

ART AND THEORY

REVIEW OF THE FACULTY OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART THEORY

Volume I • Number 1 • April 2015

UDK 7.01(082)

ISSN 2406-2162

ЗБОРНИК ФАКУЛТЕТА ЛИКОВНИХ УМЕТНОСТИ

УМЕТНОСТ И ТЕОРИЈА

ОДСЕК ЗА ТЕОРИЈУ УМЕТНОСТИ

Година I •

Број 1 •

Април 2015 •

Факултет ликовних уметности • Београд



UDK 7.01(082)
ISSN 2406-2162

Универзитет уметности у Београду
Факултет ликовних уметности
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УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ
УМЕТНОСТИ
У БЕОГРАДУ



ФАКУЛТЕТ
ЛИКОВНИХ
УМЕТНОСТИ

Београд
2015.

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Година I • Број 1 • Април 2015

ЗБОРНИК ФАКУЛТЕТА ЛИКОВНИХ УМЕТНОСТИ

<http://www.flu.bg.ac.rs> / redakcija@flu.bg.ac.rs

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UDK 7.01(082)

ISSN 2406-2162

ART AND THEORY

Volume I • Number 1 • April 2015

REVIEW OF THE FACULTY OF FINE ARTS

<http://www.flu.bg.ac.rs> / redakcija@flu.bg.ac.rs

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Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade
Department of Art Theory

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Print: Digital edition

UDK 7.01(082)

ISSN 2406-2162

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READY TO BE ANYTHING IN THE ECSTASIE OF BEING EVER (THOMAS BROWNE) — THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PLURALITY IN W. G. SEBALD'S *THE RINGS OF SATURN*

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UDK 7.034.001

ABSTRACT

As a foreword to his book *The Rings of Saturn* a contemporary German writer W. G. Sebald uses an encyclopedic entry on the rings of Saturn: *the rings of Saturn consist of icy crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around planet's equator. In all likelihood these are the fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect.* Those opening sentences are the most precise illustration of a key concept of Sebald's book, as well as being emblematic of his very understanding of space and time. His fragmentary approach to time that is constructed out of shatters of different pasts and presents, it is respectively a part of our own modern vision of temporality, and as this text will try to prove, it represents a great legacy to the Baroque aesthetics.

Key words: Baroque, Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, eternal present, Thomas Browne, transience, the lost past, plurality of times and spaces



Melencolia I, Albrecht Dürer, 1514.

As a foreword to his book *The Rings of Saturn* a contemporary German writer W. G. Sebald uses an encyclopedic entry on the rings of Saturn: *the rings of Saturn consist of icy crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around planet's equator. In all likelihood these are the fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect.* Those opening sentences are the most precise illustration of a key concept of Sebald's book, as well as being emblematic of his very understanding of space and time. His fragmentary approach to time that is constructed out of shatters of different pasts and presents, it is respectively a part of our own modern vision of temporality, and as this text will try to prove, it represents a great legacy to the Baroque aesthetics.

Sebald's description of the rings of Saturn almost echoes Wolfflin's own definition of the Baroque style in his „Principles of Arts history“ *as the style that saw the profound change of the pieces to the whole, there was no more a dominant relationship of elements to one leading principle of harmony, it was replaced with the principle of fragmentation and dichotomy.* (Wolfflin, 1950)

The Rings of Saturn is truly a hybrid work, as hybrid as Baroque culture itself was. It is simultaneously the composition of a memoir, travel book, a visual document and a fiction. Sebald himself claimed that his literature does 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.

This almost Baroque hybridity is even more pronounced on the temporal level in *The Rings of Saturn* – Sebald's book constantly overlaps the past and the present, the time evoked and the time perceived. It stands between memory and fiction, between record and recollection. Its narrative is also consisted out of several constantly overlapping entities – that of the personal observation, the realm of the documentary and the one of the historical study. The entire book is composed as a pseudo – documentary record, partly real partly fictional, of an almost pilgrimage walk along the coast of Norfolk and Suffolk. It is the book that uses movement, time and nature as its key motifs, the elements that, as it would be presented, figured greatly in the art and culture of the Baroque age.

