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PETER LANG
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Borgesian and Shakespearean Allusions in *Die Ringe des Saturn* by W. G. Sebald

I. Introduction

The distinct elements of the *Die Ringe des Saturn*¹ by W. G. Sebald – fragments of history, memory, (auto)biography – are various and discrete, although they hang together as a coherent entirety. Yet there still remains space in between these elements, created by Sebald's allusions to other works of literature, where the themes of the novel may be addressed. The title of Sebald's novel itself not only reflects the author's novelistic praxis of collecting disparate, mysterious elements and arranging them as a harmonious whole, but also echoes the novel's themes of annihilation and reconciliation. Gareth Howell-Jones has gone so far as to posit that the novel's title acts as a metaphor for the human condition, claiming that "as Saturn is encircled by rings made up of the fragments of a former moon, so we revolve surrounded by the shards of a lost and broken-up world, 'our history which is but a long account of calamities'".² In quoting from the English translation of *Die Ringe des Saturn* itself, Howell-Jones reminds us of Sebald's writing style, which intends "to evoke, to suggest, to make references that can lead in several directions or exist on several levels,"³ much like the very title of the novel.

Speaking of the "quasi-chaos" of the totality of human experience, William James posited that "round the nucleus, partly continuous, partly discrete, of what we call the physical world ... innumerable hosts of thinkers ... trace paths that intersect one another only at discontinuous perceptual points, and the rest of the time they are quite incongruent".⁴ However, in Sebald's narrative, there is no incongruence in the intersections of discrete elements of experience. He fashions a nucleus, a central gravitational force, in his work, around which the fragments of the narrative are held in harmonious orbit. This is the space created by literary allusion, as the past is brought into the present, where the novels' themes may be elaborated and confronted.

II. Borges in Sebald

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius serves as a literary touchstone for W. G. Sebald, particularly in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, in which Sebald in fact explicitly cites Borges's short story.

1 Hereafter page references to this novels will appear in the body of the text as (RS).
 2 Gareth Howell-Jones: "A Doubting Pilgrim's Happy Progress". In: *The Spectator*, 30th May 1998, pp. 34-35.
 3 Mark R. McCulloh: *Understanding W. G. Sebald*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004, p. 67.
 4 William James: "A World of Pure Experience" In: *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 1:20 (1904), pp. 533-543, p. 543.

Towards the end of the third chapter of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, as the narrator is continuing his *englische Wallfahrt* through the countryside of East Anglia, he is walking along a stretch of coastline where there lie “ein paar Dutzend toter Bäume, die vor Jahren schon von der Klippen von Covehithe heruntergestürzt sein müssen” (RS, p. 83). As he watches the sand martens flying above the sea, he is reminded of a passage in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, which recalls “[die] Rettung eines ganzen Amphitheaters durch ein paar Vögel” (RS, p. 87). The passage in question in Borges’s story reads: “Things become duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten ... at times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheatre”.⁵ In this passage we see Sebald addressing the idea of memory as a form of resistance, particularly against the erosive effects of time, allowing objects to be saved from destruction by dint of their not being forgotten and through commitment to history and representation of historical figures or events at the margins of society.

Through this allusion to *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Sebald is also able to remind the reader of the elusive nature of memory and the ambiguity of recollection, which may distort the truth over time. The fact that his narrator associates his narrative with that of Borges brings literary credibility to the observations made in *Die Ringe des Saturn* and enables Sebald’s writing to be implicitly and indirectly elevated to a similar status as that occupied by Borges’s *œuvre* within the canon of world literature by association. This enables the creation of a community of writers, as well as readers, who share in a sense of complicity with the novel and the works to which it alludes.

