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The Worlds of Eternal Present – the quest for the hidden patterns of Baroque thought in Sebald's literature

I now think that the time will not pass away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments in time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us, is true.1 (Vintage, 2001)

The exploration of the depths of time was first fully commenced in the Baroque era and continued to be one of the main preoccupations of our civilisation in the centuries to come. But few contemporary writers engage so profoundly with the currents of time, with precisely those issues that were first studied in the Baroque age. Most of Sebald's questions are also Baroque questions that emerge from the narrative of his two key novels: *The Rings of Saturn* and *Autserlitz.* Behind every element of his writing Sebald is looking to unravel the importance of the past in our present and to explore both the memory and oblivion and their relation to the very nature of ourselves.

The time for Sebald is not continuous but fragmented, not linear but circular in its flow. It is the ever present composition of diverse elements, belonging to different ages and epochs. Like his emblematic *"rings of Saturn"* the time is composed of individual particles belonging to our presents, as well as to our pasts that perpetually ambulate in one unending vortex. All the pasts and all the presents, all our visions and our memories, our perceptions and reminiscences, converge.

This very fragmentation of Sebald's view on both time and space also resonate throughout the Baroque world. Not unlike Sebald's literature, the Baroque is decidedly difficult to define: they both chart an inconstant, fluid and ever-changing universe. Although already established in the Renaissance and the Mannerist culture, the notions of the fragment and the fragmentary were considerably elaborated in the Baroque age and shaped implicitly the outlines of the Baroque world. This concept encompassed a wealth of meanings spanning from "particular", "unfinished", "discontinuous" to "incomplete" thus reflecting the polivalence and plurality of then-contemporary worldview.

Primarily, fragmentation was evident on the political level, with religious wars transforming Europe into a continually changing compendium of fragments. It also resulted in a proliferation of capitals in the Baroque world, further enhancing the polycentricity that became one defining cultural element of the age. Thus, the fragmentation of this period was not necessarily negative, but encompassed a wealth of meanings.

1 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 144.

In the Baroque culture fragmentation had a wide span of interpretations - it was used as a means of propagations - respectively in sacred and the secular sphere. Yet, the significance of the fragment in the Baroque age was further elaborated denoting the fragmentation of the world and the human being. In the world that was pepreptualy disolving and crumbling into fragments, the notion of the fragmented self came to faithfully depict the state of the mind of the Baroque man. Few Baroque concepts encompassed both the for understandings of time and space; denoted both abundance and transience; having equally positive and negative connotations. In the Baroque age, as in Sebald's novels, the concept of fragmentation defined the world and ourselves.2 (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017)

Sebald's novels themselves also display a high level of hybridity, that great legacy of the Baroque culture. While the artists of the Baroque strove to unify sculpture, painting and architecture in order to achieve one beautiful whole of the *bel composto* so evident in Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* or *Cathedra Petri*, in the same way Sebald merged documentary, historiography, fiction and travel writing in order to create a new artistic form in itself. Sebald himself claimed that his literature did not belong to any fixed category, but that it unites all of them. In the same way that many Baroque artworks evade usual classification and transcend genres becoming the hybrids of different arts and media.

Hybridity was not only the formal characteristic of the Baroque art, but it also resided in the very essence of then contemporary cultural idiom. It gave it the much needed flexibility and power of amalgamation that transformed the arts of the Baroque from the purely European to the first global culture. The same hybridity of content is also pronounced in respectively *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* – both of these books constantly interweave the past and the present, the time evoked and the time perceived. His writing stands between memory and fiction, between record and recollection. Sebald`s narratives also consistof several constantly overlapping entities – that of the personal observation, the realm of the documentary and the one of the historical study.

