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# A Natural History of Derangement

## *Ecopoetics Shattered and Intimate in Sebaldian Historiographies*

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“The Gaucho acquired an exaggerated notion / of mastery over / his own destiny from the simple act of riding on horseback / way far across the plain.”

- Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

“The policeman is the reader, who tries in vain to decipher this wretched novel.”

- Roberto Bolaño, *Woes of a True Policeman*

Amid the liquefaction of the apparently solid conditions of the Earth as they have existed for the entirety of human history, which now retreat like tides around our accumulated observations and predictions of normalcy, it becomes evident that our relationship with the precarious intangibles undergirding our existence is more fraught than has been previously assumed.

Much has been written on climate change’s confounding of those long-standing patterns (in human terms) of geophysicality upon which practices of modeling and prediction are based. And

yet, comparatively little has been offered in terms of consideration of climate change as potentially *falsifying* the terms of intimate familiarity we have extended to a world we have only briefly persisted upon.

Intimacy, at its most elemental, can be understood as an effort born out of our imperfect faculties—moral, intellectual, sensual—to locate ourselves and the object of our gaze in terms of spatial and temporal situation. It is a mode of commanding the poetics of the unknowable that suggests that the person we fall asleep beside will be there in the morning and that the sea will not have risen to swallow us up before we have woken. It is difficult to feel that such intimacies have ever been more remote than in the present moment. The faith in regularity—regular seasons, regular tides, regular life—from which we become ever more distant from, has in its crumbling precipitated a parallel process, prosecuting estrangements grand and minute, from self, from place, and from history itself. We do not know where we stand.

In 1966, eco-activist Stewart Brand printed a pin asking, “Why haven’t we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?” (Brand, 1977, p. 168). In

2009, artist Aspen Mays blazoned another pin with an expanded question: “Why haven’t we seen a photograph of the whole Universe yet?” (Mays, 2009) The implication proposed by each is an expansion of the ideal of the cosmogram—a form of imagery which not only elaborates the universe but is in fact animated by dreams of *ordering* it through the act of depiction. Yet, these representations do not necessarily land on solid ground. “Occupations of land and the cosmic orders that justify them raise questions of life and death,” notes historian John Tresch (2020) in his commentary on such images, “but the central terms of conflict – who and where ‘we’ are, and what ‘we’ need – are not fixed.”

In the context of climate change, writer Amitav Ghosh considers the novel as the thus-far failed vessel for enacting such cosmographic aspiration, suggesting that the “serious” literary novel’s fidelity to the logic of “individual moral adventure” renders the mode incompatible with genuine depiction of environmental change, leaving a grievous depictive gap as we attend to the unfolding crisis. “[B]elief in the regularity of the world,” states Ghosh, has been “carried to the point of derangement” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 36). Likewise, Kris Bartkus (2018) observes that despite the existential urgency of climate change, “no good, let alone great, novel about global warming has yet been written,” for the reason that an accurate depiction of climate change requires a “narrative inversion” antagonistic to the form of the novel.

Namely, it is the fact that the innumerable small operations accumulating in the background—an unrecycled can, a refilled gas tank—in an Anthropocene context begin to smolder with catastrophic potency. Contrastingly, all these actions, situations, and events—love, death, sex, epiphany—which, in their legible regularities, structure both the novel and life, nevertheless do nothing to curb carbon emissions as mankind hurtles towards destruction. As such, the things which have meaning when reckoning with the climate crisis are precisely those things that literature seems to dismiss as meaningless.

However, it is not the case that Ghosh and Brand do not ask for novels or photographs of climate change or the Earth out of some fidelity to perfect depiction as a virtue in itself; counting parts per million of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> or metric tons of oceanic microplastic captures the grand attention of neither man. Rather, each considers their respective cosmogram in terms of its potential elaboration of

the situating forces and factors addressing Tresch’s fundamental questions of “who and when we are.”