Sebald commences each of his chapters on the level of the real, tangible, presence, with the almost topographically precise rendering of a place or a landscape, often underlined with visual material, that subsequently engenders a personal recollection. The landscape thus becomes the stage where different pasts, both real and imaginary, cherished or forgotten, emerge. These recollections are as hybrid and fragmentary as the book itself, they are constructed out of the fragments of memory and shards of the past that are as real for the reader as the coastal landscape that the narrator walks through. The hybridity of both form and content is even more pronounced by Sebald's use of photographic material in his work. All the photos, regardless of their subject matter, have the semblance of the documentary or archival material. But like the text itself, they are presenting to us a fained authenticity. With its black and white colouring, the creased and worn surfaces they are created to deceive the reader in believing them to be the record of the past, to be the proof of veracity. In such way Sebald manipulates the past in fashion similar, as we shall see, to that of his Baroque predecessors. Throughout the entire book the reader is left to unravel the level of reality in Sebald's work, to discover, as it is the case with many Baroque creations, where history ceases and imaginary begins. In the end, this difference becomes irrelevant as Sebald creates his own reality consisted of intertwined temporalities, that is both more tangible and credible than the reality itself. He creates histories within histories that recede into infinity like those Baroque illusions that enable the spectator to be, if only for an instant, a part of eternity.

The connection between Sebald's book and the Baroque aesthetics is not accidental. *The Rings of Saturn* is deeply connected with the curious work of a 17th century medic and philosopher Sir Thomas Browne. It is through both his works *Religio Medici* and *The Urn Burrial* that Sebald makes the constant, if not always explicit, dialogue with the Baroque aesthetics and we could even say, with Browne himself. Like our writer, Browne was highly interdisciplinary man of letters both a medic, philosopher and even natural historian who devoted one of his key works, *The Urn Burrial* to the ethnographic study of the same territory Sebald would use in his *The Rings of Saturn* – the coast and region of Norfolk. Beside other philosophical concepts present in Browne's work, the most momentous one is that of the thoroughly novel sense of space and time with was left to our age as one his most important legacies. Browne sees the concept of time, as it would be elaborated later, as one inseparable temporal plane of *eternal present* where different times and spaces co-exist simultaneously. For him, as for Sebald, there is no past or present just one uninterrupted temporal continuum. Therefore Sebald's book ought to be considered as a work of someone who deeply understood Baroque perception of the world, of the movements through space and time. Through his thorough knowledge of Browne Sebald gained a profound understanding of those very qualities that are inherent to the Baroque worldview and are present in *The Rings of Saturn*: **the concept of transience, the connection between the landscape and the past, the superimposition of the past upon the present and the eternal instant.**

The Nature of Transience

There is one quality, that of transience, which above all else, makes Sebald's book utterly Baroque in its worldview. It deals, beyond history, beyond time and nature, with that perpetual Baroque subject, the fragility of human condition. Sebald sees transience formulated as destruction, violence, war and terror in all forms that surround him. From the depths of the forests, under the gentle heather hills, beyond the last lights on the horizon surfaces a shadow of past destructions.

Such an image of history demonstrates the necessity of the man's awareness of the past, of that ever present merging of the temporal fragments that form our consciousness of the world. It shows, even further, the inevitable inseparability of life and death in the fabric of our existence. This coexistence of life and death in Sebald's book mirrors that particular Baroque obsession with the flickering nature of ourselves which is so aptly described by Browne in his *Urn Burrial*:

It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature; or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seemes progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine... (Browne (1698) IV)

The same concept is visible in that terrifyingly modern epitaph from the tomb of one of the most powerful man of Baroque age Cardinal Antonio Barberini *Here lies body, ashes and nothing*. The idea of death as the end of one's time might seem quite uncommon for 17th century. However, the entire notion of fatality was not singular to few poets or highly educated individuals of the age, but formed an integral part of the then-contemporary perception of dying, which was a highly intricate one.

It existed between two extremes – the death as annihilation was on one, while the idea of the *good death* stood at the other end of the scale. In front of death, although prepared, the man denounced everything, including himself. It was both the striking self-awareness of the reality of death, and the Christian belief in the destruction of the body that brought on such complexity of feeling.