Therefore, I propose, Sebald's writing also needs to be examined through the concepts of the Baroque aesthetics and particularly its concepts of time and space. The connection between Sebald's books and the Baroque aesthetics is not accidental. In both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* we can identify the influence of the theoretical work of a 17th century medic and philosopher Sir Thomas Browne. In *TheRings of Saturn* Browne's presence is

2On Baroque fragmentation see Todorović,*The Spaces that Never Were in Early Modern Art: Exploration of Edges and Frontiers*, p. 1-41.

more immediate if not always obvious, while in *Austerlitz* many concepts could not be understood without knowledge of Browne's philosophy. Like our writer, Browne was a highly interdisciplinary man of letters, a medic, philosopher and even natural historian. His main theoretical concepts, that would prove to be so pivotal for the unravelling of Sebald's vision of temporality, were elaborated in two books: *Religio Medici* and *Urn Burial,* both written and published in Norfolk, the same area where Sebald spent most of his life and where he situated the narrative of his *TheRings of Saturn.*

Besides other philosophical concepts present in Browne's work, his thoroughly novel sense of space and time was left to our age as one of his most important legacies, as one inseparable temporal plane of *eternal present* where different times and spaces co–exist simultaneously.3(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) For him, as for Sebald, there is no past or present - just one uninterrupted temporal continuum.

Therefore Sebald`s books ought to be considered as works of someone who deeply understood Baroque perception of the world, and all the nuances behind Brown's concept of *eternal present*. For Browne, as for Sebald, the *eternal present* exemplified itself through diverse media, different visual regimes and had several manifestations. All those topics, inherent to the Baroque culture, would recur in Sebald's novels, particularly *the eternal instant and the fragmented universe.*

The Plurality of Worlds confined in one Eternal Instant

Both Sebald's and Browne's notion of *eternal present* included the experience of time as a complex multi focused vision of the world. The multiple field of vision that Sebald so elegantly used to surface different pieces of the past in his books, was one of the key characteristics of the Baroque sense of both space and time. It could be said that the Baroque aesthetics preferred the visual plurality manifested both in the multiplicity of picture planes and in the saturation of the visual information offered to the spectator.

It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry….4 (Vintage, 2001)

3 Todorović, *Hidden Legacies of Baroque Thought…*,33-60.
4Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 181.

Although these words are spoken by Austerlitz to envisage his own personal experience of both space and time, they could have been equally used to depict the experience of movement through some of the Baroque sacred spaces, like Borromini's *San Carlo alle Quatro Fontane* in Rome.

Created as one of the most dynamic spatial phenomena of the age, Francesco Borromini's *San Carlo* is the polyphonic understanding of the time moulded into space. He had fully visualised in three dimensions those endless temporal and spatial intertwining present in other media of the Baroque arts. Borromini used the qualities of stone to create elasticity yet unseen. His church is the architectural answer to the illusionistic frescoes of Baccicco's *Il Gesu*, where the beholder is never fully aware of the exact place and time he inhabits, nor can he be certain which medium he perceives. The painting has the voluminosity and depth of sculpture, the stucco looks like gilded bronze, while the statues have the colour of flesh. Like our own misconceptions of both the past and present, that Sebald so often explored, Borromini's space questions the very boundaries of spatial organisation. In his interior of *San Carlo*, loosely based on the shape of the oval, there is no sharp corner, there is no straight wall, everything seems to undulate in one unending movement, forever moving and never ceasing, perpetually existing in one eternal instant like Sebald's vision of time and space where *various spaces interlock according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry*…5.(Vintage, 2001)

As Borromini's space seems to be relentlessly moving, it challenges the usual boundaries between the interior and exterior, between the billowing facade and rippling nave, it also blurs the confines between the palpable world of our present and the *atemporal* domain of the Heavens. In the same way similar liminal spaces in Sebald's literature are connected with the equally ambiguous sense of temporality, the time without chronology:

> Although in my dream I was sitting, transfixed with amazement, in the Chinese pavilion, I was at the same time out in the open, within a foot from the very edge, and knew how fearful it is to cast one's eye so low.6 (Vintage, 1995)

And in *Austerlitz*:

> And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there for the in search of places and people who have some connections with us on the far side of time, so to speak?7

5Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 144.
6Sebald, *TheRings of Saturn*, p. 174.
7Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 360.

