

A walk in the wake of destruction

In *Bulfinch's Mythology: Age of Fable*, Thomas Bulfinch starts with a bird's eye introduction into the landscape of gods and goddesses, the creation myths, and the epic tales that form the pantheon of Greek and Roman mythology. In doing so, he tells the known story of Kronos, the Titan who devoured his children, and was ultimately overthrown by Zeus. But, Bulfinch points to something more that had eluded me before: that the Greek word Kronos means Time. The subsequent realisation that words such as chronology and chronometer owe their roots to this Greek word, although no new discovery, was to me astounding. The Roman god Saturn—of our Saturdays and the planet—subsequently came to be associated with Kronos in the genealogy of gods. Bulfinch, shows how the mythologies made the symbolic connection between time and destruction. He writes: "Saturn, who devours his own children, is the same power whom the Greeks called Kronos (Time), which may truly be said to destroy whatever it has brought into existence."

If all these seem to be ramblings and tangents, it is because this is what characterises the German writer W. G. Sebald best. Especially so, because the theme of his book *The Rings of Saturn* and his writings in general, are meditations on—to borrow the title of another of his books—the natural history of destruction in the course of time.

One of the epigraphs to *The Rings of Saturn* quotes a Brockhaus Enzyklopädie entry:

In all likelihood these [the rings] are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its [Saturn's] tidal effect...

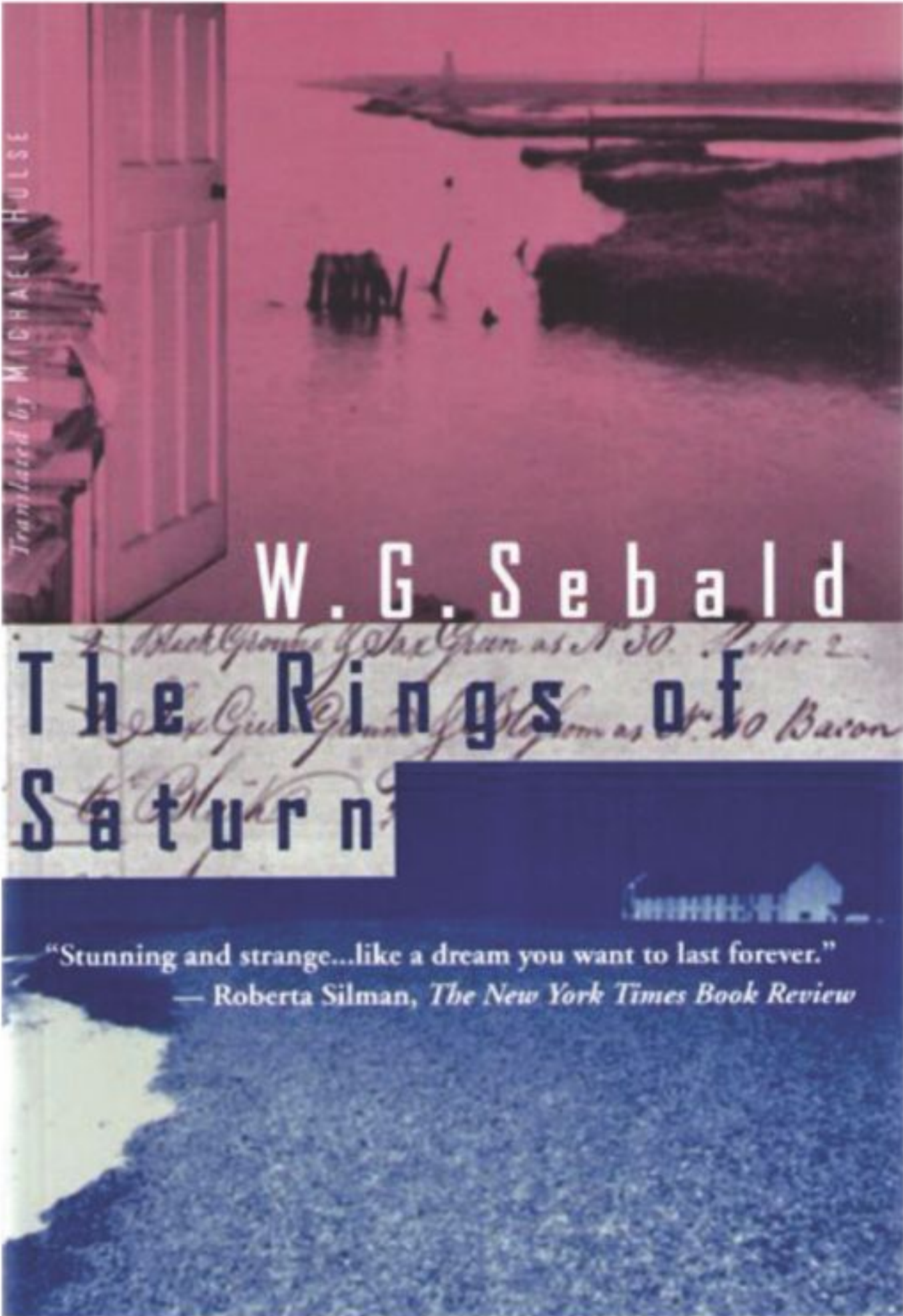
This sets the central theme of the next three hundred or so pages, but one is late to realise the significance. At the beginning of the book, we meet the narrator—who like in Sebald's other works, is both himself and imaginary—set off on a walk around the county of Suffolk. The narrator is consumed by the emptiness that comes with the end of a long stint of work, and "walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside," he is carefree. But at the moment the realisation of this dawns on him, his thoughts are overwhelmed by the horror of destruction that lies beneath a few layers of our everyday surroundings, which can turn the familiar into a bizarre and alien territory. The opening paragraphs, which go from the blissful start of his walk to him confined in a hospital, set the posthumous tone of the book—Sebald's voice speaks to us in the words of a man dying or dead. The

