Both W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) and the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr (1954–) were born too late to know directly the violence of the Second World War and the Holocaust, but these traumatic events are a persistent presence in their work. In a series of close readings of key prose texts, Dora Osborne examines the different ways in which the traces of a traumatic past mark their narratives. By focusing on the authors’ use of visual and topographical tropes, she shows how blind spots and inhospitable places configure signs of past violence, but, ultimately, resist our understanding. Whilst links between the two authors are well-documented, this book offers the first full-length study of Sebald and Ransmayr and their complicated relation to the traumatic traces of National Socialism.

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Traces of Trauma in
W. G. Sebald and Christoph Ransmayr
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d.o., Edinburgh, October 2012
ABBREVIATIONS

For key works, references first to the original and then to the translation will be given in the text in parentheses. The following abbreviations have been used:

**Texts by Christoph Ransmayr**

**DK** Morbus Kitahara, paperback edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001)


**GT** Geständnisse eines Touristen: Ein Verhör (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004)

[translations are my own]

**LW** Die letzte Welt, paperback edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991)

[The Last World, trans. by John E. Woods (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990)]

**RD** Strahlender Untergang: Ein Entwässerungsprojekt oder Die Entdeckung des Wesentlichen (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2000)

[translations are my own]

**TID** Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003)

[The Terrors of Ice and Darkness, trans. by John E. Woods (London: Paladin, 1992)] Unless stated otherwise, italicized quotations are given in the original and refer to the archival material used by Ransmayr.

**Texts by W. G. Sebald**

**A** Austerlitz (Munich: Hanser, 2001)

[Austerlitz, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2002)]

**AN** Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht, 3rd edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004)


**BU** Die Beschreibung des Unglücks (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003)

[translations are my own]

**CS** Campo Santo, ed. by Sven Meyer (Munich: Hanser, 2003)


**E** Die Ausgewanderten, 9th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002)


**NHD** Luftkrieg und Literatur: mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch, 5th edn
(Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005)

**RS** Die Ringe des Saturn, 7th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003)

**UH** Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur, paperback edn
(Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995) [translations are my own]

**V** Schwindel: Gefühle, paperback edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003)

**Texts by Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud**

References to Benjamin and Freud give the volume number followed by the page number.

**WB** Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) [translations are my own]

**SF** Sigmund Freud, Gesammelte Werke, ed. by Anna Freud and others, 18 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1961–68)

Translations of other sources are my own unless otherwise stated.
Since his death in 2001, the German author W. G. (Max) Sebald has gained a considerable reputation in both academic and non-academic circles. The ten-year anniversary of his death saw a new wave of interest, including the publication of a handbook and the production of a film, to name just two contributions. Indeed, over the years, readers, scholars, bloggers, directors, artists, authors, and poets alike have been inspired by the man and his work. This response seems wholly commensurate with the richness of Sebald’s texts, but perhaps at odds with the author’s self-effacing nature; Sebald would probably have shied away from the industry generated in his name. Like the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr, who gives interviews relatively rarely and who chose to live for many years in a remote part of Ireland, Sebald was a reluctant literary celebrity. But beyond a common dislike of public attention, Sebald invites comparison with Ransmayr for his production of German-language literature that still engages with the legacy of National Socialism, albeit in oblique or indirect ways. Writing after Auschwitz and after the cultural prohibition formulated ‘after Auschwitz’, Sebald and Ransmayr are both representatives of what might be called post-post war literature. As such, they respond to the non-viability of conventional forms of narrative after 1945 and to the discourses of postmodernism and post-structuralism that emerge as a consequence. But the idea of post-postwar literature also implies a more persistent sense of coming after, where their writing remains compulsively attached to the violence of National Socialism in whose shadow it emerges. In their writing, Sebald and Ransmayr ask questions about the difficulties of remembering a violent, elusive past, which is to say, they are concerned with trauma and memory. Together, they offer particularly interesting examples of how past violence is still inscribed in narrative and of how, as the memory of this past recedes, its traces are subject to distortion and displacement. Sebald and Ransmayr do not write about the Second World War and the Holocaust directly. Rather, the references to these events are oblique or even conspicuous by their absence. Focusing on their prose narratives, this book identifies the traces of trauma in their work and asks what such marks tell us about the relation of these authors to the legacy of National Socialism.

Born in 1944 and 1954 respectively, Sebald and Ransmayr came too late to know the Third Reich directly, but were affected by what they learnt subsequently. In self-acknowledged and self-reflexive ways, their prose bears the marks of a belated encounter with the National Socialist past and exemplifies the tension produced
in working through the past between remembering and forgetting, and between
history and memory. Ransmayr and Sebald are often referenced alongside one
another as important representatives of contemporary literary practice, specifically
an engagement with place, travel, and memory that is sometimes described as
postmodern. However, sustained investigations of the two authors are relatively few
and far between, and the following study aims to develop a better understanding
of their work in parallel, of how their work reflects their comparably belated
perspective on a traumatic past. I will begin by outlining the culture and politics
of postwar memory to which their writing responds, then go on to identify further
factors which indicate how a parallel examination of their respective prose work can
shed new light on these authors.

Sebald and Ransmayr belong to a subsequent generation of postwar literature,
writing after, and reflecting critically upon, the work of canonical postwar authors
such as Alfred Andersch, Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Thomas Bernhard, and Peter
Weiss. They can be aligned with contemporary authors such as Monika Maron,
Uwe Timm, Bernhard Schlink, and Marcel Beyer, who are still deeply invested
in questions surrounding National Socialism, but who, in their engagement,
must reconstruct a past not experienced directly. Like these authors, Sebald and
Ransmayr are writing in response to what has become a much longer history of
postwar memory, which charts the shift from disavowal and repression towards
questions of ‘normalized’ national identities. As Ernestine Schlant has shown in
her seminal study *The Language of Silence*, even through these shifts, the politics of
postwar memory remains unresolved and the literature which emerges alongside is
still marked, albeit in different ways, by a traumatic past.

Looking back to 1945, the cultural response to the years of National Socialism
fell short of any significant engagement with the violence of that regime. In the
immediate postwar years *Trümmerliteratur* and *Trümmerfilme* (rubble literature and
film) dominated the popular cultural landscape, showing the ruins to which
Germany had been reduced. These narratives could not yet consider the implications
of Nazi brutality and focused instead on the daily struggle for food and shelter, as
well as the alienation felt by those returning home to broken communities. It was
not until the 1960s, when the media attention given to the Eichmann Trial in
Jerusalem and the Auschwitz Trials in Frankfurt awakened public consciousness
to the concentration camps, that debates opened up about Germany’s recent past.
Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich’s famous 1967 study was a major catalyst,
using psychoanalytic theories to ‘diagnose’ Germany’s failure to overcome its past
in terms of a national inability to mourn. They explained how West Germany
had been able to repress, even disavow, its past in the *Wirtschaftswunder* years, a
time of unexpected prosperity. They called for Germans to undertake the work of
mourning as the first and necessary step towards an active work of memory, thereby
setting in motion a process of engaging with the past. The need for a more public
acknowledgement of Germany’s Nazi legacy resonated with a younger generation
who felt angry that their parents had failed to atone for their crimes. In the late
1960s, the student movement expressed this frustration and protested against the
perceived resurgence of fascism within intolerant state organs of power. But when
this response mutated into the terrorism of the Rote Armee Fraktion and its violent climax in the Deutscher Herbst [German Autumn] of 1977, it became clear that the wounds of the past could open up again in messy, uncontrolled ways.