Like the beholder in Borromini's church the reader of Sebald's novels is never certain of the space and the age he is in. The landscapes become townscapes of the past, or the stages of a-temporal events. For Sebald the space and time never function as fixed categories, they are forever susceptible to change, always moving with the curious flow of that slippery river of time. Nothing is what it seems, and everything is what is not.

Like Sebald's *Austerlitz* the beholder cannot ascertain what he is experiencing: the solidity of the present, the flow of the past or the infinity of eternity:

> It is as if the time which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as the years behind us were still to come.8

These words by Sebald almost echo the verses of a famous Baroque poet Louis de Gongora who was equally mesmerised by the reversal of the usual roles of Man and Time:

> Where do you imprint your fingerprints
> That I cannot find your trace?
> Now I realise I am wrong
> If I believe you fly, run and roll;
> You are the time, the one who stays,
> And I am the one who goes.9(Glas, 1979)

Such spatial ambiguities were not confined only to the sacred spaces of the Baroque world, but were equally prolific in the other interiors. One of the most curious examples of the unification of different temporal and spatial entities respectively, was Athanasius Kircher's *Mirror Palace.*10(Roma, 1646)

Usually known as one of the last universal men of the Baroque epoch, the Jesuit polymath Athansisus Kircher also founded, in Collegio Romano in 1651, one of the most conspicuous cabinets of rarities of his time. Very quickly his *wunderkammer*, greatly thanks to the widespread network of Jesuit colleges all through the known world, became one of the richest museums in Europe. The museum had to envisage the image of the true faith, of the only righteous Catholic Church, but even more so it had to represent the new approach to both space and time. Like all the collections, Kircher's in Collegio Romano, was also a symbolic image of its founder, the curious portrait of his multiplied self. As Italo Calvino lucidly pointed out about Kircher *It is my image that I want to multiply [in a mirror], but not out of*

8 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 152.
9Louis de Gongora,'Measuring Time by the Stars'.Zvjezdani sat, p. 54-55.
10 For Kircher's Mirror Palace see Athanasuius Kircher, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*(1646).

*narcissism or megalomania . . . on the contrary, I want to conceal, in the midst of so many illusory ghosts of myself, the true me…*11(Picador, 1981)

If there was one object that truly represented that multiplicity of visions, that plurality of both the self and the world, that convergence of the times past and times present, it was the *Mirror Palace* or *Catoptic Box*. The Mirror Palace was the most peculiar illusionary space that the Baroque age had ever created.

It is a Box in the shape of a Theatre, which on the inside is clothed all round in mirrored planes; furthermore, the mirrors on the back are joined to each other, not to the side, or at a right angle, but at an acute angle, hence it curves into a four-sided hollow space; but the horizontal plane is a quadrilateral, which revolves around a moving axis in the centre, and so on four sides it presents a variety of figures or planes; thus the mirrored planes exchanging by reflexion one of the presented planes for another reflect, distribute and multiply the images and by continuously gathering up the same images they break them up optically, so that it is impossible to count them…[12] (Roma, 1646)

The Mirror Palace was a curious device, a box lined with mirrors and equipped with the multiple scenographies that were combined in such a way, that each change of mirrors' positions presented to the beholder a novel visual experience. From interior to the exterior, from the banquet hall to the lavish formal garden, the spectator was offered a sight of, as Kircher himself had explained, the *infinite spaces in motion.* Unlike Borromini's church, the beholder was never a true participant in this space, he always remained outside. However, the illusion that mirrors had fabricated was so powerful, so deceiving, that it created a semblance of immersion in this plurality of worlds that no other enclosed space could have ever offered.

In Kircher's Mirror Palace, as in Sebald's literature, there is never a clear distinction between times and spaces that the beholder perceives, everything is superimposed, everything overlaps, one is never certain where present ceases and past resurfaces.