Sebald’s narrator then goes on to describe the “aufsteigende Schwindelgefühl” (RS, p. 88) he experiences as he looks down on the beach and witnesses a couple making love. This is particularly redolent of a pivotal moment in Borges’s short story when his narrator, having acquired a book which will tell him more of the fictional construct of Tlön, experiences “an astonished and airy feeling of vertigo”.⁶ Sebald’s narrator is “voller Bestürzung” (RS, p. 88) and retreats from (what is for him) an alarming and upsetting reality into thoughts of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, not unlike how Borges’s narrator and other Tlönist scholars in the story flee their unpleasant reality through establishing an intoxicating secondary textual world. In both narratives the indecipherability of the present and the ambiguous nature of the fantastic is clearly apparent, with Borges’s narrator learning more facts about a fictional world, and Sebald’s narrator’s realistic impression of the couple making love giving way to an altogether more uncanny and fantastical association: “kam es mir vor, als sei ein Zucken durch die Füße des Mannes gefahren wie bei einem gerade Gehenkten” (RS, p. 88).

The subsequent account of the couple becomes even more disturbing, as the narrator describes them:

ungestalt gleich einer großen, ans Land geworfenen Molluske lagen sie da, scheinbar ein Leib, ein von weit draußen hereingetriebenes, vielgliedriges, doppelköpfiges Seeungeheuer, letztes Exemplar einer monströsen Art, das mit flach den Nüstern einströmendem Atem seinem Ende eingedämmert (RS, p. 88).

5 Jorge Luis Borges: *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. In: Jorge Luis Borges: *Labyrinths: Selected Short Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. London: Penguin, 2004, pp. 27-43, p. 39.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

This description is perverse in all senses of the word, particularly as regards the narrator's consideration of a potentially life-giving event as representative of the last of the species of a monstrous creature. Such a gruesome and uncanny image is typical of Sebald's narrator's highly subjective and imaginative vision of the world, which is linked to a catastrophic and quasi apocalyptic view of natural history.

Significantly, the phrasing of this description recalls not only the character of Gregor Samsa, the man transformed "zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer" of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, but also his pathetic death: "aus seinen Nüstern strömte sein letzter Atem schwach hervor". Kafka is a writer who is often linked to Sebald as an influential figure or with regards to their mutual focus on the uncanny and how it may coincide with the everyday.⁷ Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate further on the implications of these Kafka allusions, we shall discuss later the noteworthy multiplicity of instances of allusion to several literary works within the same passage, in particular the effect this has on the reader and on the relationship between the reader and the author.

Returning to Borgesian allusions in Sebald, the progression from a rationalistic observation of a natural event, in this case a couple making love, towards a supernatural and strange interpretation of it reinforces the narrator's attempts to make sense of his experiences through blissful meanderings of thought. This allows him to confront said experience even as he tries to defamiliarise himself and the reader from it, and recalls how Borges's narrator in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* attempts to create secondary and tertiary worlds and accounts of worlds as a means of escaping reality.

Sebald's narrator's account develops from a relatively simple simile ("gleich einer großen ... Molluske") into a rhetorical trope which then rather ambiguously becomes his reality, since later he „wußte nicht mehr, ob [er] das blasse Seeungeheuer am Fuß der Klippe von Covehithe nun in Wirklichkeit oder bloß in [s]einer Einbildung gesehen hatte" (*RS*, p. 89). His initial sighting of the couple seems to now have been entirely replaced by his perception of them as a monstrous creature, reinforcing the sense of ambiguity within the narrative of *Die Ringe des Saturn* as a whole, which is only increased by Sebald's explicit allusion to Borges's *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*.

Just like the reader, Sebald's narrator is defamiliarised from the familiar and the natural through this surprising and shocking comparison, which allows him and us to perceive reality anew. As Victor Shklovsky observed in his 1917 essay *Art as Technique* 'the purpose of art is "that one might recover the sensation of life ... to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known".⁸ For in the reality of what is perceived, as opposed to a reality which is merely known or known of, we are able to strip away any preconceptions or habits and see the truth of

7 For further discussion of Sebald's relationship with Kafka, see R. J. A. Kilbourn: "Kafka, Nabokov ... Sebald: Intertextuality and Narratives of Redemption in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*" and Brad Prager: "Sebald's Kafka". In Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2006, pp. 33-63 and pp.105-125. See also McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald*.

8 Victor Shklovsky: "Art as Technique". In: *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. and trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Rees. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 12.

the matter. Thus the narrator of *Die Ringe des Saturn* does not only align himself with a highly fantastical and uncanny means of storytelling, he concurrently establishes a meta-fictional or intertextual form of narrative which corresponds with Sebald's own novelistic praxis and art.