 Whilst on the one hand a developing discourse of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, of coming to terms with the past, was critical to the reconstruction of postwar German identity, it also raised a question about the extent to which Germany should be looking to move on from its fascist past or whether it was duty-bound to commemorate it in collective ways. Meaning literally overcoming or mastering the past, Vergangenheitsbewältigung implies closure or completion, and in this sense, binds the work of memory to the inevitability (or even desirability) of forgetting. By the 1980s, it seemed that some regarded the temporal distance from Germany’s National Socialist past as sufficient to legitimize the nation’s ‘normalization’, a claim which provoked the notorious Historikerstreit [Historians’ Debate]. In his response to Ernst Nolte and others, Jürgen Habermas vehemently resisted reducing the singularity of the Holocaust to one in a series of catastrophes in a longer history of destruction and identified the dangers of implementing history in German politics. The debate which erupted more than a decade later following Martin Walser’s controversial acceptance speech for the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels [Peace Prize of the German Book Trade] was proof that the politics of memory remained highly controversial even after Unification. Moreover, it made clear that a commemorative project on the scale of Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe would in no way suture the wounds of the nation, but instead open them up again in very public fashion. Beyond such specific controversies and beyond the twentieth century, memory culture in the new Berlin Republic also faces the challenge of integrating other, perhaps previously suppressed or taboo histories alongside that of the Holocaust; namely German suffering as a result of the Allied aerial bombings (a debate in large part initiated by Sebald’s controversial Zurich lectures, later published as Luftkrieg und Literatur [On the Natural History of Destruction] (1997)), the fate of expellees, and the experiences of those living in the GDR.

 If the response to National Socialism in West Germany was, in the initial postwar period at least, found wanting, the reaction in Austria was even more so. Here, a nation invested in its status as victim, an unwitting party in annexation, and sought resort in myths of the glory days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the rural ideal of Heimat. Whilst an increasingly public and engaged discourse has developed in Germany surrounding the nation’s recent past, Austria has been more reluctant to break its silence and investigate its role in National Socialism. The Waldheim affair and the undiminished popularity of conservative, right-wing parties testify in political terms to Austria’s unwillingness to work through its Nazi allegiances. Literary figures such as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek, on the other hand, have made notoriously noisy protest at the failure of the state to take responsibility for the past. During his career, Bernhard was determined to expose Austria’s hypocrisy with his vitriolic outpourings and merciless parody. Yet the very fact that his 1988 play Heldenplatz, a staging of Nazi ghosts haunting Vienna’s most public square, should cause such outcry, is a clear indicator of the national reluctance to come to
Ransmayr’s criticism of postwar memory culture surely reflects the arguably more unresolved case of his native Austria, although it responds in large part to the debates that have raged in a broader, German (language) context. Sebald, whilst of German nationality, was born in the remote Allgäu region at the foothills of the Alps and spent most of his adult life in England. In this sense, he was writing from a similarly peripheral position. Both authors, however, developed a keen scholarly and cultural interest in the overarching question of postwar, post-Holocaust memory.

The longer history of postwar memory is grappling at every stage with the fraught question of what constitutes an appropriate mode of remembering those affected by the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Literature is one mode that might be used in remembering the lives of others, but its validity stands in the shadow of Theodor W. Adorno’s much quoted dictum that ‘nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch’ [to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric], which expresses the idea of a representational impasse surrounding the Holocaust.8

The historical trauma of the Holocaust constitutes a rupture in conventional forms of representation because, as Dan Diner famously wrote, it signifies a break in civilization itself.9 With the Holocaust, the Enlightenment discourse of the advancement of the modern subject is radically overturned. In their Dialektik der Aufklärung [Dialectic of Enlightenment], Horkheimer and Adorno show how, at the limits of modernity, technologies of manufacture are used not in the service of humans, but against them, and in their efficiency are employed in the annihilation of the subject.10 The perverse use of technology in the camps exposes the failure of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment and even of narrative more generally to account adequately for how or why the Holocaust happened. With the invalidation of unified, linear epistemological models, postmodernism becomes the means by which the radical evacuation of meaning in a post-Holocaust world is expressed.11 It is in this broader framework that the post-structuralist theories of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas emerge which privilege precisely the unrepresentability of the Holocaust and the haunting reminder it leaves behind.12

Temporal and generational distance makes it difficult to approach the topic of the Holocaust, but, as Geoffrey Hartman and others have argued, the reality of a finite number of Holocaust survivors makes the attempt to do so even more urgent.13 There is then an imperative to respond to the claim derived from Adorno and to the ethical injunctions on different modes of aesthetic representation after 1945, although the form of that response remains a deeply contentious issue. Drawing on the literature written by survivors such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry, Elie Wiesel has argued that the experiences of Jewish Holocaust victims resist representation from another perspective.14 The Holocaust refuses witness by definition: those who died in ghettos and concentration camps cannot tell their story, and those who survived are haunted by the fact that they did not die. But the fact of its having happened demands transmission nevertheless.15 Furthermore, the experiences of individuals cannot be circumscribed by those of the collective, but the sheer scale of the Holocaust resists the inscription of a meaningful, authentic narrative for each life affected. The production of narrative should offer
a means for remembering personal experience and commemorating collective events, but it is also compromised by the inadequacy of memory and the limits of perspective.

In the last few decades the growing fields of Holocaust studies and memory studies have attempted to define and theorize the issues at stake in the representation of traumatic experience. The work of Maurice Halbwachs has been foundational for developing an understanding of memory not merely as a biological capacity, but as a socially and culturally defined function which produces collective memory. Thus the relationship of memory to the past is not mimetic, but part of a cultural, social construct which enables us to narrate both personal and collective experiences. Building on the idea of collective memory, Jan and Aleida Assmann have gone on to develop their groundbreaking model of cultural memory. In contrast to collective memory, which refers to the memories passed down through three generations of a family or community, cultural memory describes what is transferred over longer periods of time in cultural practices and artefacts. Assmann’s diachronic model is important for articulating the relationship between history and memory: cultural memory leaves, negotiates, and compensates for gaps in personal or collective memory, thereby determining how the past is transmitted, narrated, and understood over time. Moreover, cultural memory carries with it in symbolic form what is not or cannot be represented in other forms of memory; it is the means by which unrepresentable or repressed elements of past experience are transmitted. In this sense, it connects with trauma theory, which is concerned precisely with the persistence of unspeakable traces in memory.

Where past experience is violent or overwhelming, our ability to remember this in any meaningful sense may be impaired, but its traces still remain and demand to be integrated into memory. This recognition is central to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic project and is the central tenet of recent trauma theory. For Freud, it is the violent, overwhelming experience of modernity that provokes his theorization and diagnosis of traumatic neuroses, and in Chapter 1, I will outline the relationship between psychoanalysis, trauma, and modernity in more detail. For contemporary memory studies, trauma theory offers a framework for thinking about the limit experience of the modern subject, namely, the Holocaust. Trauma, meaning ‘wound’, refers to an impact so severe it is not registered consciously. The individual becomes aware of the traces it leaves behind only belatedly, traces that in their unconscious registration are not amenable to subsequent (and subsequently necessary) attempts to make sense of the experience. In other words, trauma at once demands and precludes narrative. The publication of Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience in 1995 initiated a huge resurgence in trauma as a hermeneutic model for formulating the paradoxes at the heart of violent experiences. This model gained particular relevance in postwar memory culture, since the Holocaust marks a limit case for the need to transmit narratives of traumatic experience despite their inherent unknowability. Whilst Caruth’s work has been severely criticized for effectively defining history as traumatic, for reading history as trauma, recent trauma theory has developed as a significant cultural model and is used, often implicitly, in many contemporary engagements with postwar literature and art as a
means of showing how texts and images are marked by the representational impasse of trauma, specifically the trauma of the Holocaust.¹⁹