It seems to me that if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if the future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last…13 (Vintage, 2001)

Or in *The Rings of Saturn*:

And now they are all gathered here, my Berlin relatives, my
German and my English friends, my in-laws, my children, the
living and the dead. Unseen by them, I walk through their midst,
from one room to the another, through galleries, halls and passages.14 (Vintage, 1995)

11Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*…,
[12] Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, 256
13 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 359-360.
14 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 180.

The space Kircher created was the ultimate space, the space that contained all the loci and all the times of this world. It was the space where the beholder encountered, like in Browne's eternal instant, the sense of boundless time, the true image of the a-temporal. Everything in the Mirror Palace was at the same time in the realms of the past present and future, all confined to one single instant.It was truly a place like the one that for *Austerlitz* contained all the hours of his life:

> In fact I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting room where I stood contained all the hours of my past life, all the superimposed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the end'game would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time.15 (Vintage, 2001)

The Mirror Palace by its multiplication of times and spaces actually annihilated any border that could have existed between them. In this space none of the parameters upon which our world is founded are valid any longer. The mirrors of time, for Kircher and for Sebald, forever change their angles, shaping our own fleeting existence in this world.

The Movement and Memory

It was frist in the Baroque period that the concepts of movement and memory were insperably intertwined. The cultural climate of this calamitous age gave an enhanced impetus to the concept of the retrospective journey, the voyage of evocation, into the past, into the history and memory. Similarly to Sebald's process of evoking memory through ambulations of his main protagonists both in *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*, the Baroque man was the first who connected the physical movement and the *movement of the soul*.16(Clio, 2012)
Inner and outer journeys reflected and replicated one another.

In both Sebald's novels the process of walking as recollection, of movement as a symbolic pilgrimage to the past, personal and collective alike,stands as one of the main topoi.Even the innitial title of *The Rings of Saturn* was*An English Pilgrimage,* in order to denote the perpatual ambulations of the author through the paths of Norfolk and the ways of European history. On the other hand, the greatest revelations come to Austerlitz through the very process of walking the cities of his past and present: Antwerp, Paris, Prague, London. In Sebald's novels they are simultaneously the cities of the present and the elusive metropolises of memory. For the Baroque man and for Sebald's heros respectively, it is the movement through space that opens up emotion and allows memory from the past to resurface:

15Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 192-3.
16See Todorović, *O ogledalima, ružama i ništavilu*..., p. 95-122.

Such ideas infaliably come to me in places which have more of the past about them then the present. For instance if I am walking through the city and look into one of those quiet courtyards where nothing has changed for decades, I feel, almost physically the current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion…17(Vintage, 2001)

In the cultural and spiritual climate of the Catholic Reformation the return to the past was seen as a process of enrichment and notone of retrospect. The past of the Early Church had to be revived in order to be believed, had to be restored in order to be included in our present. Religious images like that of S. Cecilia, San Alessio or San Clemente served only as departure points, as an inspiration of one's own recollection of the past. After it was revived that very past ought to be re-lived in the meditations upon holy history of the Christianity and Church itself.18(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017)

Re-enactment of the past lies in the very basis of the meditative mechanism that marked deeply the culture of the Baroque, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignazio Loyola.The connection between movement and memory was deeply embeded in this meditative and mnemonic exercise. The faithful, through a continous set of *exercises* had to meditate upon the passion of Christ, gradually inserting themselves as one of the witnesses of the Biblical narrative. In order to achieve greater identification and *compassio* they ought to found their meditation upon a specific space, to create their own inner scenography of the past and populate it with all the protagonists of the sacred narrative adding themselves at the very end. This concept of meditative visualisation, known as the *composition of place* was a foundation not only of this particular form of Jesuit spiritual pracice, but also determined the relationship between the Baroque man and the virtural spaces of his age.