In Sebald's allusive interplay of connections, associations and possibilities, the impressions which pass through the mind of the narrator inevitably become part of the reader's thoughts, even if we are startled or defamiliarised by his uncanny comparisons. We can perceive how the interrelated nature of all things in Sebald's fiction is taking shape through the merging of various memories, associations and identities. *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* acts almost as a precursor for Sebaldian motifs, such as the fluidity of identity and memory, as well as coincidence, which comes about through some apparently secret design, and Sebald's narrator's direct allusion to the story in his novel only serves to underline this.

Borgesian allusions in *Die Ringe des Saturn* open up a space to allow Sebald and his narrator to grapple with the themes in the novel. Literature of the past which co-exists in literature of the present establishes a detemporalised arena, which is distanced and defamiliarised from the surface plot of the novel. Given that the novel's themes usurp the conventionally primary nature of the plot within the narrative, thanks to the blissful meanderings and intertextual allusions in Sebald's prose, these age old themes of reconciliation and restitution are able to be address in a new and startling light.

During *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* Borges's narrator posits that "while we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere and ... in this way every man is two men",⁹ which perfectly echoes the sensation of the interchangeable nature of identity experienced by Sebald's narrator during his visit to his friend Michael Hamburger's house later in the novel: "warum ich gleich bei meinem ersten Besuch bei Michael den Eindruck gewann, als lebte ich oder als hätte ich einmal gelebt in seinem Haus, und zwar in allem geradeso wie er, das kann ich mir nicht erklären" (*RS*, p. 218). We see here the ambiguous and uncertain nature of reality further presented to us by Sebald's narrator, and yet it is not only identity's mysterious interchangeability to which he alludes over the course of *Die Ringe des Saturn*.

Indeed the Borgesian narrator's aforementioned view of time chimes so clearly with Sebald's concepts of memory as predestined order and time as something elusive which appears to have already occurred, a fact which Sebald makes explicit for the reader as his narrator once more alludes to Borges's short story in the sixth chapter of the novel when he discusses "die Leugnung der Zeit" (*RS*, p. 185). The Sebaldian narrator quotes more or less verbatim from a key tract in Borges's short story, reminding the reader that „diesem Grundsatz zufolge hat die Zukunft Wirklichkeit nur in der Form unserer gegenwärtigen Furcht und Hoffnung, die Vergangenheit bloß als Erinnerung“ (*RS*, pp. 185 - 186). In doing so comparisons between Borges and Sebald's writing are once again clearly drawn, reinforcing the sense of ambiguity which permeates the prose, as well as raising Sebald to a higher canonical status by association again. This alchemical coalescence of texts from the past into texts of

9 Borges: *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, p. 35.

the present mirrors the novel's themes of reconciliation and restitution, while simultaneously allowing a space to form between these fictions where confrontation with these themes may occur.

In a final allusion to *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* in the last sentence of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Sebald's narrator recalls the old Dutch custom of covering the mirrors in a house with black mourning cloth „damit nicht die den Körper verlassende Seele auf ihrer letzten Reise abgelenkt würde, sei es durch ihren eigenen Anblick, sei es durch den ihrer bald auf immer verlorenen Heimat“ (RS, p. 350). We are reminded of the disquieting moment at the beginning of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* when Borges's narrator and his colleague are “spied upon”¹⁰ by a mirror and learn that “mirrors have something monstrous about them”¹¹. The narrator goes on to relate how in Uqbar “mirrors ... are abominable because they increase the number of men”,¹² a notion which is echoed throughout Sebald's narrative when his narrator and we as readers are potentially distracted by reflections presented within the text, which despite their defamiliarising nature and their potential to distort our view of the truth, may in fact allow monstrous events of the past to be confronted, as they may be perceived afresh in a truthful way, not simply recalled.

Through the culmination of these allusions, I would argue that *Die Ringe des Saturn* has been raised to an equal status to that of Borges's short story within the canon of world literature. The reader once again experiences the sensation of an ambiguous relationship in Sebald's novel between the real and the unreal, and truth and fiction, and how the apparent contradictions within the prose in fact aid the narrator and reader in confronting past trauma.