The tradition of regularity that each draws from framing these questions is one founded upon an idea of intimacy; to address anything cosmographically is to become intimate with its particulars of place and time and locate it in our physical and moral ontologies. Thus, if we have falsified through our imperfect and secondhand sounding of the depths of sea, space, and self, then such a falsified intimacy with regularity does not merely compromise our predicted and modeled worlds, but indeed stunts our ability to locate ourselves—as species and individuals—as moral actors within the temporal topography across which our ethical obligations to past and future unfold.

Between Brand in 1966 and Ghosh in 2016 is W. G. Sebald, whose body of work gestures towards the possibility that the history of man and Earth might be probed not through simple depiction, but as acts of cosmography on scales both intimate and infinite—evaluated on their aspirations of providing legible order and meaning rather than supplying outright description. Notably, we observe in Sebald, as scholar Stefanie Harris does, a tendency to resist the dichotomy proposed by Paul Valéry that, in the case of history, there is only “photography,” whereas all the rest is “literature” (Harris, 2001, p. 390). Sebald’s works, in their formal schemes and aesthetic execution—*The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* in particular—consider history in a manner similar to Ghosh and Mays—in terms of its cosmographic and moral stakes rather than strictly representative capacities. For Sebald, the addressing of history requires a “falsification of perspective,” where even “we, the survivors,” seeing “everything from above, everything at once... still... do not know how it was” (Sebald, 2016, p. 125).

This “falsification” signals its charge of moral obligation at several points in Sebald’s narratives. In one arresting example of this in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald writes of his friend Michael Hamburger’s struggle to locate memories of his birthplace in a Berlin leveled by Allied bombs. To Hamburger, his scattered memories appear amid the rubble as “pictures in a rebus,” charging him and him alone with the simultaneously monumental and trivial responsibility to “puzzle out correctly in order to cancel the monstrous events” of the past years (Sebald, 2016, p. 178). Here, Sebald considers a seductive proposition: if we could just reclaim intimacy with the

right images lost to time, we might use it to decode what their barely audible echoes ask of us and heed their instructions to reorder the world as it *should* have been.

Indeed, it is his trans-temporal practice which some critics have sought to decry as Sebald's search for, as German novelist Georg Klein put it, a "false intimacy with the dead" (as cited in Jaggi, 2001, p. 4). Yet, how *should* we be intimate with the dead? Susan Sontag writes of the now-naïve hope that "vivid enough" photographs of the dead of the First World War might disallow, through the searing visual proximity to violence, the prosecution of any future conflict (Sontag, 2013, p. 14). How, in the face of mounting tragedies which confound and derange our settled modes of relation, can we discern true from false intimacy? The failure of such purely depictive images of WWI leaves small hope of their success as applied today to a tragedy which acts to upset far more radically our relationship with horrors past and future—held as we are between the decisions of those long dead and the fates of those yet to be born.

Such a point is both core to Sebald's engagement with tragedy as well as a wrenching point of concordance with environmental catastrophe. History, be it global or personal, no longer unfolds itself within the domain of grand progressive forces; instead, Sebald suggests that any project concerned with history such as *The Rings of Saturn* must contend with "something like a description of the aberration of a species," traced in spiraling circles out from the "domestic economy of one's own mind" up through the local, national, and cosmic, "until the circle where natural history and the history of the human species alternate" (Sebald as cited in Groves, 2017, p. 270). In this sense, even though Sebald's ostensible concerns are vast and tragic, his process of *historiography* is attuned to the way the ghosts of these grand traumas must be processed on the individual level, with the unfortunate reader and narrator staged as central moral actors. As such, the trauma which Sebald's narrator is overwhelmed by "does not constitute a usurpation of another person's suffering," as critic Josephine Carter suggests, but instead something fundamentally intimate, revealing "something primordial about (one's) relationship with each and every person" (Carter, 2014, p. 734).

Consequently, to be intimate with history is to know where one stands in terms of one's moral obligations to it. What Francoise Meltzer (2019) observes as the

removal of history from the sphere of "things as they happened" and into the recesses of the individual consciousness, has in Sebald's narrative the effect of causing historical images and texts to become charged with the equally crushing and entrancing idea that we might *ourselves* be able to compose some kind of cosmogram with them, ordering the whole of history into an array of things we might still be able to save.