Most of the reflections, in the *mirror of time* held by Sebald in his *The Rings of Saturn*, are those very meditations on brevity of life and fragility of our mortal selves that populate the culture of the Baroque.

Sebald starts his own *treatise on transience* with the image of the skull, that time-honoured symbol of all vanities. The book both commences and ends with the meditation upon death and departure. It begins with Thomas Browne's burial and ends with the departure of the soul also described by Brown in his *Urn Burial* from 1658.:

... Curiously enough Brown in his own famous part-archeological part-metaphysical treatise the *Urn Burial* offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnawed out of our graves is a tragic abomination. (Sebald (1998) 11)

Even the landscape Sebald's narrator walks through, is the one of transience. The coast of Norfolk is among the most unstable ones on the British isles, with its lime and sand structure constantly changing and escaping our perception, just like the life itself, just like those slippery sands of the Baroque hourglasses.

See how they press, see how they strive, which shall/ With greatest speed and greatest quickness fall
(Crashow)

How easily you slip from my hands! /Oh how you slide away years of my life...(de Quevedo)

Thus the real and literary landscape in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* become one, that of transience. In such a landscape, not only history evidences to the past destructions but the land itself is often the image of the slow decay, which is inherent to the very substance of nature.

The history how that melancholy region came to be, is closely connected not only with the nature of the soil and the influence of a maritime climate but also, far more decisively, with the steady and advancing destructions that extended over the British isles after the last Ice Age. (Sebald (1998) 169)

There almost could not be a vista in *The Rings of Saturn* that is not the reminder of what was, or the object and the creation of man that was not subject to decay. Every seascape and crumbling wall, every abandoned house and the pile of driftwood are for Sebald the initiation to the meditation of our own finity.

Here and there one comes across the abandoned boats that are falling apart, and the cables with which they were once hauled are rusting in the salt air. (Sebald (1998) 53)

And how fine a house it seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion. (Sebald (1998) 36)

Moreover when Sebald describes destruction it is often staged in landscape, whether it happened in East Anglia coast or somewhere miles away on the other end of the world.

The destruction that was through in those legendary landscaped gardens over the next few days which made a mockery of military discipline or of all reason, can only be understood as resulting from anger (...) Yet the true reason why Yuan Ming Yuan was laid waste may well have been that this earthly paradise was an irresistible provocation in the eyes of soldiers who knew nothing but the rule of force... (Sebald (1998) 144-145)

It was indeed the Baroque age that first fully explored the landscape of destruction as one of the main visualizations of the irreversible power of Time. If one role of time was the paramount in that period it was the one of the Great Destroyer. The irreversible passage of time brought destruction and annihilation to the world, and it was most often represented through the images of vast land both in poetry and the visual arts. The German poet Gryphius pointedly expressed his anguish at the all destroying power of time:

Wherever you look, you see nothing but vanity on earth.

What this one builds today will pull down tomorrow.

Where now there are towns, there will be a meadow tomorrow,
where a shepherd's child will play with flocks.

(...)

The glory of lofty deeds must vanish like a dream. (Gryphius (1975) 187)

The most fitting illustration of the vast lands of time's destruction described by Gryphius can be seen in the works of a Neapolitan sculptor Gaetano Zumbo. He made a series of wax high relief works that depicted the landscapes of annihilation where Time the Great Destroyer reigned supreme. In his *Trionfo del Tempo* he represented the novel sense of transience for the Medici court in Florence in 1690s. It is a high relief object that opens in front of spectator an entire world of destruction. In this somber *teatro del mondo* the allegory of Father Time himself 'draws the curtain' and presents us with the landscape of world swept by time. The scene of broken pillars and pediments, dead bodies of men women and babies, dilapidated walls and withering plants trails into the infinite distance of the vista. Time as Death spears nothing, not even the author himself whose portrait lays under Time's feet. And as it is, it was from the beginning of history – pyramids and Roman arches in the distance tell us that even the greatest empires could not withstand the flight of time. Vivid intensity of both form and content of this tableau is greatly magnified by the medium it was executed in – wax. Working in wax had two important advantages – it was malleable, while its colour and texture resembled that of human flesh. Images created in it were more vivid, more lifelike and thus more credible to the beholder. Furthermore, in this case, the usage of wax was more than appropriate – its existence was as ephemeral as the life itself.