The Baroque period is rich with examples of evocative spaces that invited the faithful onto a dual journey – the visible and invisible one. The most dispersed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe was the concept of *sacro monti* where the sacred topography of the Holy Land was projected onto the landscapes of Western Europe. From the most renowned in Varallo in North Italy, to the less known but equally suggestiveSacro Monte di Ossuccio (one of the nine *scari monti*which were created only in Lombardy and Piemont at the Baroque age), these mnemonic lands translated the concept of *Spiritual expercises* into the realm of nature. In each of these *landscapes of memory* the cluster of chapels represented one of the chapters in sacred history of the Christ and the Virgin Mary. Through careful ambulation

17Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 359.

18 For the Baroque concept of the return of the past in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* see Todorović, *Hidden Legacies of Baroque Thought…*,p. 33-60.

through these landscapes, from chapel to chapel, not unlike Sebald's main protagonists, the Baroque man pursued a specific voyage of evocation. These spaces offered a particular condensation of time and space, where each particle of the present evoked a past event. It was the space which opened emotion, the locus of self-descovery and inner transformation curiously close to the one experienced by Sebald's Austerlitz:

He had often found himself in the grip of dangerous and and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotions in the Parisian railway stations, he regaded them as places both marked by blissful happiness and profound misfortune.19(Vintage, 2001)

However, mnemonic spaces in the Baroque where not necessary onlyinscribed into landscapes, in several instances they were integrated in the sacred places of the Counter Reformation Rome. One of the earliest spaces in the Baroque to be created as both sacred and evocative space was the interior of the Early Christian *martyrium* San Stefano Rotondo in Rome.20(Routlege, 2012)

There could not have been a more appropriate space to develop the idea of the past that should inspire our present. The church was originally afifth century circular Christian martyrium, a place of veneration and commemoration of an early Christian saint St. Stephen on Celianhill in Rome. It was the place with its own memory, with its own immediate connection to that very past that the Catholic Church strove to integrate into its present. It had several restaurations, but the most pivotal one, the one that changed its space dramatically, happened after 1580 when it was given to the Jesuit order to be its Collegium Germanicum, a Jesuit school for the future missionaries. After its transfer to the Jesuits it was further restaured and frescoed all round the circular nave, by Nicolo Circignani – il Pomarancio with twenty four scenes depicting martyrdoms of different martyrs of the Early Christian church. Never before a frescoed cycle depicted such a sequence of highly naturalistic martyrdoms where every terrifying detail of their tortures is presented. Although placed in ther separate wall planes between the pillars, the scenes are interconnected both through the continuous circular wall, but are also situated in the same landscape that weaves from one image to the other. Thus the utterly novel sense of both time and place had been created. Walking though the church the devout existed in multiple places and multiple times simultaneously. His ambulation through the frescoed gallery was at the same time a voyage into the past where he

19 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 46.
20 For the detailed discussion of Cricignani's frescoes in San Stefano Rotondo see Ann Dillon, Michelangelo and the English Martyrs, p. 302-308.

became one of the participants in the sacred history. The entire cycle was created as an ideal sacred scenography situated both in the past and in the persent, as the ultimate evocative space of the times of the Early Church. Furthermore, these very frescoes were constructed in such a way to enable a more profound meditation upon the sacred space. Each detail was carefully marked by a letter that in a legend (incorporated in the fresco) identified each of the protagonists and carefuly explained their roles in the sacred history. In such a way, the beholder could study them carefuly and later incorporate them in thier inner world of meditations.

Everything that the devout saw and experienced, similarly to the reader of Sebald's novels, was liminal. His space was the current Baroque church, but also the locus of the Early Christian *martyrium* and the site of numerous sacrfices for faith and the Church. Thus, his movement through that meditative space immersed him into the virtual projection of the past.

Through his ambulations not only the past had been evoked, but also the ficitional memory of the martyrs bacame the memory of the beholder himself. As a future missionary of the Catholic church he had to be prepared for his own destiny, for his own martyrdom. The beholder had to learn that he would not only re-enact, but re-live the sacred history. The processes of memory and retrieval had been united in one Eternal instant that was intentionally created, as Sebald's literary spaces often are, to mark one's place in history.

