebald's narrative concludes by performing two ostensibly separate digressions which are then themselves connected together. First, and inside the text's narrative frame, is a connection by *theme*. Sebald's narrator details the long history of the sericulture trade, tracing threads of silk—which become threads of narrative—across processes of global trade and industrialization from China to France, culminating in the "entire killing business" (294) of the Third Reich. And second, breaking the frame narrative and hence in the "now" of the writing event itself, is a connection by *date*. Sebald creates a melancholy calendar of overlapping events that each occurred on the thirteenth of April, evoking what Jacques Derrida would call "the poetic experience of the date" (6). This poetic experience of the date is rendered as a melancholic recognition of history as a "long account of calamities" (Sebald, *Rings* 295), with the thirteenth of April memorializing the establishment of the Anti-Semitic League in Prussia, the Amritsar massacre in Punjab, and—on a more personal level for Sebald's narrator—the death of his father-in-law. Struck by the "profound grief" of this historical abyss, Sebald's narrator turns again to silk, noting the integral function of silk in mourning rituals. And yet, although *The Rings of Saturn's* final sentences promise a certain transcendence—the soul leaving the body as it takes "a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever" (296)—the reader is nevertheless alerted to the connective work at play that both compromises and implicates the soul and the novel as they move into their respective afterlives. Sebald's concluding remarks on mourning rituals become symbolically connected to the very capitalist circulation that his narrator suggests is connected leads to Nazism. By connecting together material histories in one extended syntactic gesture, Sebald develops a melancholy ethics of memory and implication that performs itself on a sentence-by-sentence—or clause-by-clause—level. Sebald's poetics of connection, then, is one of the major driving forces behind his work's aesthetics.

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[2] On Sebald's debt to the Frankfurt School, cf. Dubow; Hutchinson *Imagination*; Hutchinson "Shadow"; Long "Contact Zone"; Ward.

Building on these previous approaches, this essay begins from two interrelated premises: first, that Sebald's style can be productively described as a form of zoopoetics; second, that because Sebald's literary project also situates itself within the cultural-temporal horizon of modernity, it can be argued that Sebald's zoopoetics is related to an ecocritical imagination. My first premise, then, is that Sebald's poetics of connection is structurally related to an interaction with nonhuman animality. More specifically, I want to discuss one instance in which Sebald's connective prose style is inspired by the *autopoietic* movement of nonhumans. Sebald, in an act of reading and interpreting an image of a spider, *translates* nonhuman movement into human language.

My definition of zoopoetics emerges out of three particular formulations: first, Aaron Moe's definition of zoopoetics as "the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species' bodily *poiesis*" (10); second, Kári Driscoll's claim that zoopoetics is an interrogation of the relationship between animality and language, that it at once "inhabits the 'abyssal rupture' between human and animal, and reveals how that dividing line is fragmented, unstable, and internally incoherent" (223); and third, Roberto Marchesini's conceptualization of "zoomimesis." Marchesini proposes that "human creativity" is not "the autarchic act of the demiurge artist," but rather "a transformation in one's own being in the prospect of reflecting the other" (178). Marchesini argues that what we routinely think of as purely "human" aesthetic forms are in fact produced within a zone of interpretation that "envisage[s] a merging between entities" (178). Put simply, Marchesini is cautioning us against seeing the creation of artworks as removed from forces that exceed the human subject, be they cultural or—in this case—nonhuman. Under Marchesini's formulation, animals in particular are seen as "deforming mirror[s]" (177). That is, humans are deformed and formed anew by their non-recognition of themselves in the animal.

Following these definitions, I see zoopoetics as a mimetic act of translation whereby humans read and interpret what they take to be nonhuman signs. Because of this, zoopoetics is also a fundamentally ambivalent engagement with animality. It can take the form of a deconstruction, a bridging, and/or a re-instantiation of the supposed threshold that separates humans and animals. As Jacques Derrida writes in his *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminars, it is "in our way of translating what are called animal reactions that we believe ourselves able—but this is a risk of translation—to discern or trace a limit between animality and humanity, reactive animality and responsive or responsible humanity" (336). While Derrida's notion of translation is much broader than my own, focusing as it does on an entire cultural history of

human-animal relationships, his words offer a helpful way for theorizing zoopoetics as one specific node of this translation exercise that occurs when humans *think about* animals. In sum, zoopoetics might therefore be thought of as one particular way, a stylistic way to be precise, in which humans "translate" their encounters with nonhumans. My essay therefore focuses on how Sebald's poetics of connection–as a formal breakthrough in language *and* as an ambivalent interrogation of animality and language–is precipitated in part by an image of a scurrying spider. To do this, I will first turn to Sebald's final public speech before his premature death. Here, I identify how Sebald summarizes his aesthetics by recourse to the figure of a spider. Sebald self-consciously characterizes his own stylistic project as one that is contingent on the metaphorics of nonhuman *poiesis*.