Another fitting illustration of the landscape of destruction, that so greatly captivated Baroque visions of temporality, is visible in the painting *Memento mori* by the unknown Neapolitan artist now in the Court collection in Belgrade. Like his compatriot Zumbo, the author of this *Memento mori* painting devotes his work to the depiction of land destroyed by Time's unforgiving flight. From the closest part of the foreground to the last plane in the background, the entire painting is populated with different images of Time's destructive progress. Only his landscape is the urban one, where the prospect of nature is replaced by the endless vista of the classical ruins. This pseudo-classical world is used to remind the spectator that even the greatest monuments and powerful Empires are powerless in front of Time the Great Destroyer. It is almost as this painting visualizes Browne's lines from the *Urn Burial*:

Pyramids, arches, obelisks, were but the irregularities of vain-glory, and wild enormities of ancient magnanimity (Browne (1689) V)

Triumphal arches erected in the honour of now forgotten generals, dilapidated temples whose glories have now vanished and broken lances and broken pediments all remind us of the fragility of our own existence. This panegyric of destruction elaborates fully the Baroque concept of the ruin, that ceased to be just the sign of the past and became the reminder of our temporality. In the same way that Sebald views ruins among Anglian landscape as a memento of our troubled past:

The closer I came to these 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.

From the works of Poussin and Claude, Bourdon and Rosa, the Baroque art uses the ruin to depict not only death in Arcadia but the disbelief in its very existence.

In the age that saw the real destruction, exemplified in thirty years' war, the night of St Bartholomew, terrors of inquisition and martyrdoms of the missionaries in the New World, such images were, as are the images of the past in Sebald, only the personification of crude reality.

The figures of Death and the Maiden, posed on that slippery edge between the world of the spectator and the virtual world of the *Memento mori* represent the focal point of the entire composition and the key for understanding of the entire painting. The image of the skeleton represented as the merging of both allegories of Time and Death, with the gesture of the utmost pride, shows to the maiden beside him the landscape of the dying world. Below their feet lie all the material riches of this world: jewels, royal insignia, golden and silver decanters, lavish fabrics and shiny armour. Together with the architectural vista behind them, these riches serve as the testimony of the transitory nature of all worldly goods, and consequently of life itself.

As Thomas Browne reminds us in his *Urn Burial* even the monuments are not sufficient to ensure the eternity of our memory, since Time conquers all, and conquers forever:

'Tis too late to be ambitious. The great mutations of the world are acted, or time may be too short for our designs. To extend our memories by monuments, whose death we daily pray for, and whose duration we cannot hope, without injury to our expectations in the advent of the last day. (Browne (1689) V)

As if the vanishing world was not enough, the artist had to employ the entire vocabulary of *memento mori* still-lives to fully express his fear and his conviction in the finite nature of ourselves.

The vastness of demise present in this *Memento mori* painting as well as in Zumbo's *Trionfo del Tempo* echoes centuries later in Sebald's own observation of nature as the waste land of Time:

Save for the odd solitary cottage there is nothing to be seen but the grass and the rippling reeds, one or two sunken willows, and some ruined conical brick buildings, like the relics of an extinct civilization. These are all that remains of the countless wind pumps and windmills whose white sails revolved over the marshes of Halvergate... (Sebald (1998) 30)

But for Sebald, as well as for his Baroque predecessors, the destruction is not only visualised through allegory and the image of the dying world, it was also connected with flame, the smoke and the concept of burning and annihilation that the fire stood for. It was Thomas Browne in his *Urn burial* who said that *Life is pure flame, and we live by an invisible sun within us* (Browne (1658) 49). Browne's idea is not of burning as the brilliant shining of Providence, or the glow of Divine creation, but that of self-destruction and of the irreversible process of decay.