Trauma theory offers an important framework for reading post–postwar literature because it is a model of latency: the effects of trauma are felt only belatedly, that is, as after-effects. As such, any attempt to narrate traumatic experiences is subject to distortion. These traces both conceal and mark the fact of disfiguring violence, functioning not as direct signifiers, but as symptoms which must be read as such. Trauma theory shows how the traces of violent events that could not be understood meaningfully at the time are retained and transmitted in the distortions and displacements of memory. Crucially, as Sigrid Weigel has shown, as a model of latency, it relates not only to individual memories but also to those of a collective, transmitted across generations. It permits an understanding of violent history in transgenerational terms; trauma ruptures historical continuity, but the traces of this rupture are passed on between generations in the repressed or distorted traces of cultural memory. Thus, trauma negotiates a paradox between *posthistoire*, that is, the invalidation of the grand narratives of history after 1945, and the afterlife of that catastrophic history which persists in the small marks of traumatic memory.²⁰

Weigel’s reformulation of trauma theory as a model of ‘télescopage’, of the transmission of traces across generations, indicates a shift in memory studies towards thinking about the legacy of National Socialism beyond those immediately affected. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory also attempts to negotiate the break in experience signalled by subsequent generations. Her work has made a significant impact on scholarship on recent literature, particularly discussions of those texts that make use of photographic material. According to Hirsch, photographs can mediate between those who came too late to know the experiences of loss and violence suffered by their predecessors and those captured in these ‘family frames’.²¹ Postmemory wants to want to work in recuperative fashion, seeking to overcome the traumatic gaps in family history. However, for attempting the inscription of another biography into that of a later generation, this is a ‘radically overdetermined concept’, attended by ethical problems.²² The visual elements in narrative become overburdened and where they cannot support the weight of postmemory, they collapse or rupture, opening gaps in narrative once more. Meanwhile, Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove have formulated the concerns of subsequent generations differently through the concept of ‘memory contests’, which acknowledges the increasingly pluralistic nature of memory narratives, particularly post–Unification. And James E. Young’s claim for the creative possibilities for the continuation of memory in commemorative art and architecture has found strong resonance in memory and Holocaust studies.²³

As I will show in the following close readings of prose works by Sebald and Ransmayr, both textual and visual elements are marked by traces of trauma that resist the recuperative gestures of narrative. Their work emerges alongside, and sometimes reflects critically upon, the discourses outlined above, but they are also interested in the cultural models that were developed before the caesura of 1945, models that were equally interested in the after-effects of trauma, that is, the traumatic impact of modernity. My focus on traumatic traces on one level works to
identify the oblique references to the Second World War and the Holocaust in their prose, but on another, to trace also the vestiges of the modernist projects of Freud and Walter Benjamin, for whom the trauma and shocks of modern living were a defining influence. Indeed, as I will show in a theoretical first chapter, trauma is a modern paradigm, and its return in a postmodern age testifies to the fact that modernism has not been concluded in any proper sense. Sebald and Ransmayr are writing self-consciously in the face of failed grand narratives, sometimes attempting their reconstruction, sometimes representing precisely their ruptured state. They expose the breakdown of traditional narrative modes for representing violent events and experiences of loss after 1945, a breakdown which results at once from the traumatic nature of recent German history and the fact of their having been born too late to know these things. The post-postwar literature of Sebald and Ransmayr attempts to write about history in other ways, drawing on the Freudian case history and Benjaminian material history to do so. The traumatic traces in their prose are, then, both the distorted signs of the legacy of National Socialist violence and the return or persistence of modernist thinking in their own later projects.

**Sebald and Ransmayr**

Though born ten years apart, Sebald and Ransmayr belong to the same generation; they came too late to witness the war and the Holocaust, but were born into a world charged with working through the consequences of these events. The belatedness which marks their projects is heightened in the case of Sebald, because he worked first and foremost as an academic and developed his literary career relatively late. Yet already in his literary critical work, Sebald identified Ransmayr as an important contemporary author whose work was representative of the difficulty of inscribing identity in both an individual and collective sense: in his second volume of critical essays, *Unheimliche Heimat [Strange Homeland]* (1991), Sebald notes that Ransmayr’s work, along with that of other contemporary Austrian authors, reveals an apocalyptic consciousness of the disintegration of any natural place of belonging, that is, of *Heimat (UH 16)*, a consciousness very much shared by Sebald. Sebald’s working library at the German Literature Archive in Marbach also contains lightly annotated copies of Ransmayr’s three main prose works, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis [The Terrors of Ice and Darkness] (1984)*, *Die letzte Welt [The Last World] (1988)*, and *Morbus Kitahara [The Dog King] (1997)*, and following the publication of the first of these, Sebald wrote to Ransmayr to express his approval. In addition, Ransmayr’s most successful novel, *The Last World* appears on the reading list in English translation for the course ‘Major Trends in European Fiction’, which Sebald convened in 1996 in his capacity as lecturer at the University of East Anglia. The interest in each other’s work was mutual and it was Ransmayr who recommended the manuscript of Sebald’s long poem, *Nach der Natur [After Nature] (1988)*, to Hans Magnus Enzensberger for publication in his *Andere Bibliothek* (the volume was in fact published by Greno, but with Ransmayr’s insistence, the later prose narrative, *Schwindel. Gefühle [Vertigo] (1990)*, appeared in Enzensberger’s prestigious series). This endorsement is particularly significant, since *After Nature* was Sebald’s first major publication and marks the beginning of his literary career. Moreover,
bringing together both biographical and autobiographical elements, Sebald’s long poem establishes a fundamental element of his literary practice and provides a key to understanding his project.

The apocalyptic vision evoked in the title of After Nature establishes another major element of Sebald’s work and one shared by Ransmayr; namely, his scepticism towards the idea of human progress.29 The Allgäu region in which he grew up remained relatively untouched by the effects of industrialization and Sebald was struck by the disparity between his hometown and the rest of Europe: ‘In meiner Kindheit gab es da keine Maschinen. [...] Das ist am schwersten zu verkraften: Daß man aus dem 19. innerhalb weniger Jahrzehnte in das 21. Jahrhundert muß’ [In my childhood, there were no machines there. [...] That is the hardest thing to deal with: that you only have a few decades to make the transition from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century].30 Ransmayr also grew up in rural surroundings, in Austria’s Salzkammergut. His early journalistic writing often expresses a fascination with the sorts of Austrian community untouched by the effects of modernity and his later fictional narratives actively withdraw from the city and from modernity, returning to pre-industrial states. Ransmayr’s ‘Fortschrittsskeptis’ [scepticism towards progress] and ‘Zivilisationskritik’ [critique of civilization] are mirrored in Sebald’s own ambivalence towards the mechanisms of modernity.31 Indeed, as Ben Hutchinson has shown, Sebald’s work is informed by the dialectic of Enlightenment proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno, this influence being explored most extensively and explicitly in Die Ringe des Saturn [The Rings of Saturn] (1995).32

The scepticism shown by Sebald and Ransmayr towards narratives of human progress forms part of their more broadly ambivalent positioning in relation to discourses of modernism and postmodernism. In apparently postmodern gestures, their texts resist genre categories, blurring the boundaries between history and memory, fact and fiction. Ransmayr’s narratives take the form of very deliberate fictional reformulations and reconstructions of historical events, ensuring that there can be no definitive or authoritative account, and also no definitive or authoritative genre categorization of the text itself. The author sees no difference between acts of literary and journalistic, documentary writing, and situates his project under the sign of ‘Erfindung’, of invention which is always also discovery, finding or retrieving (MHD ervinden, AHD irfinden = entdecken, erfahren).33 His second and most successful novel, The Last World, is seen as paradigmatically postmodern for its reworking of classical myth (Ovid’s Metamorphoses), its thematicization of the writer and his work, and the performative inscription and erasure of this writing.34 Yet intertextual references to, for instance, Kafka, an appeal to mechanically reproducible images, as well as the intimation of the kinds of moments of illumination described by Benjamin, also indicate an attachment to modernism that asserts itself despite these postmodern traits. On the one hand, the characteristically hybrid form of Sebald’s prose marks it as postmodern; his narratives are part biography, autobiography, historical novel, detective fiction, travelogue, but no single one of these.35 On the other, its hybridity also comprises intertextual links with a distinctively modernist canon (Kafka, Benjamin, Nabokov) and is symptomatic of ‘an intensifying dialectical interplay’ between modernism and
Sebald and Ransmayr are caught between a contemporary espousal of postmodernist gestures and a nostalgic or melancholic attachment to modernist ones, a position that is bound to ‘the longer history of modernity’ and reflects the difficulties of writing after 1945.