The second premise that I want to begin with is the idea that Sebald's project is pitched at least in part as a response to a temporal and thematic focus, namely the idea that modernity is situated "after nature." Here I pick up on the title and content of Sebald's first creative publication, *After Nature*, as well as J. J. Long's argument that the "individual topoi" of Sebald's texts–the Holocaust, trauma and memory, melancholy, photography, travel and *flânerie*, intertextuality and *Heimat*–"can in fact be seen as epiphenomena of a much wider 'meta-problem' in Sebald's work … That is the problem of modernity" (1).[3] In other words, Sebald's work not only bears witness to the singularity of the Holocaust but is also written so as to encompass the deeper historical time of modernity. And modernity is, in Sebald's works, a period which sees a rearranging of ecology, in that it disarticulates humans from nature. I take this idea forward in my conclusion, in which I explore how Sebald's zoopoetics is also structurally tied to an ecopoetics. Under this reading, Sebald's poetics of connection begins to look more and more like a narrative ecology; Sebald's texts not only thematically but also *formally* echo the ecological principle that "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 16). Sebald's connective memory-work is an attempt to tentatively push back against the forces of alienation that disarticulate history from nature, which is also to say, the human from both the environment and nonhuman animals. Sebald's poetics of connection is committed to drawing connections between subjects and objects–including humans and nonhumans–that have been alienated from one another during modernity. Thus, it can be claimed as both a zoo- and ecopoetics.

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[3] See also Hutchinson, *Imagination*; Burns and van der Will.

"A spider in the skull": Sebald's Zoopoetic Attempt at Restitution

There are a handful of moments throughout Sebald's literary project in which his style can be seen to take shape because of nonhuman *poeisis*. Moths and butterflies, for example, serve as crucial figures in what Sebald calls the "rather trite" (Kafatou 35) symbolic economy of metamorphosis and transcendence that seem to be foreclosed in *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. Moreover, in an interview with Joe Cuomo in 2001, Sebald reflects on the nonlinear method of connection that brings *The Rings of Saturn* into a cohesive whole: "I never liked doing things systematically," Sebald writes. Instead, his method takes inspiration from what he takes to be the aleatory wanderings of a dog: "If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he's looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this" (Sebald, "Conversation" 94). Here Sebald suggests that the writing of his works–and indeed these works' formal and methodological qualities–are contingent on learning and mimicking the movement of dogs.

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on one major example of Sebald's zoopoetics. This example comes in "An Attempt at Restitution" ("Versuch der Restitution"), a speech delivered by Sebald at the opening of the *Literaturhaus Stuttgart* in November 2001.[4] "An Attempt at Restitution" is a slight but significant address, not only because it marks Sebald's final public appearance before his death, but also because it sees the author offer a sincere distillation of his wider creative preoccupations and his stylistic project. As Jeannette Baxter, Valerie Henitiuk and Ben Hutchinson put it–in a collection that is in many ways a direct response to Sebald's final speech–"illustrated in crystalized form here are some of the recurring concerns of, and tensions in, Sebald's writing" (1). Lynn Wolff echoes the notion that "An Attempt at Restitution" is typically Sebaldian, stating that it flags up the "essential tension in Sebald's writing: the relationship between history and literature, documentation and imagination, rational explanations and defiantly non-rational insights" (96).

Sebald begins his speech by jumping from personal to collective memory, describing a childhood card game he would play with his father, before then turning to Hölderlin's visit to Tulle, and the later 1944 massacre that would

[4] First published as: "Zerstreute Reminiszenzen: Gedanken zur Eröffnung eines Stuttgarter Hauses," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 18 Nov. 2001.

happen in the same town. In this sense Sebald connects his narrative "I" to a plurality of deeper historical and geographical scales that precede and exceed him. The main questions that animate "An Attempt at Restitution" revolve around the purpose of literature itself. Sebald frames this question as follows: "*A quoi bon la littérature*? Perhaps only to help us remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic" (*Campo Santo* [trans. Bell] 214-15). Sebald's poetics of connection comes into view here as a formal economy of remembrance, but despite this provisional ("perhaps") logic Sebald switches to a more affirmative vein: "[T]here are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship" (215). For Sebald, then, it is literature's form "over and above" other forms that facilitates an "attempt at restitution." More precisely, it is literature's formal potentiality to make "strange connections" that opens up this possibility for restitution. Sebald's poetics of connection is therefore co-constitutive with his attempt at restitution.