The image of burning and smoke spoke eloquently through 17th century poetry and visual arts. For the Baroque poet Gryphius *the man is just but a smoke on strong winds carried*, and for his contemporary poet from Dubrovnik Dživo Bunić the fire is a metaphor for the human life itself:

Let us remember that man's years on earth, are tempest, fire, shadow, mist and nothing (Dživo Bunić-Vučić, 1640s).

Sebald develops the idea of burning even further as the supreme process of annihilation. In his book, he reminds us that the destruction of the world and of ourselves lies behind every principle existing:

Like our bodies and like our desires the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than the strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which none can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. (Sebald (1998) 170).

Also many descriptions of destruction in *The Rings of Saturn* are inseparable from the image of of fire, of burning and of slow consumption:

On the Royal James alone, which was set aflame by a fireship nearly half the thousand strong crew perished. No details of the end of the three master have come down to us. There were eye witnesses who claimed that have seen the commander of the English fleet, the Earl of Sandwich, (...) gesticulating on the deck as the flames encircled him. (Sebald (1998) 77)

I myself heard for instance that experiments were conducted out at Shingle Street with biological weapons designed to make whole regions uninhabitable. I also heard tell of a system of pipes extending far out to sea, by means of which a petroleum inferno could be unleashed with such explosive rapidity that the very sea would start to boil. (Sebald (1998) 231)

When they had arrived at the scene of destruction, those who had started the fire had long disappeared, and all they could do was hug their children and join those huddled together there speechless and paralyzed with horror like shipwrecked survivors on a raft. Not till daybreak did fire abate and the black contours of the burnt-out shell stand out against the sky. (Sebald (1998) 216)

It is as if the verses of Baroque poet Gongora echo in the background of Sebald's sentences:

You hardly be pardoned by the hours,

The hours that keep on wearing 'way the days.

The days that keep on gnawing 'way the years. (Gongora (1973) 203)

The time for Gongora, Browne and Sebald is merciless in its unstoppable flight. Its passage spares and pardons none. Only the waste land remains.

Everything round about rots, decays and sinks into the ground. There are only two seasons: the white winter and the green winter. (...) In the white winter everything is dead, during the green winter everything is dying. (Sebald (1998) 105)

It is thus not surprising that Sebald closes his book with the reference to Browne's treatise in the *Urn burial* and the passage that describes the departing of the soul, not as a voyage to eternal glory, but as a somber ascent into nothingness. Same nothingness that Cardinal Barberini understood so well:

... in the Holland of his time (*Browne's*) it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvases depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever.

(Sebald (1998) 296)

By the end of *The Rings of Saturn*, of this book of multiple travels, of perpetual going and leaving, this final voyage just becomes one of many. Thus, the Baroque sensibility towards death and time, towards this intertwining of the beginnings and ends in one infinite loop, precisely complements Sebald's travels through landscapes of history and destruction.

The Landscape of Forgotten Pasts

There was one other role that the 17th century culture endowed upon landscapes – they were the depository of the collective memory. In that capacity the landscape became the domain of dual time, where the seen and the remembered, or seen and constructed, constantly coexisted in one perpetual instant.

The connection between nature and time, which was so crucial for Sebald in his expression of the landscape of destruction as the emblem of human fragility, has its deep roots in the perception of nature that was formulated back in the 17th century. In the age when man began, for the first time in the visual arts, to give the key role to the image of nature, landscape was one of the media for transporting complex conceptual contents. Thus the landscape was hardly ever a chosen fragment of nature, a privileged view, it was a significant vista enriched with respective political, religious or philosophical ideas. It was the ideological construct, but above all the depository of different manifestations of temporality. In the Baroque visions of nature, as in Sebald's book, the times and spaces stood superimposed upon each other.

The recorded view of nature served in the landscapes of Claude Lorain, Nicholas Poussin, Aniballe Carracci, Ruisdael or Hobbema, only as a stage of different temporal or special significations. While Claude and Poussin created landscapes that were in their essence the reflections of Arcadia, of a realm that never have been, their Dutch counterparts used their depictions of nature for far more mundane purposes, to express the patriotic delight over their land. Whether it was paradise or the land of *patria* they strove for, the countryside firmly remained in the domain of the conceptual.