Indeed, as Sebald mentions earlier in his novel when he first alludes to *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Borges's narrator (and Sebald by association) is engaged in

die Ausarbeitung eines Romans, der gegen offenkundige Tatsachen verstoßen und sich in verschiedene Widersprüche verwickeln sollte in einer Weise, die es wenigen Lesern – sehr wenigen Lesern – ermöglichen sollte, die in dem Erzählten verborgene, einestails grauenvolle, andernteils gänzlich bedeutungslose Wirklichkeit zu erahnen (RS, pp. 89-90).

Thanks to Sebald's inclusion of intertextual allusions to Borges's short story within his narrative's transcendent and blissful meanderings, the themes of his work are given space to be addressed and explored. By uniting the past and the present through literary allusion in this way, Sebald mirrors his own novelistic concerns and praxis in an innovative exploratory fashion.

In *Die Ringe des Saturn* Sebald constructs a prose style which is refined, as well as a narrative praxis which allows the sediments of memory and allusive association to accrete subtly then vertiginously, in order that the reader is unable to discern the validity of the narrator's memories and recollections. His bricolage of intertexts, particularly his open allusions to *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, suggests that his narrator's memory is something heterogeneous and fragmentary while also serving to reinforce Sebald's being perceived as an encyclopaedist attempting to hold back the evanescent nature

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-43, p. 35.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

of time and memory through the creation of other worlds of learning, not unlike the protagonists of Borges's short story.

III. Shakespeare in Sebald

William Shakespeare has long been canonised as the one of the world's greatest writers. Yet he is not only beloved in countries where English is spoken; he is frequently so revered that he is embraced as a literary hero by people from all over the world and appropriated as one of their own, with many of his plays having been performed in translation since the seventeenth century.¹³ As Stanley Wells has suggested, we "should think of Shakespeare ... not as a quintessentially English writer but as a European one" since "at the time Shakespeare was writing, educated Englishmen were the products of a civilisation that was founded not on national values but on international ones".¹⁴

Given his enduring popularity, Shakespeare may even be thought of as a transnational writer, whose work transcends the boundaries between nations and languages. He lived during an age of rapid expansion abroad, when many people were moving to London, not only from rural towns and villages in England, but also from overseas. This facilitated widespread importation, translation and imitation of contemporary European works of literature and classical works of antiquity.¹⁵ Since "London was becoming an increasingly miscegenated place"¹⁶, demographic changes across the capital city exerted a great influence on an emergent national consciousness. Therefore during the time he was composing his greatest plays and poems, Shakespeare, this ostensibly most English of English writers, was living through a period of blossoming new relations and interdependencies between many nations. As his contemporary and fellow playwright and poet, Ben Jonson, asserted, a writer "not of an age, but for all time".¹⁷

Particularly in Germany Shakespeare has been translated and popularised for nigh on four hundred years by many esteemed literary figures, including Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who declared that after having read an entire play by Shakespeare he felt "wie ein Blindgeborener, dem eine Wunderhand das Gesicht in einem Augenblick schenkte. Ich erkannte, ich fühlte aufs lebhafteste meine

13 For further discussion of translated performances of Shakespeare's works, see *European Shakespeare: Translating Shakespeare in the Romantic Age*. Ed. by Dirk Delabastita and Lieven D'hulst. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1993.

14 Stanley Wells: "Shakespeare: Man of the European Renaissance". In: *Renaissance Shakespeare: Shakespeare Renaissances: Proceedings of the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress*. Ed. by Martin Procházka, Michael Dobson, Andreas Höfele and Hannah Scolnicov (Maryland: University of Delaware Press, 2014), pp. 3-15, pp. 3-4.

15 For further discussion of the transnational in Shakespeare, see Carole Levin and John Watkins, *Shakespeare's Foreign Worlds: National and Transnational Identities in the Elizabethan Age*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

16 Jean E. Howard: *Theater of the City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598-1642*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007, p. 11.

17 Ben Jonson: *To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare and What He Hath Left Us*. In: Ben Jonson: *A Selection of his First Poems*. Ed. by Ian Donaldson. Oxford Poetry Library. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 137.