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From Grant Gee's documentary film *Patience (After Sebald)*, which traces the journey of *The Rings of Saturn*.



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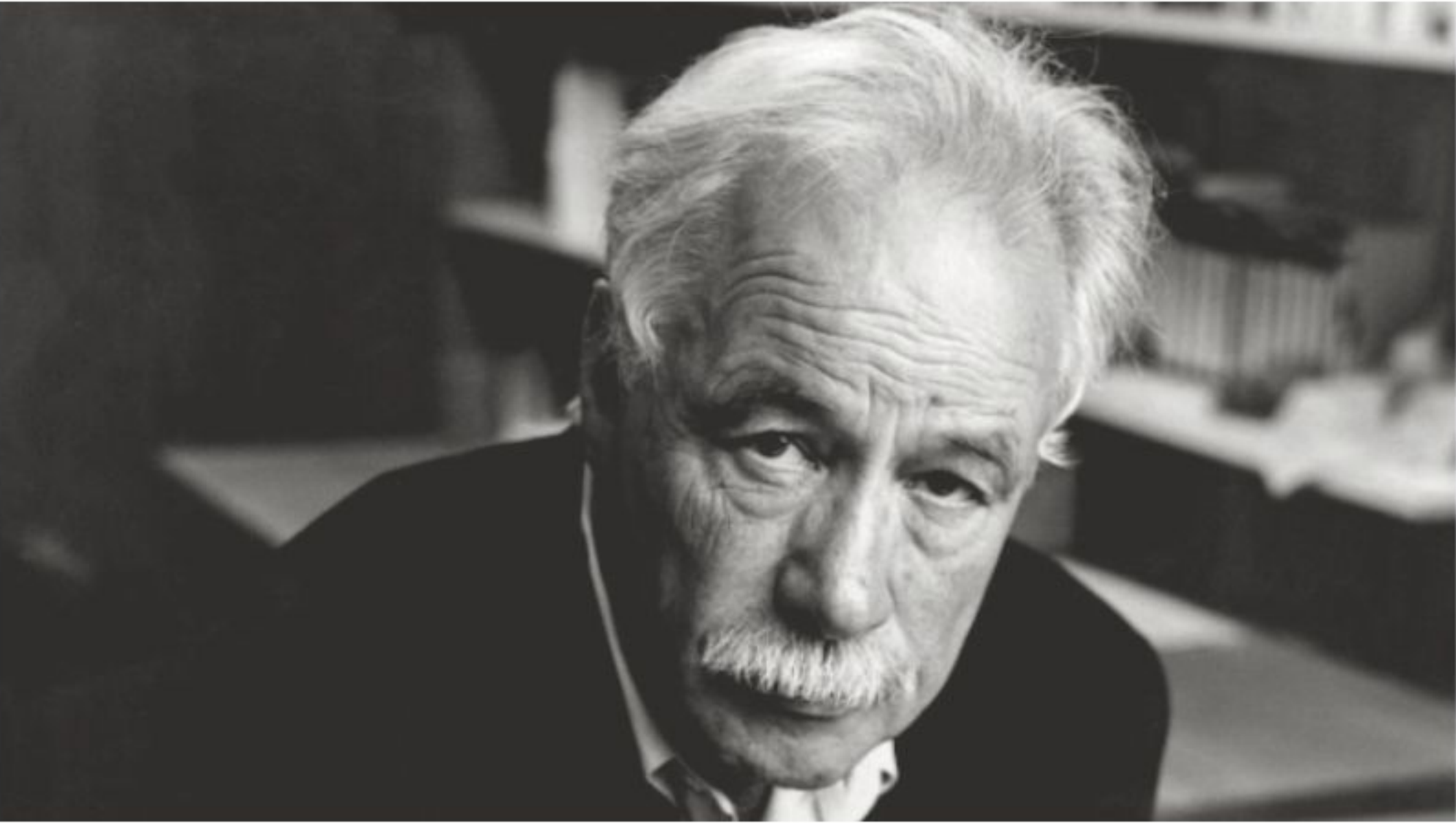
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A WALK IN THE WAKE OF DESTRUCTION

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Sebaldian narrator, in a course of ten chapters, walks the reader through a tour Suffolk, and his digressions—which effortlessly branch out ever more into everything from books and the lives of writers, to fishing and war—through the continents.