The Baroque time of nature thus, as the time in *The Rings of Saturn*, was simultaneously the past and the present, the topography and memory depicted. Nature was used as a tool of *evocation*, of enlivening the past, whether real or imaginary. Such interaction of the past and present is evident in those very prospects of land that are made to remind the viewer of the possession that is now only belonging to memory.

Particularly poignant are vistas of land in those societies whose existence was precarious on the political map of the early modern Europe. One such example are the landscapes created in the Archbishopric of Karlovci, a Serbian Orthodox domain that existed in the shadow of the Habsburg Catholic empire. All the landscapes produced in this particular Baroque centre (1730s to 1770s) always represented dual temporal and spatial domains. They were, on the surface, precise topographical renderings of the monastery grounds belonging to the Orthodox Archbishopric in the Habsburg territory (prints by Orfelin and Žefarović). But on closer analysis of the symbolism used (with references to hills vineyards and woods belonging to other place and different times) these landscapes became the images of the land that was no longer. Beside their topographical function, through their symbolism they illustrated the precise territory that the Serbian people, with their exodus to the Habsburg Empire, abandoned to the Ottoman occupation. They functioned as symbolic portraits of the past that was once glorious and now lost forever.

Sebald's use of landscape is also essentially one of *evocation* and sometimes even one of *invocation*. On the first level of perception the landscapes in *The rings of Saturn* are the precise topographical renderings, not unlike the Baroque ones, of the coast of Suffolk and Norfolk.

A quarter of an hour's walk from Benacre Broad where the beach narrows and a stretch of sheer coastline begins a few dozen dead trees lie in a confused heap where they fell years ago from the Covehithe cliffs. Bleached by salt water, wind and sun, the broken, brakeless wood looks like the bones of some extinct species, greater even than the mammoths and the dinosaurs that came to grief long since on this solitary strand. The footpath leads around the tangle, through a bank of gorse, up to a loamy cliff-head and there it continues amidst bracken, the tallest of which stood as high as my shoulder, not far from the ledge, which is constantly threatening to crumble away. (Sebald (1998) 64,65)

But it is not the land that matters, it is the past which it evokes, the reflections it engenders that is the key protagonist of Sebald's book. His recorded landscape serves as the literary and visual equivalent of memory, the memory that, like the one emerging from the visions of nature in the Baroque age, is never an individual subjective recollection, but a collective memory of the past. The same discourse on memory we find well defined in Browne's *Urn Burial*:

But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. (Browne (1698) V)

For Sebald, the surfacing past and history, as the landscape itself, equals destruction, decline and deterioration that as we have seen are not the sole prerequisites of our closest 20th century history, but reach far beyond it, back to the Baroque age.

Footsore and weary as I was after my long walk from Lowestoft, I sat down on the bench on the green called Gunhill and looked out on the tranquil sea, from the depths of which the shadows were now rising...I felt as if I were in a deserted theatre, and should not have been surprised if a curtain had suddenly risen before me on the proscenium and I had beheld, say, on the 28th of May 1672, that memorable day when the Dutch fleet appeared offshore from out of the drifting mists, with the bright morning light behind it and opened fire on the English ships in Sole Bay. (Sebald (1998) 76)

The tide was advancing up the river, the water was shining like a tinplate, and from the radio masts high above the marches came an even scarcely audible hum. (...) And then through the growing dazzle of the light in my eyes, I suddenly saw amidst the darkening colours, the sails of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind. (Sebald (1998), 237)

The memories of the past submerged, are shattered and fragmentary, appearing in *The Rings of Saturn* on surface of the landscape and on surfaces of the pages, vehemently like the changes of the coastal line of Norfolk.

Over the centuries that followed, catastrophic incursions of the sea into the land of this kind happened time and again, and, even during long years of apparent calm, coastal erosion continued to take its natural course. (Sebald (1998), 158)

Moreover the functioning of the remembrance itself, the very process of recollection, is crucial for the understanding of Sebald's book. Both its inner and outer structure recall the pattern of our own invocation of the past whether personal or collective, real or imaginary. The discussion of the principle of remembering is re-occurring, like the memory itself, randomly but consistently throughout *The Rings of Saturn*.