A further indicator of the authors’ ambivalent position vis-à-vis modernism is their concern for place and travel. In the second section of After Nature, Sebald describes the historical figure of Vitus Bering, giving an early sign of his interest in travel and exploration, one which surely resonated with Ransmayr. As Ian Foster notes, Ransmayr’s status is that of ‘traveller in this world, a kind of Austrian Bruce Chatwin’, a literary affiliation also to be found in Sebald. Ransmayr is a keen mountaineer who has undertaken several expeditions with his mountaineering friend Reinhold Messner and his work is often set in extreme locations. Yet there is a tension between his ‘would-be postmodern rootlessness and visible rootedness’. Indeed, Ransmayr’s love of travel and mountainous landscapes is indicative of a more ambivalent relationship to place, signalling both an attachment to his native Austria and his desire to escape it. Ransmayr lived for many years in West Cork, although he has since returned to Austria to live with his wife in Vienna. The desire for escape and the seeming inevitability of being cast back to one’s place of origin are inscribed in Ransmayr’s writing. These contradictory forces drive his project and, I argue, they respond to a desire to cast off the burden of history. Across his different texts, Ransmayr inscribes and reinscribes gestures of escape, erasure, and overwriting reality: ‘Auf und davon!’ [Up and away!], ‘Aus der Welt schaffen’ [To Remove from the World], and ‘die Erfindung der Welt’ [the invention of reality].

In combination, and in their repetition, these narrative gestures can be understood as a rejection of a historically bound present within, and through, narrative.

Travel and the desire to escape are also key motifs of Sebald’s writing. They are symptomatic of his own ambivalent relationship to place, particularly his place of origin. Sebald was anxious to leave the Allgäu region in which he grew up, but still found himself drawn to peripheral places and identities. His two volumes of literary criticism focus on Austrian literature and it is not for nothing that Sebald has been erroneously labelled an Austrian author. Sebald’s literary work, in particular his ‘English pilgrimage’ The Rings of Saturn, is seen as a kind of travel writing, even exemplifying a ‘poetics of travel’. As scholarship has shown, the spatial, topographical relations in Sebald’s prose are uncanny: the protagonist or narrator wants to escape or even get lost, but instead discovers, often with horror, that he has merely returned to his point of departure. However, if Sebald’s work, like Ransmayr’s, evidences a desire — albeit one which is repeatedly thwarted — to escape the confines of historically bound experience, it is also driven to come closer to an inaccessible past, and these attempts are made through a troubling tendency to appropriate the experiences of others. Sebald often writes about the lives of others, but in so doing he has his narrator almost take possession of these biographies. Where these are the lives of Jewish exiles, it seems Sebald and/or his narrator want to map their own experience of voluntary displacement onto a more violently imposed one, which is to say, they express a wish to have ‘suffered a more literal form of exile’. Sebald claims a restitutory role for literature (CS 240–48;
but critics have also been bound to consider whether his own writing in fact partakes of more questionable forms of appropriation. In her seminal study, Anne Fuchs identifies in Sebald’s work a ‘poetics of memory’, that is, the literary inscription of the memories of others which, being mindful of their otherness, ultimately wards against this. Yet, whilst, as Schlant also argues, Sebald has redefined how literature remembers the lives of others, his narrator often does this in the act of claiming a likeness that erases difference and inscribes himself in the place of another.

Writing from their belated perspective, Ransmayr and Sebald are both concerned with the past and the way in which the past is available to a later generation only in mediated form; which is to say, they are concerned with memory and its fallibility. Memory is found wanting in their texts, firstly, because their narrators and protagonists try to access the memories of others and, secondly, because they try to make sense of traumatic memory, that is, a recollection of the past which is always already marked by the traces of violence. Both authors are interested in the visual as a medium of memory and, in different ways, they both use visual material as part of their narratives. Ransmayr has collaborated with the photographer Willi Puchner, as well as the Austrian artist Manfred Wakolbinger, and he is particularly interested in the work of Anselm Kiefer. In the case of Sebald, it is perhaps above all his innovative use of visual material that makes his work a landmark in the literature of recent times. Sebald famously inserts photographic images in his texts, and he also makes substantial use of other visual material, such as diary pages, newspaper cuttings, receipts, and visiting cards, as well as works by iconic artists (e.g. Courbet, Rembrandt, Pisanello) and lesser-known ones (Jan Peter Tripp, Frank Auerbach). As scholarship has shown, Sebald’s photographs and other visual material far exceed any documentary function; in fact, images are pivotal in blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and memory, and thus contribute in large part to the narrative complexity of Sebald’s work. Indeed, responding to the photographic theories of Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag, Sebald, like the artist Gerhard Richter, uses photography as a means of interrogating categories of referentiality and authenticity. Photographic images feature in Ransmayr’s and Sebald’s work, either as physical inserts in the text, or as textual description (termed ‘narrative photographs’ by Silke Horstkotte). Yet, rather than giving the access to the past which they ostensibly privilege, these images become fixed as objects of melancholic contemplation, even taking on a fetish value. Photographs want to provoke recall of the past, but are in fact prone to expose impenetrable blocks on memory.

Ransmayr and Sebald are both interested in what images can reveal about the past, but they are also plagued by the potential obscurity of visual media and the failure of vision itself, that is, by the threat of blindness. Ransmayr’s second novel, Morbus Kitahara, takes its name (in the original German) from a retinal disease affecting those ‘die so fixiert sind auf ihre Arbeit, auf irgend etwas in ihrem Leben, daß sie sich buchstäblich ein Loch ins eigene Auge starren’ [who are so fixated on their work, on something in their life that they literally stare a hole in their own eye], and it was the intensive work on his first novel which caused Ransmayr
to suffer with the disorder himself. The threat of blindness at once provoked and threatened the production of these texts. Following his experience, Ransmayr was determined to write a book which carried the name of the disease as its title:


[The book title is also about my fear of obscurity, of blindness — The Terrors of Ice and Darkness. As the doctor told me the name of my disease, I thought I would like to write a book bearing the title Morbus Kitahara].

Both novels, then, were produced under the sign of blindness brought about through visual fixation in and on the act of writing. That his first novel came to write about the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust only obliquely and the subsequent one more explicitly (although still without naming it as such) might indicate that Ransmayr’s pathological fixation was bound to the representation of recent history. Whilst the two narratives represent very different engagements with the violence of the war and the Holocaust, both can be understood as having been written under the sign of trauma. In both cases it could be said that Ransmayr’s affliction provoked him to write about a postwar scenario elsewhere. In Chapters 2 and 3, I focus on The Terrors of Ice and Darkness and The Dog King respectively and show how the novels’ shared symptomatology of visual dysfunction links different perspectives on recent German history and marks narrative with blind spots.