At the center of "An Attempt at Restitution" is Sebald's recollection of his visit to the artist and former school friend Jan Peter Tripp in May 1976.[5] Sebald's tells us that it is this visit that convinces him that he must do something else "besides giving lectures and holding seminars" (210):

> At the time Tripp gave me a present of one of his engravings, showing the mentally-ill senatorial president Daniel Paul Schreber with a spider in his skull–what can there be more terrible than the ideas always scurrying around our minds?–and much of what I have written later derives from this engraving, even in my method of procedure: in adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life. I kept asking myself since then what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run. (*Campo Santo* [trans. Bell] 210)[6]

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5 Sebald's stylistic relationship with Tripp can be further adumbrated by looking at Sebald's essay on the artist in *A Place in the Country*.

6 In the German-language original, Sebald writes: "Tripp hat mir damals einen von ihm gefertigten Stich als Geschenk mitgegeben, und auf diesen Stich, auf dem der kopfkranke Senatspräsident Daniel Paul Schreber zu sehen ist mit einer Spinne in seinem Schädel–was gibt es Furchtbareres als die in uns immerfort wuselnden Gedanken?–auf diesen Stich geht vieles von dem, was ich später geschrieben habe, zurück, auch in der Art des Verfahrens, im Einhalten einer genauen historischen Perspektive, im geduldigen Gravieren und in der Vernetzung, in der Manier der *nature morte*, anscheinend weit auseinander liegender Dinge" (243).

It is worth explicating this quotation. Sebald begins with the image of Tripp's gift, an engraving of Daniel Paul Schreber, *Senatspräsident* in late nineteenth-century Dresden and a famous sufferer of acute paranoid schizophrenia. Schreber's story has become a pivotal case study for psychoanalytic work from Freud to Canetti, and from Deleuze and Guattari to Eric Santner. Indeed Santner's most recent analysis in *On Creaturely Life* (2006) reads Schreber as "a kind of totem for Sebald's work" (175). Santner sees Schreber as an emblematic figure whose feverish thought processes inspire Sebald's own focus on wounded and traumatized characters and histories. What Santner does not recognize in this totemic relationship, though, is the *other* totem in Tripp's illustration, namely the totem *within* the totem: for emerging from the inside of Schreber's head, Sebald tells us, is a spider, "a spider in the skull" (210).

Santner's analysis is correct in the sense that Sebald's focus on what he calls the "terrible" and "scurrying" spider means that, at one level, Sebald identifies the spider as an uncanny and parasitic occupation of Schreber's brain; Schreber's mental illness becomes figured as a nonhuman organism that, in its movement, animates–or even "spins" (210)–Schreber's deteriorating condition. In other words, in contrast to the Aristotelian idea of the person being a controlled composite of rationality and animality (Esposito 7), Schreber's mental condition has reawakened the animal that lies dormant inside the human. But what is important here is that Sebald does not merely see this parasitic occupation as being specific to Schreber alone. Rather, the spider is pictured as "always scurrying around *our* minds" (210; emphasis added). Tripp's illustrated spider is therefore portrayed as a totemic animal that occupies–or *possesses*–the mind of both the personal and the collective. Sebald reads the spider as symptomatic of both the scattered thoughts of a paranoid schizophrenic *and* the equally scattered thoughts that occupy all of our minds. Thus one conclusion that can be immediately drawn from this arachnid occupation is that Sebald sees human "ideas" themselves as autopoietic systems that mime the "terrible" and "scurrying" movement of the spider.