Existenz um eine Unendlichkeit erweitert“.¹⁸ The German poet and literary critic August Wilhelm von Schlegel, whose translations of Shakespeare's plays and poems have become German classics in their own right, even went so far as to once refer to Shakespeare as being “ganz unser”.¹⁹

This most English of poets in fact helped the German intelligentsia to define themselves and their nation in the run up to the failed revolutions of 1848, the first major step towards establishing national unity in Germany: in a poem of 1844, Ferdinand Freiligrath began by declaring that “Deutschland ist Hamlet!”,²⁰ suggesting that Germans are curiously disposed to identify with this particular Shakespearean figure. Indeed, as Goethe's quotations above suggests, Shakespeare helped them redefine themselves culturally as well as nationally, his work acting as the antithesis of the French tradition prevalent in Europe at the time.²¹ As William Preston Johnston observed, this opening line embodies the notion that “Hamlet's strength and weakness are the strength and weakness of the German people”,²² who were seen as idealising and reflective, yet lacking the determination and resolve to achieve greatness.

W. G. Sebald held the positions of lecturer then chair of European literature at the University of East Anglia between 1970 and his death in 2001, and has been described as a writer, who “as a scholar and a teacher of European literature ... is steeped in the texts, some quite obscure, of a much broader range of writers, Latin American as well as European”.²³ This is the case with references to Borges, as we have seen, and Shakespeare's work continues to loom large on the stage of influence for Sebald. In *Die Ringe des Saturn*, this is especially true: the novel contains a fleeting nod to a well known line from *Hamlet*, as well as many implicit and explicit allusions to *King Lear*, both of which have a profound effect on the text and the reader.

Die Ringe des Saturn is, as previously discussed, at least on the surface a travelogue account of the Sebaldian narrator's walking tour of the county of Suffolk, yet is also “ein Reisebericht besonderer Art” (RS, promotional material), as the authority of witnessing trauma and coming to terms with it are problematised tangentially. In the fourth chapter of the novel, the narrator states, when recalling earlier travels abroad, how the „Flughafen an jenem Morgen erschienen wie der Vorhof des unbekanntes Landes, von dem kein Reisender mehr wiederkehrt“ (RS, p. 111). It is interesting to note the decision has been taken to reference explicitly the Shakespearean line in the English translation, although the reference is more obscure in the original German.

In the novel's eighth chapter, the narrator proceeds to explain how „es war ein trüber, beklemmender Tag und ... kam es mir vor, als ginge ich durch ein unentdecktes Land“ (RS, p. 279). These are clear echoes of Hamlet's famous characterisation of

18 Heinrich Viehoff: *Goethes Leben*. Stuttgart: Ad. Bechers Verlag, 1864, p. 299.

19 August Wilhelm von Schlegel: „Etwas über William Shakespeare bei Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters“ In: *August Wilhelm von Schlegel's sämtliche Werke*. Ed. by Edouard Böcking. Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846-7, p. 38.

20 Ferdinand Freiligrath: *Hamlet*. In: Ferdinand Freiligrath: *Ein Glaubensbekenntnis. Zeitgedichte*. Hamburg: Tredition Classics, 2012, p. 95.

21 For further discussion of this, see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Rede zum Shakespeare-Tag 1771*. Hamburg: Europäische Verlags-Anstalt, 1992.

22 William Preston Johnston: *The Prototype of Hamlet, and Other Shakespearean Problems*. New York: Belford Company Publishers, 1890, p. 90.

23 McCulloh: *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, p. 140.

death as “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns”,²⁴ which serves to reinforce how we as readers are guided by the Sebaldian narrator through both the physical landscape of Suffolk and the haunted landscape of the novel. His elegiac prose weaves its way through histories, memories, death and destruction to allow Sebald to confront ghosts, memories and the dead of the past.