Whilst Ransmayr’s own vision was compromised during the production of The Terrors of Ice and Darkness, Sebald, in a letter to the Austrian, praised his ‘klares und weitsichtiges Buch’ [clear and farsighted book]. Sebald’s response alerts us to the dialectical relationship between vision and blindness, clarity and obscurity evident in Ransmayr’s two novels, and it directs us to the same tension underlying his own work. Sebald’s prose is obscured by a series of blind spots which appear perhaps as after-images of the visual dysfunction which affected him also. Sebald’s vision failed him in 1997, an experience which finds expression in his final prose work Austerlitz (2001), when his narrator visits an ophthalmologist in London. Like Ransmayr, he is diagnosed with a temporary disorder affecting middle-aged men ‘die zuviel mit Schreiben und Lesen beschäftigt seien’ [who spent too much time reading and writing] (A 55; 51–52). Richard Sheppard notes the biographical correspondence between Sebald and his narrator and wonders ‘whether this could have been a psychosomatic condition brought about by Max’s “increasingly” painful memories of the “sinister”, “blinding” side of his psychic ancestry and everything with which this had become associated over the years’. Moreover, as Uwe Schütte points out, Sebald’s visual disorder emerges at the time when he breaks off his work on his so-called Korsika-Projekt [Corsica Project] — left following his death only as manuscripts — and devotes himself fully to Austerlitz. Sebald’s visual disorder can then be understood as the symptom of a work crisis. For Sebald, ‘the eyes are the most vulnerable part of a person or animal’ and he claimed to be afraid of any kind of surgical procedure, particularly the removal of cataracts. By extrapolation, these personal comments indicate the complexity of the visual element of his work:
obscuring marks such as cataracts not only compromise vision, but also shield the gaze from what cannot be looked upon directly or immediately.

**Traces of Trauma in W. G. Sebald**

The violence of the Second World War and the Holocaust constitutes a legacy of destruction for Sebald. Born in the last year of the war into a sheltered rural community, he was left with the sense of having missed something that still determined his identity.\(^5\) In the third, autobiographical section of *After Nature*, Sebald’s poetic subject recalls how, already in his earliest years, he perceives the shadow of an unknown, indescribable catastrophe cast over his world:

\[
[...]
\begin{align*}
\text{[...]} & \text{ I grew up,} \\
& \text{despite the dreadful course} \\
& \text{of events elsewhere, on the northern} \\
& \text{edge of the Alps, so it seems} \\
& \text{to me now, without any} \\
& \text{idea of destruction. But the habit} \\
& \text{of often falling down in the street and} \\
& \text{often sitting with bandaged hands} \\
& \text{by the open window between the potted} \\
& \text{fuchsias, waiting for the} \\
& \text{pain to subside and for hours} \\
& \text{doing nothing but looking out,} \\
& \text{early on induced me to imagine} \\
& \text{a silent catastrophe that occurs} \\
& \text{almost unperceived.} \\
& \text{What I thought up at the time} \\
& \text{[...]} \\
& \text{I have never got over.] (AN 76–77; 86–87)}}
\end{align*}
\]

Removed from the time and place of destruction, the child senses its after-effects in small but repeated accidents. After falling down in the street, he retreats to a safe space, but is overwhelmed by the feeling that there is in fact no security or resort. With his hands bandaged, the child cuts a helpless figure who, perhaps out of fear
and ineptitude, can only sit and watch from the window. He waits for the pain to subside, for the ‘Nachlassen der Schmerzen’, but perhaps what develops in its place, or what persists as an echo, is a sort of legacy of pain, ‘Nachlass der Schmerzen’. The significance of these feelings can only be understood as the child comes to know the extent of, and reasons for, the destruction he detects. But essentially they only make tangible his exclusion from the world into which he has been born. In this sense, the belated awareness of earlier violence and its dislocating after-effects felt through the small wounds of childhood read like a narrative of psychoanalysis. Freud’s psychoanalytic model of trauma and its belated impact clearly resonated with Sebald’s thinking; on several occasions he evokes the language of trauma and its after-effects to describe the re-emergence of violent history in symptomatic form.59 In the foreword to On the Natural History of Destruction (1997), Sebald writes: ‘[d]aß diese Katastrophe dennoch Spuren in meinem Gedächtnis hinterlassen hat, das versuchte ich anhand längerer Passagen aus meinen eigenen literarischen Arbeiten zu zeigen’ [I tried to show, through passages of some length taken from my own literary works, that this catastrophe had nonetheless left its mark on my mind] (NHD 5–6; viii). In my discussion of Sebald’s later prose texts The Emigrants and Austerlitz, I draw on two of Freud’s case histories to show how the belated effects of trauma are experienced in neurotic symptoms, in phobias, falls, and dreams.

As Sebald emphasizes in interviews and in his literary work, two factors hindered his attempt to make sense of the legacy of destruction with which he was confronted: firstly, the remote location of his birth; and secondly, the postwar conspiracy of silence which prevented people from talking about recent events. It was only upon a visit to Munich that the young Sebald saw the evidence of the substantial damage of war. Since this was the first time he had seen a big city and his father said nothing about what confronted them, he took this to be ‘eine naturgeschichtliche Gegebenheit größerer Städte’ [a natural historical fact of larger towns].60 His encounter with the aftermath of destruction and the effort of understanding its significance for his generation clearly affected Sebald and he has his narrator (always to be aligned with himself as author) return to this primal scene in his prose work (V 204; 187, E 46; 30). As well as his father’s silence on the matter of the war, Sebald also detected a kind of screen obscuring the work of authors who had been in the Wehrmacht: ‘So kam es wohl, daß man als Nachgeborener beim Lesen ihrer Bücher immer das Gefühl hat, hier stehen irgendwelche Paravents herum, hinter denen es Dinge gibt, die man nicht sehen kann’ [And so this was probably why, reading their books as someone of a later generation, one always had the feeling that there were some kind of blinds around everything, that behind them were things that one can’t see].61 Then, when ‘diese Leichen auf die Schulbank geschoben [wurden]’ [these bodies [of the concentration camps] were thrust onto the school desk], Sebald was frustrated by the lack of explanation, let alone discussion, which accompanied this crude gesture; it was clearly carried out under obligation and with deep unease by those charged with ‘educating’ the next generation.62

In Sebald’s view, Germany’s response to National Socialism was found wanting: intellectuals shied away from the task of confronting the National Socialist past,
remaining silent in the first instance, then, as some of the facts became apparent in the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, retreating into more traditional forms of scholarship. Sebald was particularly critical of the literary reaction in the immediate postwar period, claiming it was morally and aesthetically insufficient. He was no more persuaded by the efforts of the literary circle Gruppe 47, which he felt to be nothing but an embarrassment. Moreover, the group’s exclusivity and elitism prevented more avant-garde voices, like those of the surrealist Konrad Bayer, from being heard. Nevertheless, Sebald was acutely aware of the difficulties of formulating a response commensurate with, and respectful of, the enormity of the traumatic experiences of others, and he believed that only figures such as Alexander Kluge and Thomas Bernhard had developed forms radical enough to engage meaningfully with this legacy. Kluge’s use of documentary sources was instrumental in Sebald’s own development of intermedial narrative strategies, and it was Bernhard’s ‘persicopic’ style, that is, his mode of narrating ‘at one remove, at two removes, at two or three’, which exemplified what Sebald believed to be a necessarily oblique and tangential approach to the subject of the Holocaust. In these models, Sebald finds formal devices for turning the fact of difference into an authentic encounter with the past.