But another point I want to make here is that, for Sebald, this particular image of a spider comes to occupy a central place within his own conceptualization of his creative technique: "[M]uch of what I have written later derives from this engraving, even in my method of procedure." And this "method of procedure" is identified as none other than Sebald's poetics of connection: "in adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and *linking together apparently disparate things* in the manner of a still

life" (210; emphasis added). Thus although "Sebald's scholarly writings on literature tend to focus on themes and issues rather than on narrative technique" (Ryan, "Sebald's Encounters" 123), here we get exactly that, a description of the "method of procedure." Buttressed by the later references to "invisible connections" and "threads," Sebald's metaphors also liken his connective literary method to the web-making *poiesis* of the scurrying spider. And it seems as if the passage itself takes on some of these "terrible" and "scurrying" qualities. Sebald pierces the hitherto steady rhythm of his speech by enclosing a subclause within interruptive dashes: "–what can there be more terrible than the ideas always scurrying around our minds? –" (*Campo Santo* [trans. Bell] 210). Sebald reflexively interprets the spider's "terrible scurrying," incorporating the spider's movement into his own rhetorical delivery. Sebald generates a syntactic style that emerges when the human takes notice of and responds to the nonhuman, translating its movement into human aesthetic form.

Thus, when Sebald says that his creative work "derives from this engraving, even in [the] method of procedure" (210), what he means is that Tripp's artwork stages a tension between aesthetic and biological forms that inspires the aesthetic repertoire that Sebald will go on to employ in his texts. This might explain, then, why moments of cross-species interaction within Sebald's later work–the raccoon in *Austerlitz*, or the quail in *The Rings of Saturn*–are quite so affectively charged. Here Sebald's narrators come up against what the author's prose style is also interested in exploring: the separations and connections that mark the human/animal boundary.

This is not to say that Sebald's style operates in a one-to-one relationship with animality. This would be to argue that zoopoetics is the hidden crux of Sebald's entire project. Rather, I am suggesting that the much discussed "hybridity" (Wolff 80) of Sebald's poetics of connection is informed by an encounter–a scene of translation–between human and nonhuman forms. Sebald's poetics of connection is hybrid precisely because it recognizes the importance of nonhuman forms to human thought.

Conclusion: Writing after Nature: Zoopoetics and Ecopoetics

There has recently been a move among Sebald scholars to try and pin down the stakes of the author's treatment of nonhuman worlds. Lynn Wolff, for example, writes that Sebald "does not privilege the human being above all other forms of life, rather his concern is for life in all forms: human, animal, and natural" (5-6). This sentiment is rearticulated in even stronger terms by

Anne Fuchs who argues that Sebald's prose in fact disputes the "disastrously anthropocentric world-view of the modern era" ("Sebald's Painters" 173). And for Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa, Sebald's textual worlds rank as being among "the most species-rich biotopes to contemporary German-language literature," and he argues along similar lines to Wolff that Sebald's work is ontologically non-discriminatory and on occasion even "anti-speciesist" (32). If Wolff, Fuchs, and Schmidt-Hannisa are all correct then the question that necessarily follows is this: *How* do Sebald's texts challenge anthropocentrism?

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to answer this question, but by way of a conclusion I would like to propose two possible arguments for approaching this question in the future. One argument to put forward would be one which Wolff, Fuchs, and Schmidt-Hannisa all make themselves, namely that Sebald's texts counteract anthropocentrism by virtue of their biodiversity. By including nonhuman animals within the narrator's connective memory-work, these authors argue, Sebald's project "aims to correct a concept of history which completely neglects the fate of animals" (33). Nevertheless, if we are to answer the question of anthropocentrism in Sebald's works, then it is equally important to propose a second possibility: not just to identify Sebald's representational content (the *what* of Sebald's texts) but to also be more attentive to his works' stylistic construction (the *how*). This is why I have been emphasizing the fact that Sebald's poetics of connection is a zoopoetics. If this is the case, then it means that some of the foundational elements of Sebald's prose style necessarily relies on a joining up of the human and the nonhuman. Thus the question of anthropocentrism in Sebald's work is rendered more important–and indeed more complicated–by attending to the author's zoopoetic translation of "terrible" and "scurrying" animality into a "method of procedure." In short, Sebald's texts destabilize the human's claims to narrative superiority, and thus propose what David Herman has recently theorized as a "narratology beyond the human" (2).

The question that follows, then, is how this relates to environmental thought and, more specifically, ecopoetics. Here we might turn to Jason Groves' ecopoetic analysis of *The Rings of Saturn*, in which Groves argues that *Rings* "explores a postnatural world of anthropogenic climate change, biological invasion, and mass extinction" (277). But as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, such analyses must also attend to the translation of nonhuman forms that become registered within the stylistic makeup of the text itself. Further research, then, would ask how Sebald's poetics of connection not just translates the figure of the spider into literary style, but how other nonhuman lifeforms are connected together by literary forms.

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