But the fact is that writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and unexpectedly. (...) Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in strange way blind us to life. (Sebald (1998), 255)

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as those surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the morains and deposits are insuperable. (Sebald (1998) 177)

This very principle of recollection and the fickle nature of nature itself complement each other, as they did centuries before in the Baroque images of land. The landscape and memory are truly united in their very nature of randomness in which they coexist with our own time. Like metaspaces of Baroque visions of the past that are embedded in then-contemporary landscapes, Sebald inscribes both the most diverse and most disturbing parts of the European history in the land of East Anglia.

The Eternal Present

Rings of Saturn is truly a collection of fragments both in the conceptual and formal sense. The fragments of text and imagery are merged in the same way in which different times and spaces overlap in Sebald's narrative. The past and the present do not exist for Sebald in their usual linear, chronological sequence. They inhabit a mutual space of *eternal present* that particular a-temporal domain already defined by the Baroque philosopher Thomas Browne in his *Urn Burial*. Thus we could say that Sebald's time is also Browne's time, the time that exists in temporal intersection of our presents and our pasts, forever captured in one a-temporal instant.

The Baroque age, to which Browne belonged, brought about new cosmological and geographical discoveries, it remapped the known, and charted out the new world, and offered, in exchange for the old dogmatic worldview, a new fragmentary universe. This new vision of the world was manifested in different visual regimes, in diverse illusionistic pictorial systems, in the striving for plurality both spatial and temporal.

One could say that Baroque was the time of the eternal moment, it was the moment of action and even more the moment of passion and emotion. The captured instant as a leitmotif not only exemplified the Baroque attitude towards time, but also brought on a new relationship between the beholder and the sacred, or profane, work of art. The chosen instant was always a vivid, dramatic culmination of the represented narrative that for its very immediacy could establish a new psychological relation to the audience. The image of the captured moment, both in the visual arts and literature, ensured a more immediate response to the narrative presented and the easier identification with its content.

One of the most striking visualizations of Browne's *eternal present* is not just one of the Baroque highly dramatic martyrdoms but a genre scene by El Greco *Boy Lighting a Candle*, now in the Capodimonte museum in Naples. Perceived only on the first level of narrative, El Greco's painting seems fairly simple – a young boy is depicted at the moment of blowing on the ember to light up the candle he holds in his right hand. The image is steeped into darkness, and the only light illuminating the scene emanates from the glowing ember in the foreground. The whole image is highly naturalistic that heightens even more the feeling of presence evoked by the glowing light. His face is full of serious concentration and solemnity that at first seems out of tune with the commonplace of the scene depicted.

However, the action we are dealing with is a complex one. El Greco represents the movement which seems like a total absence of motion; he depicts a scene that lasts a fraction of a second, but looks like an illustration of eternity. It is an image where time looks suspended, almost annihilated. As in the famous poem of Baroque poet Andreas Gryphius:

Not mine are the years which time has taken from me,

Nor mine are the years which might still come;

the moment is mine, and if I grasp that, He will be mine who made time and eternity.

Gryphius, *A Meditation upon Time*

At the same time, the painter tells us that the motion we perceive is a conceptual *perpetuum mobile* – the air the boy produces to create light also makes him visible to us. Invisible air produces visible light, in the same way that stillness engenders motion. Here the action and visibility are dependent upon each other. El Greco thus depicts a double time – the swift almost barely noticeable fraction of the second that the initial action of blowing on the ember lasts, and the very same moment, now suspended and turned

into timelessness. He plays on a very ambiguous border between the visible and invisible, between the movement and its suspension in order to treat more profound issues of time, duration and transience.

Like in Gryphius' s poem, just a moment belongs to this boy. It is the only time he actually is visible to us, since with the ceasing of his breath the light would vanish and his existence with it. This is a highly subtle comment on life and its momentousness. Sebald's narrator is not unlike El Greco's boy, to him only the moment belongs, the moment that is at once the past and the present, the action and its recollection.