> The closer I came to these imaginary ruins, the more any notion of mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our civilization after some future catastrophe.21(Vintage, 1995)

Like on the real pilgrimage walk, in S. Stefano Rotondo the devout was visiting all the sacred places of martyrdom of the early Christian saints. Only those places were not real, they were fictional and they offered a pseudo-historical narrative, one created by the means of illusion. Thus the virtual history becomes real through the production of seemingly true visual evidence. The very same process is crucial for Sebald's writing. Like the pseudo-documentary photoes embeded in Sebald's narrative, these *loci* of virtual history created a reality onto itself. It was the image that possesseda veracity onto itself, it contained its own official memory of the past. But it was far more powerful than any conventional altarpiece, far more suggestive and more vivid reconstruction of the Christian past. As Austerlitz remarks at one point in the novel:

21Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 237.

One has the impression (…) that images have the memory of their own and remember us, remember the roles that we, the survivors, and those not longer with us, played in our former lives…22 (Vintage, 2001)

A crucial role in the process of evocation both in *sacri monti* and in San Stefano Rotondo was endowed upon the movement through the constructed sacred landscape, where the physical movement of the devout was only the commencement of the symbolic movement of the soul. Thus the retrospective shift in time could happen only upon meditating a specific image and the very space which was imbued with the concepts of the past. The image and space, as in Sebald's literary world, are the bearers of memory, space thus becomes a palimpsest where perpetually different pasts resurface.

Similiarly to the spatial plurality of Sebald's litrature, the beholder of these virtual pilgrimages simultaneously exists in two spaces – the external one through which he walks, and the inner one which he creates by those very ambulations.

The fragmented universe

In contrast to previous periods in the history of culture, the Baroque was marked by by an overwhelming feeling of paradox. It was an age that glorified transience, fugacity and nothingness, while simultaneously favoring expansion and abundance both visual and sensory alike. Despite their disparate nature, these fragmented elements coexisted in a profoundly novel form of dynamism, in the perpetuity of movement that permeated all spheres of existence. From its macrocosms to its microcosms – the entirety of existence was moved by a grand tide, by the same *Tide of Time* that would ebb and flow thorough Sebald's work centuries later.

If Newton really thought that time is a river like Thames, then where is it its source, and into what sea does it finally flow? Every river, as we know, must have banks on both sides, so where seen in those terms are the banks of Time? What would be these river's qualities, qualities perhaps those of water, which is flowing rather than heavy and translucent? In what way objects immersed in Time differ from those untouched by it?23 (Vintage, 2001)

In Baroque architecture, such fragmentary space was masterfully employed by Francesco Borromini and his follower Guarino Guarini, while ceilings of Andrea Pozzo and Franz Antoin Mauelberch translated the same concepts into the medium of paint. They created the ultimate fragmented places, thoseentities of seemingly incongruent particles achieving the unity in discontinuity so specific for the Baroque aesthetics.

22Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 258.
23Sebald, *Austeritz*, p. 142-143.

The same unison of dissonant fragments echoes through the depiction of the waiting room at Liverpool street station in Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Like Baroque fragmented realms, Sebald`s spaces are composed of several spatial segments belonging simultaneously to different epochs, while creating a solid composite entity, the places that contain *all the hours of our past life*.24(Vintage, 2001)

A similar compendium of different temporal and spatial planes is visible in the structures of great early Christian basilicas renovated in the early late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century Rome. The most notable were five great basilicas (Santa Maria Maggiore, San Giovanni in Laterano, San Paolo fuori le Mura, San Pietro...) which from the late sixteenthcentury were re-vested in the Baroque mantle, manifesting in their composite decoration the perpetual continuity of both time and dogma that the Catholic Reformation strove to achieve. However, the most conspicuous ones were some great *martiriums* of the first Christians that were initially built to glorify the power of faith and were re-built in the Baroque times, when both the power of faith and sacrifice were needed more then ever as the ultimate proofs of *ecclesia militans*. What Catholics had needed the most at the time, was to show that there was indeed no change, like cardinal Cesare Baronio wrote in the opening to his *Annales*: *It is the uninterrupted chain of years, when Church has never altered and was always one and the same*. These very words resound in the words spoken by Austerlitz*: I now think that the time will not pass away, that I can turn back and go behind it, there I shall find everything as it once was*.25(Vintage, 2001)