As a direct function of this conviction, which seems to both seduce and horrify Sebald, his documentarian approach takes as first principle the fact that images and depictions of the "past" need not be met on the static and straightforward terms that such depictions give to us; instead, history itself is shaped in its immediate manifestations by *desire*—our yearning to know how to salvage something, to make everything right again. As Sebald remarks on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, "if we stand today before the large canvas... we are standing precisely where those present at the dissection... stood, and we believe we see what they saw then" (Sebald, 2016, p. 13). In other words, Sebald implicitly considers our *want* to be in these places—a want which presents itself more broadly as Sebald's narrators' ceaseless turning over of the already said and done, as if the tiny traces of past tragedy are not merely the key to understanding an event, but also a cryptic cipher that reveals the tragic past as ongoing, unrelenting, personally implicating, and above all, *possibly* reparable.

Accordingly, Sebald's view of history positions his characters as seeking to believe—liberated by the turn towards historiography as personal, individual, and autobiographical—that this kaleidoscope of fragmented sorrows, held just correctly, provides a path for things to be changed, repaired, remade, before it is too late. On one hand, if we can just find out where we are, we can fix it all. But on the other, doing so means that the holocausts, slaughters, bombings, mutilations, would be *ongoing*, extending their moral obligations not simply as echoes within the present, but through past and future. If all of human history is not locked away but instead utterly unmoored, then those innumerable past horrors are somehow still inflicting their ravages. We just do not know how to stand or at what angle to look to see it all correctly, such that we could make a difference. It is this same sense that torments the individual in the climate change era. The sense that climate change is an utterly encompassing, implicating setting which has wrecked our cosmograms and left all of Anthropocene history's excesses gushing like spilled oil

into the gulf of natural history.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his influential consideration of climate change's impact on historiography, notes that an Anthropocene understanding of events has, among other vexations, forced a reckoning with the fact that natural and human histories are inseparable. What Sebald offers in the context of climate is a mode of moving with care and tact amid the splicing together of human and natural history—a joining which has occurred on neither's terms and perhaps to neither's benefit. The observation made by Chakrabarty (2009), that "absent personhood... there is no human subject of history," thus strikes a Sebaldian note in observing that unfortunate ultimate bearer of human history in all its weight is not humanity, but the individual human.

What takes shape across the single accumulation of wreckage suggested by both Sebald and Chakrabarty is the notion of history as a unified desert through which we must journey to discern, with no shortage of dread, how our moral obligations unfold through time. This is the same crushing thought which occurs to Jacques Austerlitz of Sebald's eponymous novel, who observes that if time "will not pass away, has not passed away," then "none of what history tells us would be true [and] past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them." As such, even as becoming intimate with the whole tapestry of history tempts one with turning back time "to what it once was," it concurrently "opens up the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish," where the death camps never closed and the dead suffer forever (Sebald, 2001, p. 101). For Austerlitz, it is this pervasive sense that if time were "only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry" which haunts him with the same sense of obligation that staggered Hamburger in the ruins of his childhood home: to attempt by "trifling mental exertion... [to] reverse the entire course of history" (Sebald, 2016, p. 178).

This sense, in which the web of human impact on the environment can implicate the seemingly innocent individual, is perhaps the feature of climate change that is literally, psychologically deranging. It is enough to drive anyone mad to consider that we are inherently monsters—that we shatter and poison everything by sheer fact of our being, and that we are and always have been actors freighted with the staggering moral weight of being a human in the

Anthropocene. It is not enough to say that we were not there when the waters began to rise or that we will not be there when they settle, but that these processes are *always happening*, and our responsibility to see things as they are is both crushing and necessary.