There are indeed moments, as one passes through the rooms open to the public of Somerleyton, when one is not quite sure whether one is in a country house in Suffolk or some kind of no-man's land at the Arctic ocean or in the heart of the dark continent. Nor can one readily say which decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist. (Sebald (1998) 36)

Sebald's protagonist is thus similar to a Baroque man, who, standing on the stage of the world, witnesses, simultaneously in one single instant, the passage of different pieces of real or imaginary history, the imagery of pasts lost or pasts forgotten. He is, walking along the coast of Norfolk, also poised on the crossroads of time and encounters those shatters of the past whose perpetual ambulation form the fragmentary landscape of our own present.

The multiple field of vision that Sebald elegantly uses to surface different pieces of the past in his book, 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.

This age announces the onset of another form of perception, and one can even say, the birth of a new sense of space. The perception of the universe as a single unified space where *pluralities of Suns and planets exist* indeed captures the imagination of the Baroque man and opens in front of the space of the infinite. The infinite that unites all our pasts and all our presents in one vision of eternity. As Browne explained at the close of his *Urn Burrial*:

There is nothing strictly immortal, but immortality. Whatever hath no beginning, may be confident of no end; — all others have a dependent being and within the reach of destruction; — which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that cannot destroy itself; — and the highest strain of omnipotency, to be so powerfully constituted as not to suffer even from the power of itself. (Browne (1698) V)

The aesthetic response to the new conception of space as interminable is visible in the diverse visual forms, but it is at its most poignant in the illusionistic representation of infinite spaces that decorate the ceilings and domes of Baroque palaces and churches.

Such unification of different temporal and spatial entities is the most elaborate in the Hall of Mirrors of the Baroque Villa Pellagonia in Sicily. Built in 1715. by one of the richest princes in Sicily Prince of Baggheria, this villa offers a profoundly novel understanding of fragmented temporal and spatial realms. Upon entrance to the Hall of Mirrors, situated at the *piano nobile* of the villa, a curious space of multiple realities opens up in front of the spectator. Upon the walls of the room, an imaginary Arcadian garden revolves, while the vast ceiling is entirely covered with pieces of mirrors of different sizes. On all the walls of the Hall of Mirrors and in the bottom part of the mirrored ceiling the artist created a fantastic pastoral world full of fantastic plants and birds, while through the windows of the salon, the view opens on one of the most lavish and imaginative gardens of the period. The prospect that these windows offer to the spectator, perfectly complements the Arcadian vision displayed in the salon. There is no longer a border between the outer and the inner world, between the Arcadian one and the reality. Upon entering

this room the spectator discovers a curious polycentric world, not unlike Sebald's, that is a complex unity of different imaginary realms.

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. (Sebald (1998) 174)

Beholding the marvels of Villa Pellagonia the beholder is, if only for an instant, offered a glimpse of the ideal world of Vergil's eclogues. While viewing the multiple visions of himself in the glittering mirrors of the ceiling, he literally participated in that eternal present of Browne's. The real and the fictional have been multiplied to the infinity, expanding to the furthers corners of his field of vision. Like in Sebald's landscapes the spectator-reader cannot not sense any longer the confines of reality, only the limitless world that is at both past and present.

The principle of Browne's eternal present is ultimately manifested in *The Rings of Saturn* through the movement of the main protagonist and the reader through the narrative. And that voyage is personified through the image of the silk and the act of weaving that stands as a constant although almost invisible, leitmotif of the book. At its beginning the reader is informed that Browne's father was a silk merchant, while Sebald devotes the last chapter to the story of silk production in East Anglia. The last pages of the book are even covered with the images of silk:

Now, as I write and think more of our history, which is but a long account of calamities, it occurs to me that at one time the only acceptable expression of profound grief, for ladies of upper classes, was to wear heavy robes of black silk taffeta. (Sebald (1998) 295–296)

The weaving and spinning of the silk thus becomes a perfect metaphor for *The Rings of Saturn*. All the pasts, and all the presents, all our fears and our desires, are united in one continuous thread that is unraveling in front of us. Just like the irreversible thread of time, or the thread of life itself.

Literature

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