Indeed, in writing ‘after Auschwitz’, Sebald prioritized the pursuit of authenticity, eschewing the empty performance of enforced, ritualized remembrance. He saw that it was the survivors who could come closest to the truth of traumatic experience and that the survivor literature of Primo Levi and Jean Améry offered a paradigm for the narration of a traumatic past and thus a means of bearing witness. Sebald wrote three essays on Améry and made him a template of sorts for both Paul Bereyter in The Emigrants and the eponymous protagonist of Austerlitz. Sebald’s encounter with the writings of Améry was not only formative for showing a means of representing the trauma of the Holocaust which went beyond the inadequacies of early postwar literature, but for giving voice to victims from more peripheral locations:


[his grandfather comes from Hohenems near Bregenz, where my grandfather also was often. [...] The history of the Jews didn’t just happen in Berlin and Hamburg and Frankfurt, but also right in the provinces, so there where I came from.] Reading Améry was a ‘turning point’ for Sebald’s own writing, but his statement also signals a danger present in his work, namely, claiming an affiliation or likeness with another. On the one hand, Sebald is struck by Améry’s way of narrating the experiences Sebald himself could never have known, but on the other, Améry’s links to peripheral, rural topographies suggest an affinity with Sebald’s own sense of exclusion and marginal identity. Although the two authors seem opposed, one a victim of the Holocaust, one born into a community of bystanders or even perpetrators, Sebald perceives a proximity to Améry, a tendency that derives from
an encounter with the seemingly other, but which comes to collapse that difference. In interview Sebald claims to be alert to the dangers of encroaching on territory which is not his own, a danger perhaps inherent in responding to the difficult imperative of writing about the lives of others, but as readers we must remain alert to such ‘narratophilic’ desires.\(^{70}\)

The after-effects of destruction and the legacy of violence with which Sebald grew up provoked in him an ambivalent reaction: he was driven away from his home country, which he felt to be a place of hypocrisy and disavowal, but felt compelled to address this trauma in a way that acknowledged the impossibility of engaging with it in any immediate sense. As I will show through close readings of *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, Sebald’s literary work is the inscription of this attempt to find a means of engaging with Germany’s violent past. In his first substantial prose work, *Vertigo*, Sebald seems to depart from this personal legacy by retracing the lives of his literary forebears — Stendhal, Robert Walser, and Franz Kafka, amongst others. In inscribing himself in a genealogy of European literature, he moves away from the specificity of his own origins. But, as Sebald notes, *Vertigo* does in fact have ‘very strong autobiographical elements’:\(^ {71}\) the narrator (who can be understood to be Sebald) tries to move away from his place of origin (‘all’estero’ is the title of the second part), but in the final autobiographical chapter he returns home (‘il ritorno in patria’ is the title of the last). The movement ‘all’estero’ always implies a return home, however fraught and unresolved this will be: it is retraced throughout and perhaps determines Sebald’s literary project as a whole. Sebald wants to liberate his narratives from patrilinear structures of (family) history, but is nevertheless drawn back to them.

Sebald’s unresolved relationship with his place of origin is redoubled in his self-confessed attachment to the period of his birth as a time of terrible violence and to its immediate aftermath:


[I always had the impression and increasingly have the impression that I come from this time. If one can speak of an epochal homeland, then what interests me most are the years between 1944 and 1950.]\(^ {72}\)

Sebald’s work circles persistently around this traumatic core and was set to continue to do so; his next project was to focus on the period 1900–50 and material in the archives relating to this is marked with the initials *WW*, which stand for ‘World War’.\(^ {73}\) Although Sebald’s untimely death means this remains a rather tantalizing premise, *WW* underlines how the trauma of war persists in his thinking: encompassing both World Wars and potentially looking forward to the renewed outbreak of international conflict, it indicates the kind of seriality and repetition which Sebald found so fascinating (*WWI, WWII, WW ...*). Taking the first of his own initials, *WW* also sees W. G. Sebald redoubled as an author condemned to the compulsive inscription of war on a global scale. In Chapter 4, I will consider how Sebald shows the after-effects of world war already in *The Emigrants*. In these
four long stories he describes the lives of protagonists who lived through both world wars, but his narrator — who can be aligned with the ‘Nachgeborener’ Sebald, that is, the author of a later generation — views them through the lens of the conflict closest to him (though not experienced by him), namely, the Second World War. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald goes on to trace the long history of destruction via an intricate investigation of natural disaster and human violence. Yet despite its breadth of focus the narrator of Sebald’s ‘pilgrimage’ is returned to the most recent examples of destruction and the disorientating alienation he feels as a result of coming too late to have experienced them first hand. Visiting Orfordness, the narrator ruminates on its recent military function and the uncanny atmosphere of this deserted, ‘extraterritorialen’ [extra-territorial] space (RS 278; 233). The description of one abandoned site becomes confused with the language familiar from the descriptions of another, however, and even the accompanying image, taken from a low angle, suggests the notorious ramp of Auschwitz (RS 280; 235). The propensity for the Holocaust to emerge tangentially in Sebald’s narratives, via the associative networks that are the product of his ‘Beziehungswahn’, or obsession with connections, is a troubling part of his project, but one which underpins it and which is determined, first and foremost, by his belated status. Indeed, at Orfordness, the narrator feels like ‘einem nachgeborenen Fremden’ [some latter-day stranger] (RS 282; 237) and we could say that this is the sentiment which overwhelms the narrator in all of Sebald’s prose; like the author, he comes too late to understand the violence which precedes him and in his attempt to do so retrospectively he feels alien (both in the awareness of his different (religious, ethnic, cultural) identity and as a consequence of his late birth).

**Traces of Trauma in Christoph Ransmayr**

National Socialism has been a persistent presence in Ransmayr’s life, but always and necessarily in mediated form: ‘Das Thema war seit frühesten erzählerischen Zeiten für mich da und hat mich beschäftigt, bedroht’ [For me, the subject has been there since the time of earliest storytelling and has preoccupied, threatened me]. Despite its perceived threat, the fascist past is also an imperative force driving Ransmayr’s literary engagement with the victims, whom he sees cast into an eternal confrontation with the recent past: ‘für die ist die Vergangenheit nicht vergangen, für die gibt es nur diese Unzeit, in der alle Zeiten, ihre Vergangenheit, ihre Gegenwart, ihre Zukunft zusammenschließen’ [for them, the past is not past, for them, there is only this non-time in which all times, their past, their present, their future join together]. Like Sebald, Ransmayr refers to the influence of Jean Améry and Primo Levi on him as a writer. They are representatives of a mode of testimonial literature which says what he cannot and which speaks the imperative of bearing witness to traumatic experiences. Moreover, for Ransmayr, Améry and Levi exemplify not only the after-effects of trauma, but their intensification over time (for both of them, reaching a tragic climax in suicide):

*Es gibt ein Leiden, das nicht aufhört, und auch eine Traurigkeit, die kein Ende hat: Schicksale wie das von Améry oder Primo Levi, beide sind Jahrzehnte nach*
ihrer Befreiung an dem, was sie erlitten haben, zugrunde gegangen, haben sich umgebracht.

[There is a suffering which does not stop and also a sadness which does not end: fates like those of Améry or Primo Levi, both were destroyed by what they suffered decades after their liberation, killed themselves.]

But, like Sebald, Ransmayr is aware of the distance separating his realm of experience from those who suffered in the camps. Writing *The Dog King*, he draws on the dual perspectives of his father, a teacher, and Fred Rotblatt, a Holocaust survivor; in combination, they have taught him much about what he cannot know himself. Ransmayr acknowledges this debt in the dual dedication of his second novel. Moreover, Ransmayr believes that those who lived through National Socialism can tell him more than mere historical research: ‘Was ich über die finsteren Zeiten des vergangenen Jahrhunderts weiß, habe ich in wesentlichen Teilen von Fred und meinem Vater erfahren, ich rede hier von Angst, Trauer, den Schmerzen der Erinnerung, nicht von statistischen Fakten’ [What I know about the dark times of the past century I learnt for the most part from Fred and my father; I’m talking here about fear, mourning, the pain of memory, not about statistics] (GT 123).