Some early Christian churches in Rome display an even more complex overlapping of times - like *Santa Prasede*, and even more the *martirio* of *San Clemente* under Cole Opio. They unify in their structures, early Christian, often Pagan and expectedly Baroque structures. The rebuilding of these sacred spaces was deeply intentional - they were to contain all the times in one inseparable eternal instant, the one and only time of the Catholic Church, in which, as Austerlitz believed, the *years behind us were still to come.26*(Vintage, 2001)

The world of discordant fragments, the same precarious coherence in incoherence is also visible in one of the less known Baroque paintings, a work of an unknown artist, *The Paston Treasure/Yarmouth collection* (1663) that is kept in the Norwich Museum.Regardless of its remarkable size and undeniable importance, for the history of the family and the

24Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 192-3.
25 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 144.
26Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 152.

Baroque age itself, this painting was forgotten for almost two centuries.27 After its thorough restoration and exhibition in 2017,*The Paston Treasure* received a long overdue scholarly attention. The detailed study of this curious image gave a unique insight not merely into the politics of collecting of William Paston, but more importantly into his worldview recorded through the curious artefacts of his collection, his *fragmented universe*.

The Paston treasures depicted in the canvas were only a small part of a rich *wunderkammer*carefully assembled by William Paston.Beside his mercantile journeys, Wiliam Paston visited Cairo, Constatinople, Athens, Alexandria, acquiring in each place some of the marvells to adorn his collection. Not unlike many of his contemporaries, William Paston regarded his collection as his symbolic *alter ego* and commissioned a painting possibly in 1663 as a monument to his collection, to himself and his fragmentary age.28

The Paston Treasure, unlike similarworks of this genre, is a remarkably large paintingspanning more than two meters in length (165x246cm). The Paston's collection is presented with utmost precision on a large, slightly angled table. Usual *wunderkammer* artifacts like gilded nautilus shels, ivory chalices, mother of perlflasks and bejewelled ostrich eggs are combined with flowers, shells, fruits and even two surprising figures– an ornately dressed black servant with a monkey on its shoulder, and the little girl with a musical score and a bunch of roses. They all denote copious luxury, considerable means and the undisputable refinement of its collector. Moreover, further enhancing the complexity of the piece, the elaborate "collectors'items" are combined with objects usually connected to the *vanitas* paintings – an extinguished candle, the abundance of the musical instruments, an hourglass, a mechanical clock and soap bubbles.

The depiction of the collector's symbolic self thus turns into a particular *memento mori* signifing that William Paston was a true man of his age- acutely aware of the utter ephemerality and futility of the entire world of matter. This contradictory sitution, wherea panoply of treasures represents not only wealth, but its exact opposite, acutely demonstrates the notable paradox of the Baroque worldview. It is the concept of harmony in disharmony, a concordant unity of fragmentsthat was one of the central motifs of Baroque poetry as in the poem *The Storm* by John Donne:

27Anon., *The Paston Treasure* - Norwich Castle Museum inventory number NWHCM: 1947.170. For a detailed study, see Spike Bucklow, *The Anatomy of Riches: Sir Robert Paston's Treasure*. London, Reaktion 2018; and *The Paston Treasure – Microcosm of the Known World*. Andrew Moore, Nathan Flis, and Francesca Vanke (eds.).New Haven and Norwich, Yale University Press 2018.