What follows is tangent upon tangent of thoughts as they come to the narrator seeing the landscapes he passes. We go from reflections on Thomas Browne, a 17th-century English polymath to Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson*, to Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, in just the first chapter. As the walk continues, Sebald takes us through the history of the bombing of Germany from Suffolk during the Second World War; a history of herring fishing; Joseph Conrad and the brutal colonisation of Congo; the Taiping rebellion; the Opium War; the rule of Empress Tz'u Hsi; culminating with the weaving of silk. The motif of silk and the silkworm is present throughout the book, from the Empress Tz'u Hsi's obsession with her silkworms



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Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632.

while her people were dying, to its cultivation in Germany "for reasons of national self-sufficiency, in the early years of the Third Reich." (*Why You Should Read W. G. Sebald*, *The New Yorker*)

Beyond this premise, it is difficult to speak of Sebald's books. They are truly *sui generis*, or as the writer himself might put, belong to all genres, from fiction and biography to history and geography. The only unifying strand of web that holds the book together within the absence of plot is that of the trails of destruction Sebald contemplates. An example of his meditation is the seventh chapter, when the narrator climbs to Dunwich Heath

and speaks of how as civilisation advanced, the forests of the British Isles receded. The oaks and elms of Suffolk were burnt as the earth was colonised. Sebald finds a pattern of burning and felling of trees to satisfy our yearn for progress universal, as he remarks that not for nothing does the name Brazil derive from the French for charcoal. He writes:

Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn. From the first smouldering taper to the elegant lanterns whose light reverberated around

eighteenth-century courtyards and from the mild radiance of these lanterns to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that line the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create. Yet another example comes in the first chapter, where Sebald, without the reader not knowing how he got there, is speaking of Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson*, which depicts the dismembering of a corpse of a petty criminal in Amsterdam, in ceremonial fashion, by Dutch surgeons. The artist, despite his true to life portrayal, for some reason had drawn the dissected

offending hand of the corpse the wrong way round. Sebald finds in this Rembrandt's position on the grotesque horror that was being committed:

That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity.

He finds in the painting not only the "investigative zeal in the new sciences" but with it our archaic zeal of "dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death."

A third characteristic example, from chapter eight, is when the narrator meets a Dutchman named de Jong in the course of his travels. In their conversation, de Jong, who grew up in a sugar plantation, tells the narrator how the capital amassed through slave economies such as the sugar trade is still in circulation, since the best way to legitimise the money was through patronising the arts:

"At time it seems to me, said de Jong, as if all works of art were coated with a sugar glaze or indeed made completely of sugar..."

But these examples, picked because they remained with me, barely scratch the surface of Sebald's hold on the reader. With haunting photographs accompanying his prose, Sebald can turn what might sound fatalistic and cynical to a melancholic sadness that serves only as a witness. Time is; and no moment, no place is devoid of a history of violence, he seems to say. And he does so in a way not done before. That is why it is difficult to place Sebald's books; they are not novels in the sense we speak of novels. If Joyce, Borges, and Calvino pushed the form of storytelling beyond its limits, Sebald to me is the writer who oversaw the marriage of fiction and non-fiction. Part archival, part fictitious, it becomes too murky at times to figure out if an event, or quotation attributed to a book, or a historical individual is a figment of Sebald's imaginative powers or resuscitated out of slumber from obscure books and letters.

Readers of Zia Haider's *In The Light Of What We Know* might remember from an epigraph, a quote from Sebald's most famous book, *Austerlitz*. That is indeed how I discovered the writer, and was surprised that Sebald's name was not spoken of more. In relative obscurity, he worked on his books alongside his academic life in his adopted country of England, only to find fame when the books, originally written in German, started to be translated into English. At the height of literary appreciation at the time, Sebald died in a car crash in 2001, putting out the flame of speculations of a Nobel in the near-future. In what was to become his interview, with *The Guardian*, Sebald said that the "moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory." That was, in brief, his subject matter, and he dealt with the question of living with the memory of the loss and violence done to men and nature that history speaks of in a beautifully haunting way, without platitudes or judgement.

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