Ransmayr sees himself as a politically engaged writer and is alert to the aftereffects of war and persecution. He has emphasized the unresolved nature of any attempts at coming to terms with the past and the urgent need for the continued work of mourning and memory. Speaking of survivors and of subsequent generations, he says, ‘[e]s kann doch nicht sein, daß der eine sagt: Vergessen wir’s!, während der andere immer noch an der Tortur leidet, an seinen Narben, seinen brennenden Schultergelenken, die ihm unter der Folter aus der Gelenkspfanne gezerrt wurden’ [it cannot be the case that someone says ‘forget about it!’ while someone else is still suffering as a result of abuse, his scars, his burning shoulder joints which were wrenched out of their sockets as he was tortured]. However, Ransmayr’s project is also driven by a problematic desire for liberation. In writing about the weight of the past as it oppresses others, he seeks to liberate himself from the burden of history:

Aber während der Arbeit des Erzählens muß ich mich von allen diesen Gefühlen wieder lösen, um etwas zu schaffen, das nicht mehr identisch ist, nicht mehr bloß identisch sein kann mit der Wirklichkeit, mit der Ebensee oder Kaprun, sondern etwas Eigenes ist, mein Eigenes, meine Geschichte.

[But in the work of narrating I have to free myself from all these feelings again in order to produce something that is no longer identical, that can no longer just be identical with reality, with the Ebensee or Kaprun, but which is proper, my own, my (hi)story.]

The personal need to free himself from a history perceived as overwhelming dominates Ransmayr’s narrative project; it is in the act of writing history as narrative or story — and emphatically his own — that he attempts to regain control over the past.

Before Ransmayr established himself as a major literary author, he worked as a journalist, becoming editor of *Extrablatt*, a left-liberal Austrian magazine for politics
and culture, in the early 1980s. Some of these journalistic texts appeared together in the 1997 volume Der Weg nach Surabaya [The Path to Surabaya]. His first literary work was published in 1982. Strahlender Untergang: Ein Entwässerungsprojekt oder die Entdeckung des Wesentlichen [Radiating Decline: A Dehydration Project or the Discovery of the Essential] describes the systematic erasure of the subject from the world as part of a scientific experiment and from the text as part of a narrative experiment. As such, it can be seen as a prologue to Ransmayr’s subsequent prose texts.80 Radiating Decline anticipates Ransmayr’s later work because it introduces a tension between the world of reality and the world of reality as narrative construct; ‘die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit’ [the invention of reality] as he comes to call it (LW 287; my translation). Radiating Decline also initiates the critique of progress which Ransmayr makes throughout his project; its German title, Strahlender Untergang, echoes Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s Der Untergang der Titanic [The Sinking of the Titanic], published four years earlier, and indicates the same interrogation of faith in Enlightenment values which this in part undertakes.81 With his dehydration project, Ransmayr makes an ironic comment on the notion of progress. It is one example of a so-called ‘neue Wissenschaft’, which has unburdened itself of the trappings of conventional science, of instruments and data, and will be responsible for ‘die Organisation des Verschwindens’ [the organization of disappearance] (RD 21) on a mass scale. Ransmayr’s new science parodies the strivings of the old by having it culminate in the erasure of the subject.

The desert of Radiating Decline is Ransmayr’s stage for the first in a series of dystopian, apocalyptic visions, the basic condition of which is the absence of any human trace:

Die Leblosigkeit,  
die Reinheit  
der geschaffenen Landschaft  
ist unabdingbare Voraussetzung

[The lifelessness,  
the purity  
of the landscape created  
is a non-negotiable prerequisite] (RD 42)

Beginning with his dehydration project, Ransmayr constructs postmodern, post-apocalyptic, post-historical worlds for his investigations into the status of the postmodern subject. But on some level he seems also to reinscribe the violence which is the very condition of this ‘post’ world. In order for Ransmayr to undertake his narrative project after 1945, to write post-catastrophe, he must eradicate all traces of that past: Ransmayr wants to wrest the site of inscription from the grasp of history, but what he comes to write of is renewed catastrophe. Indeed his dehydration project is not merely a plan exemplified though the case study of his volunteer; it has already been set in motion and its ‘successful’ instrumentalization — which is to say, the eradication it has already achieved — inevitably recalls recent history:

Keine Ahnung,  
wie viele im Terrarium
As the volunteer is starved of what he needs to live, memory becomes hallucination: ‘Wie war das bloß damals’ [Just how was it back then] (RD 52). The loss of memory is part of the process of wiping the slate clean, but its recurrence, even as fragments, indicates the impossibility of this project. Indeed — and also in this sense Radiating Decline is programmatic for Ransmayr’s later work — the narrative drive for erasure, for the production of a tabula rasa with which to counter the accumulated evidence of totalitarianism and hubris, is always stalled by the persistence of the past, made manifest in the return of the repressed:

Im Jahre 1809, [...] 
habe man hier die teils verwesten, 
teils mumifizierten Überreste von zweitausend Mann 
und eintausendachtundhundert Kamelen gefunden — 
Schlußbild einer großartigen Karawane

[In 1809
the partly decomposed, 
partly mummified remains of two thousand men 
and one thousand eight hundred camels were found here — 
final image of a magnificent caravan] (RD 12)

This remnant of the past also anticipates a central concern of Ransmayr’s first novel; namely, the paradoxical effects of an indifferent environment which both devours the subject and preserves his remains. Whilst the desert preserves evidence of human presence in the sand, its harsh conditions expose these remains to processes of decomposition which resist comprehensive reconstruction. On one level, this is a ‘Schlußbild’ marking the end of life, but on another it shows how the past returns in a series of incomplete, haunting ‘Nachbilder’, or after-images. It indicates how already in Radiating Decline Ransmayr is concerned with the visual and its obstruction through blindness. Indeed the final section describes in painful detail the decline of the volunteer, including the damage to his sight caused by the sun’s rays:

und die Verbrennung läßt eine blinde, 
gekrümmte Fläche zurück

[and the burning leaves a blind, 
curved surface behind] (RD 57)

The sun leaves blind spots on the subject’s visual field, ‘Blendungsbilder’ [blinding images] (RD 56), which are set to return throughout Ransmayr’s project: visual dysfunction is symptomatic for the return of the past, despite the attempt made in and through narrative to erase its traces completely and definitively.
The past also persists in the text’s status as ‘Flaschenpost’. Despite his attempts to extricate himself from the web of history in order to undertake a postmodern narrative project, Ransmayr is confronted repeatedly by the flotsam and jetsam of the past: nothing is lost — it simply reappears in another place. With the image of human and animal remains, *Radiating Decline* secretes a narrative of return: it is itself a message in a bottle, a message that records and recalls a failed attempt at erasure without trace. In anticipation of the new edition published in 2000, the text appears once more on Ransmayr’s desk: ‘Wie ein Brief, vor achtzehn Jahren geschrieben, ins Blaue geschickt und nun auf Seewegen zurückgekommen’ [Like a letter, written eighteen years ago, sent into the blue and now returned on the seas] (RD 5). In his preface, the author wonders if this return might be the opportunity to narrate his catastrophe to some kind of conclusion, to finish it completely and definitively: ‘Natürlich ist die Versuchung groß, diesen Untergang jetzt und möglicherweise für immer abzuschließen’ [Of course there is a great temptation to conclude this decline now and possibly forever] (RD 5). Almost two decades later, he describes how his first literary work and his first attempt at writing the subject out of narrative, of writing catastrophe out of history, has returned after all.