The resultant desire is then to create a cosmogram which places humankind not as a broken spot of plastic beading in the geologic tapestry, but as something in harmony with the Earth's past and constitutive to its sustainable future. Such a dream is consistent with the kind of moment that Sebald (2016, p. 24) suggests countervails Thomas Browne's apocalyptic certainty that "the whole world... does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc," but instead "leads without fail down into the dark"—Sebald imagines that "on the last day of resurrection," in a curtain-call-as-cosmogram, "the actors [will] appear once more on stage to complete and make up the catastrophe of this great piece" (Sebald, 2016, p. 24). For this reason, Sebald, like Browne and many contemporary observers of climate-change frontlines, scrutinizes the artifacts of human life in search of that "which has escaped annihilation for any sign of [the natural world's] mysterious capacity for transmigration," (Sebald, 2016, p. 26) with the intended result being some form of cipher to be drawn from the inarticulate wreckage.

Even so, Sebald's worlds teem with the implication that even as we are obligated to unravel them, it may be that we *cannot* meet these things directly. Because history has swelled with such tragic, horrific acts, and because we have wired its apprehension directly through our own heirlooms, diaries, and birthplaces, it could be that we cannot ever become the kind of unfeeling machines which could enact the "photographic" view to produce a cosmogram as would be understood by Brand or Ghosh. Indeed, to take a photo of climate change would be almost like taking a photo of human history itself, an act which Sebald would certainly have dismissed as nothing short of maddening.

Still, Sebald makes clear that such things *must* be addressed somehow, because they are otherwise never truly gone or averted. And of course, we know that we cannot look away from our place in history. We cannot now fail in answering the questions of who and where and when we are. But how? How do we know where we stand, such that we can act justly in this moment of truth, compromised and implicated as we may be? We seem to be forced to



look at something utterly inimical to the intimacies of depiction. This is a contradiction addressed with equal urgency by Sebald in his own reckoning with tragedy, as with his observation that a direct viewing of tragedy is paralyzing to the very faculties that enable an intimate understanding of the past as it acts on us. As such, they can only be addressed “obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation” (Sebald as cited in Silverblatt, 2007, p. 80). A case must be built.

This gives Sebald’s project, in its narrative mode full of melancholy itinerants picking their way through the accumulating rubble of history, the resonance of a detective novel—a pulpy genre assuredly outside Ghosh’s category of the “serious” novel. Every site, every object, every memory, burns with violence, destruction, sorrow, and nightmare, sketching out a scene for which we do not have the script. As such, *everything* in Sebald’s world is a site of a potential intimacy which can clarify our obligations to the past and future. In our inability to access human history in its complete moral totality, we are as *individuals* confronted with the catastrophe of failed stewardship and the torment of a repair which is just out of reach. Thus, through Sebald and our Anthropocene situation, we are presented with the suffering individual who history has already made into its primary receptacle, cast as a detective desperately trying not merely to understand, but crying out for the view which would allow him to enact the cosmographic knowledge reparative to the whens and wheres lost in the welter of an incomprehensibly wounded world.

All this to what end? If natural history has become a tragedy performed on Sebaldian terms, whereby we are robbed of all intimacy with our only nominally settled place on Earth or with ourselves as actors in history, then Sebald is a valuable ally who proposes that we cannot be made either insulated from or directly laid bare to horror. We are everywhere implicated, even in our feeble grasping at our dimly understood responsibilities, because to live and continue asking *where and when am I?* is to pierce to the heart of mankind’s destabilization of the world—from shoals of herring once thought infinite to the filleted cadaver in *The Anatomy Lesson*. We can only be given the tools to discern the dimmest lineaments of our entanglement in ongoing wreckage’s tragic proportions, groping poorly to make ourselves our own cosmograms, imperfect but aware, before it is too late.

Sebald, of all people, would not imagine that we might find comforting certainty in such a proposition. Not even climate change, in its overwhelming nightmarishness, can deliver us that kind of confidence—of our doom or salvation or our small place in the cold cosmos. No cosmogram will dispel this moment’s powers of derangement; it cannot make us certain because nothing is ever certain or ever will be again.

But even if nothing is certain within the wreckage, we can at least make ourselves the detectives amid the rubble. And that, perhaps, is the path to some kind of repair.

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*Untitled, ink and watercolor on paper, Isabelle D’Amico.*