In the process of constructing a fictional East Anglian arena in which to attempt to such a confrontation with these horrors and atrocities, the narrator unearths skulls, examines paintings of autopsies, traverses graveyards, inserting photographs of Nazi death camps and other mass slaughters into the pages of his novels. His reference to so well known a line from *Hamlet* gives depth of purpose to his writing, imbuing it with literary gravitas, as well as associating Sebald's narrator with the Prince of Denmark, who is often viewed as an embodiment of a melancholic and reflective European, or indeed German as suggested earlier.²⁵

However, it is not references to *Hamlet* which occur most frequently in *Die Ringe des Saturn*, but rather implicit and explicit allusions to Shakespeare's great tragedy of madness and destruction, *King Lear*. Given the frequent invocations in Sebald's blissful meanderings of stark, quasi post-apocalyptic landscapes, devoid of people, it is appropriate that he draws on a play which recounts natural, political, familial and mental destruction. These literary allusions occur in the seventh chapter of the novel, providing not only a literary touchstone and commemorative homage to one of Sebald's literary forebears, but also subtle intertextual connections which draw analogies between *King Lear* and Sebald's novel.²⁶

While recounting his experience of getting lost during his peregrinations across Dunwich Heath, when he was repeatedly unable to reach his destination, Sebald's narrator reflects how “Monate nach diesem mir bis heute unbegreiflich gebliebenen Erlebnis bin ich in einem Traum abermals auf der Heide von Dunwich gewesen” (*RS*, p. 205). During this vision the factual nature of the narrative is loosened and the realist skeleton of the novel breaks down. The reader is plunged into a state of disorientation not dissimilar to that previously experienced by the narrator himself, or indeed the sustained sensation for the reader of following Sebald's blissful meanderings throughout his exploratory narrative. The overriding sense of being in limbo is also particularly redolent of the narrator's feelings in the third chapter, which have been previously explored. Such recurrent melancholic disorientation, invariably accompanied by catastrophic visions or imaginings, encourage the reader once again to venture into the web of connections and intertextual allusions brought up by the narrator.

Upon describing how „es war, also befände ich mich am obersten Punkt der Erde”, the narrator recalls how he stood,

24 William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, III. i. 85.

25 For further discussion of this, see R. A. Foakes: “Hamlet and Hamletism”. In: *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 12-44.

26 For further discussion of Sebald's use of Shakespearean allusions in his writing, see Anita Gilman Sherman: “Shakespearean Vertigo: Sebald's Lear”. In: *Criticism* 52:1 (2010), pp. 1-24.

einen Fuß nur vom äußersten Rand, und war mir bewußt wie schlimm es ist hinabzuschauen. Die Dohlen und die Krähen, die in halber Höhe kreisten, sahen kaum so groß wie Käfer aus; die Fischer auf dem Strand erschienen Mäusen gleich, die dumpfe Brandung, die die ungezählten Kiesel mahlt, drang nicht zu mir herauf (RS, p. 207).

This passage clearly echoes a scene from *King Lear* which revolves around the characters of the Earl of Gloucester, who has been recently blinded, and his son Edgar, disguised as a peasant and keeping his identity secret from his father. Gloucester wishes to be taken to a cliff top in order to commit suicide, so Edgar describes for him an imagined precipice, much like the Sebaldian narrator's vision of looking down from the highest point of the earth, declaring:

How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles ...
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice ...
The murmuring surge
That on th' unnumbered idle pebbles chafes
Cannot be heard so high.²⁷

Just as Edgar does for his blind father, Sebald builds this vista through his narrator's use of language, specifically language that has been appropriated from a writer from the past. In doing so, the narrator's identity becomes inextricably linked with that of Edgar, the younger generation explaining to the previous how the world is. This recalls Sebald's criticism of post war German writers' failure to grieve for and engage with the traumatic horror endured by German and Austrian citizens during the Second World War.²⁸ Parallels are thus drawn with Sebald's mission in his fiction to resist the desire to be silent and not bear witness to the traumas of the past, confronting life honestly in an attempt to experience a true sense of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Following this, as if in a demonstration of how true grief should be expressed, the narrator observes in his vision "die Figur eines einzelnen greisen Mannes mit wirrem Haupthaar neben seiner toten Tochter, beide winzig wie auf einer meilenweit entfernten Bühne" (RS, p. 208), who cries (in English), "Lend me a looking glass; if that her breath will mist or stain the stone, why, then she lives" (RS, p. 208). Yet Sebald uses this verbatim quotation and re-enactment of the final scene of *King Lear*, in which Lear cradles the corpse of his beloved youngest daughter, Cordelia, not only as a possible expression of truthful response to trauma. In toying with his narrator's perspective, Sebald has us witness the grieving Lear as if he is small and reduced, yet simultaneously his character is, of course, a literary giant. Such playfulness with perception in this scene reminds us not only of Sebald's wish to confront and reconcile with the horrors of the past, but his insistence on an approach which is "oblique"

27 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV. v. 15-26.