*Radiating Decline* is also a prologue to Ransmayr’s subsequent texts, because with its closing image of a pack of sledge dogs, it is literally drawn on towards his first novel. The heat of the desert changes to cold following a supernova, the same cold which dominates *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*: its mists becoming denser and denser,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bis} \\
\text{zur völligen Schwärze,} \\
\text{zur unwiderruflichen Finsternis} \\
\text{und es endlich} \\
\text{kühler wird} \\
[\text{until total blackness,} \\
\text{irrevocable darkness} \\
\text{and it finally} \\
\text{becomes cooler}] \ (RD \ 55)
\end{align*}
\]

In his hallucinatory state of extreme dehydration, the subject of *Radiating Decline* visualizes scenes of slaughter; his cambric cloak becomes a white plastic butcher’s apron, which in turn extends to become the Arctic expanse of Ransmayr’s next text:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Die Schürze liegt dort und glänzt,} \\
\text{eine endlose Schürze die Ebene,} \\
\text{eine rissige Schürze aus Packeis,} \\
\text{und jetzt} \\
\text{setzt ein Zug Schlittenhunde} \\
\text{kläffend über die Risse hinweg} \\
[\text{The apron is lying there and shines,} \\
\text{an endless apron the plain,} \\
\text{a fissured apron of pack ice,} \\
\text{and now} \\
\text{a convoy of sledge dogs} \\
\text{jumps over the fissures, yelping}] \ (RD \ 60–61)
\end{align*}
\]
The image of the butcher’s apron becoming snowscape suggests a surface that is intended to cover and protect from traces of blood, but which records them as it does so. And the traces of blood in the snow indeed return in *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness* in the marks left by the fissured paws of sledge dogs (*TID* 223; 160).

The pack of dogs embodies the voracious force of the dictum *homo homini lupus*, which drives Ransmayr’s subsequent work. Even where the ‘neue Wissenschaft’ of his dehydration experiment has reduced the human subject to a husk, ‘das Wesentliche’ cannot be contained by the narrative, rather desire and violence surge forward towards the next wasteland. The ‘gewaltige Eisprozession’ [enormous ice-procession] (*RD* 61) is formed as the dogs and their sledges are coupled to beasts of burden and their sedans: the desert meets the Arctic as one text is conjoined to another and we make the transition via a vehicle or assemblage of the type described in the anti-centric theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.83

In the following chapters, I show how four prose texts (Ransmayr’s *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness* and *The Dog King*, and Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*) carry different marks as a remainder or reminder of traumatic experiences, marks which are found both in the field of the visual, as blind spots, and in the narrative topography, as physical limitations. In their narratives of travel and recollection, Ransmayr and Sebald have their narrators and protagonists engage in the work of seeking and preserving traces, of ‘Spurensuche’ and ‘Spurensicherung’. To evoke these essentially criminological terms indicates the reconstructive work undertaken in each case to understand traumatic events retrospectively. However, where, after the event, narrative must rely on the insubstantial material of memory, the work of searching for and archiving traces is exposed as highly precarious. Furthermore, the acts of tracing trauma, of going over the last vestiges of an elusive past, both within these prose narratives and in the writing projects of their authors, work at once to reconstruct and obliterate the historical experience of human location in, and movement through, space. Before these close readings, I will set out in greater detail the terms of the theoretical framework being used here. This will also allow for a more extensive engagement with the kinds of recuperative, reconstructive gestures provoked by trauma and utilized in the attempt to mourn, remember, and work through violent loss. The theoretical framework used in the following chapters relates to the ambivalent position of these post-postwar writers vis-à-vis different narrative and epistemological modes, which is to say, between modernism and postmodernism. It draws on the thought of two key modernist thinkers, Freud and Benjamin, and it follows postmodern, post-structuralist attempts to liberate the subject from linear historical and genealogical models exemplified in the anti-oedipal thinking of Deleuze and Guattari.

Notes to the Introduction

2. For example, Robert MacFarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2007); Waterlog, a Norwich exhibition held in 2009 showing artists’ responses to *The Rings of Saturn* (including
Tacita Dean’s video installation *Michael Hamburger*; and Katie Mitchell’s 2012 production of *The Rings of Saturn* as an audioplay at Schauspiel Köln.


8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisma: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1953), p. 31. In thinking about cultural representation after 1945, critics have often collapsed the inherently dialectical structure of Adorno’s statement. His critique in fact relies on the continued production of poetry after Auschwitz in order to detect the potential carried within it for an ethically engaged mode of writing. See Klaus Hofmann, ‘Poetry after Auschwitz — Adorno’s Dictum’, *German Life and Letters*, 52 (2005), 182–94.


25. This volume has not yet been translated, so I have used the provisional title suggested by Jo Catlin and Richard Habbitt in their introduction to *Saturn’s Moons* (p. 1).


27. *Saturn’s Moons*, p. 138 (Ransmayr’s name appears incorrectly as ‘Ransmayer’).


33. Interview with Sigrid Löffler, ‘... das Thema hat mich bedroht’, in Die Erfindung der Welt, ed. by Wittstock, pp. 213–19 (p. 217). The title of Wittstock’s collection of critical essays uses the title of Ransmayr’s acceptance speech for the Franz-Kafka-Prize in 1995 (Die Erfindung der Welt, ed. by Wittstock, pp. 198–202). This is also echoed in the title of Spitz’s monograph, Erfindene Welten.
35. Sebald is emphatic that his ‘medium’ is prose and not the novel (Sigrid Löffler, ‘‘Wildes Denken’’: Gespräch mit W. G. Sebald’, in W. G. Sebald, ed. by Loquai, pp. 135–37 (p. 137)); Austerlitz was printed erroneously as ‘Roman’ (Lynn L. Wolff, ‘‘Das metaphysische Unterfutter der Realität’’: Recent Publications and Trends in W. G. Sebald Research’, Monatshefte, 99 (2007), 78–101 (p. 81)).
38. Ian Foster, ‘The Limits of Memory: Christoph Ransmayr’s Journalistic Writings’, in Neighbours and Strangers: Literary and Cultural Relations in Germany, Austria and Central Europe since 1989, ed. by Ian Foster and Juliet Wigmore, German Monitor 59 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 159–72
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40. ‘Auf und davon!’ and ‘aus der Welt schaffen’ are the leitmotifs of Geständnisse eines Touristen [Confessions of a Tourist] and The Terrors of Ice and Darkness respectively, and ‘Die Erfindung der Welt’ is the title of Ransmayr’s acceptance speech for the Franz-Kafka Prize.

42. Zisselsberger, The Undiscover’d Country.
47. Schlant, Language of Silence, p. 234.
50. Clive Scott’s careful analysis of Sebald’s working library at Marbach shows the extent of Sebald’s dialogue with photographic theory (‘Sebald’s Photographic Annotations’, in Saturn’s Moons, ed. by Catlin and Hibbitt, pp. 217–45). Texts on photography which are frequently cited as having influenced Sebald include Walter Benjamin, ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ [‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’], (WB 1.2 431–69) and ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’ [‘Little History of Photography’] (WB 2.1 368–83); Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984); Susan Sontag, On Photography (London: Penguin, 1977). In Corinna Belz’s documentary about Gerhard Richter, we see an image of Courbet’s The Oak of Vercingetorix (which we recognize from Sebald’s The Emigrants). Richter uses this as one of his ‘templates’ for his painting because he says it has a photographic quality (Corinna Belz, dir., Gerhard Richter Painting (Zero One Film, 2011)).
52. Löffler, ‘... das Thema hat mich bedroht’, p. 213.
53. Ibid.
57. ‘Echoes from the Past’, p. 351.
60. ‘Hitlers pyromane Phantasien’, p. 261.
61. Ibid., p. 263.
75. Löffler, ‘... das Thema hat mich bedroht’, p. 214 (my emphasis).
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