28On collections as images of the collectors' selves, see Jelena Todorović, 'The Pursuit of Tradition – the State Art Collection and the process of creation of multiple identities',*The Catalogue of the State Art Collection in the Royal Compound*. Novi Sad, Platoneum 2014, p. 14-43.

Darkness, lights elder brother, his birth-right
Claims o'er this world, and to heaven hath chas'd light.
All things are one, and that none can be,
Since all formes, uniforme deformity
Doth cover, so that wee, except God say
Another *Fiat*, shall have no more day.29(Lawrence and Bullen, 1896)

The same notion of paradox also permeats all the spatial relations in Paston's painting. Primaraly, they are all existing in the impossible space – seemingly stable on the steep table top, defying reality by their mere presence. Moreover,at a closer inspection the objects depicted seem not to bear any relation to each other. They appear confined each into a space of their own, they cast no shadows, nor reflect one another creating a panoply of seemingly heterogenous fragments, as curios as the Baroque world itself.

But this painting is far more than a portrait of a "fragmentary universe" of William Paston, it is more deeply connected to the literature of W.G. Sebald than could be initially presumed. Primaraly, it belongs to a space that is also Sebald's space, the lands of Norfolk and Suffolk that are the main, albeit implicit, protagonist of *The Rings of Saturn*. Moreover, the painting is not only contemporary with the works of Thomas Browne, but William Paston was a friend with this great polymath from Norwich and often collaborated with him on the scientific experiments. Besides the previously mentioned concept of the "eternal present" that is central to understanding the notion of time in Sebald's literature, Thomas Browne also bequeaths us careful diagrams of the fragmentary nature of all things living. Like the objects in *The Paston Treasure*, all elements of the living world are for Browne none but the interconnected panoply of fragments.These precise diagrams Sebald uses centuries later to illustrate, as obliquely as he always does, the pattern of the entire universe of destruction he depicts in his *The Rings of Saturn.*

There is no antidote, he writes, against the opium of time. The winter sun shows how soon the light fades from the ash, how soonnight enfolds us. Hour upon hour is added to the sum. Time itself grows old.30 (Vintage, 1995)

The spatial relationships in this painting are as polyvalent and incoherent as the depictions of spaces in Sebald`s books. In them both there is no consistency, the incongruous composition of the painting is recalled in the non-linear narratives of the novels. Respectively, they are both spaces beyond and outside chronology where all times and all spaces co/exist together converging *according to a higher form of stereometry.The Paston Treasure* displays a curious inversion of spatial relations, where distances between objects seem misinterpreted or simply

29Donne, 'The Storm', lines 67-72, ed. cit. I. 177.
30Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 27.

annihilated. They appear guided far more by other laws than that of gravity or perspective. However, it was not the incompetence of the painter or his lack of skill. He avoided it purposefully, desiring to portray the *world's fragmented and unstable natur*e.31(Reaktion, 2018)

Predating Sebald`s image of the awry world, the master of *ThePaston treasure* reflects the fundamental instability of the universe and the man`s place in it. The very presence of the objects on the slanting table is as precarious as the existance itself. He already sensed that the representation of history is a *falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was.*32(Vintage, 2001)

Furthermore, the painterly structuring of *The Paston Treasure* resembles the narrative structure of both Sebald's novels and the configuration of land upon which the books and the painting itself were created. It is discordant, disconnected and particular. It is made from, and is being subsequently reduced to particles, as the perpetually eroding sandy shores of Suffolk coastline are slowly but inevitably crumbling into oblivion.

The lake is encircled by deciduous woodland that is now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea. Doubtless it is only a matter of time before one stormy night the shingle bank is broken, and the appearance of the entire area changes.33(Vintage, 1995)

Thus this painting symbolically presents a converging point of different patterns of thought respectively present in the Baroque culture and Sebald's literature. It stands as a polyvalent and incoherent monument to a world that by its fragmentation, instability and fluidity so disconcertingly anticipates our own age of disquiet.

31Bucklow, *The Anatomy of Riches*, p. 193-210.
32Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 144.
33Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 59.