28 For further discussion of this, see McCulloh: *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, pp. 146-7. See also W. G. Sebald: *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Munich: Hanser, 1999.

and “tangential”.²⁹ But while it is true that this reduction of Lear could be just as readily likened to a trivialisation of grief, instead of a coded reminder of Sebald’s praxis, what is in fact expressed here is both contradictory positions together. In this Sebaldian paradox we are able to understand the difficult tension and challenging impossibility of truly coming to terms with past trauma, as Sebald and his narrator desire.

Sebald’s allusion to Shakespeare is finally intensified towards the end of the seventh chapter with reference to an open air production of *King Lear* and a direct quotation from a man learning lines for the play (once more, in English): “they say his banished son is with the earl of Kent in Germany” (RS, p. 226). This citation is heavy with irony, since the narrator is bound up with his Shakespearean alter ego, the character of Edgar (the “banished son” discussed here). We see here an ironic reversal of Sebald’s decision to depart from Germany in the 1960s and live permanently in the U.K. in what has been called “his ‘self-imposed’ or ‘voluntary’ exile”.³⁰

Significantly, despite this being rectified in the English translation of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Sebald slightly misquotes Shakespeare’s original line, a line which in fact occurs only in the quarto editions of the play as opposed to the First Folio edition of 1623, which is generally considered to be more accurate.³¹ By removing the specificity of Edgar’s name, Sebald suggests a universality to his exile and attempted *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, whilst also indicating his narrator’s lack of memory, which is unsettling, given the documentary exactitude demonstrated throughout the novel. In this brief line the difficulties and challenges of memory and facing the past are encapsulated, as notions of exile and reconciliation with the past are addressed within the new space created through literary allusions in Sebald’s narrative.

As the past and the present come together in Sebald’s allusive blissful meanderings, we experience a sense of temporal flux, which allows confrontation with the past to occur in a non-confrontational manner. An innovative arena unfolds and expands between the Shakespearean literature of the past and Sebald’s literature of the present, where the novel’s principal desire of coming to terms with the past are explored. In this sequence of Shakespearean allusions in which reality is disturbed and history disordered, the mixture of time and literature mirrors the blend of memory and history in *Die Ringe des Saturn*. This allows Sebald not only to underline the themes of his work and deepen them through association, but also to provide an insight into his novelistic praxis. His writing and writing of the past is bound up in an intricate, timeless web of connections.

29 See Jean-Pierre Rondas’s 2001 interview with Sebald in W. G. Sebald: „Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis“. *Gespräche 1971 bis 2001*. Ed. by Torsten Hoffmann. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011, p. 216.

30 Lynn L. Wolff: *W. G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2014, p. 9.

31 The original reads: “They say Edgar, his banish’d son, is with the Earl of Kent in Germany”. Shakespeare: *King Lear*, IV. vi. 94-95.

IV. Conclusion

It is clear that there is a literary fraternity between Sebald, Shakespeare and Borges which enables present and past literature to co-exist in a detemporalised space within the narrative of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, where the writer, narrator and reader of these novels are able to confront the traumas of the past, the nature of memory, the passing of time, and the place of human experience among these grand concerns. Discrete allusions collected as a harmonious whole reflect Sebald's novelistic praxes and echo his novel's themes, bringing the past into the present. The idea of linear movement is suspended in *Die Ringe des Saturn* in favour of an outward expansion across these palimpsest texts. As Italo Calvino remarked on the contemporary novel, "whatever the starting point, the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing even vaster horizons, and if it were permitted to go on further and further in every direction, it would end by embracing the entire universe".³²

32 Italo Calvino: *Six Memos for the New Millennium*. Trans. by Patrick Creagh. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2009, p. 107.

