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and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn***

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‘Will what I have written survive beyond the grave? Will there be anyone to comprehend it in a world the very foundations of which are changed?’¹ These are the questions posed by the Vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), whose *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (or, *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*) are the subject of one of the most telling digressions within W. G. Sebald's 1995 work *The Rings of Saturn*. It is a digression that is so telling because it exposes the reader to the innate fallibility and unreliability of the writer, with Sebald's narrator surmising that:

The chronicler, who was present at these events and is once more recalling what he witnessed, inscribes his experiences, in an act of self-mutilation onto his own body. In the writing, he becomes the martyred paradigm of the fate Providence has in store for us, and, though still alive, is already in the tomb that his memoirs represent.²

Will Self's pseudo-autobiographical 2010 triptych *Walking to Hollywood* is a work heavily influenced by Sebald, from the black-and-white photographs that litter the text, to the thematic links between its final tale, ‘Spurn Head’, and *The Rings of Saturn*. In both, the writers embark upon walks along various stretches of England's eroding east coast as a means of attempting to dispel an insidious sense of melancholy. Ultimately, however, by manipulating a genre that transpires to be as inherently paradoxical as attempting to deny

¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 253.

² *Ibid.*, 257.

one's own mortality, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Walking to Hollywood* expose, through their treatments of the memoir, an overwhelming sense of entrapment that is a fundamental facet of our existence.

In addition to this, J. J. Long posits that from the 'desire to resist modernity and the simultaneous realisation that this desire is destined to be forever unfulfilled – however long the narrator's pilgrimage and narrative digression may defer this acknowledgement – stems the melancholy that constitutes Sebald's most recognisable signature.'³ This term 'modernity' – that for Long is central to Sebald's work – is a problematic one, yet the wish to resist some form of it is also something that plays out in intriguing ways over parts of *Walking to Hollywood*. As such, it is worth considering what modernity constitutes for Sebald and Self. For Sebald, it is pinpointed in the specific and horrific events of the Holocaust, and as such his modernity primarily entails the struggle with existence and identity in a world after these atrocities. For, as Maurice Blanchot suggests, the Holocaust was 'an absolute that interrupted history, this one *must* say, without, however, being able to say anything else. Discourse cannot be developed from this point... there is almost no affirmation possible'.⁴

Walking to Hollywood, meanwhile, offers a dramatisation of a longstanding theme of Self's work; namely, the interplay and causality between technological developments and mental health. In the afterword to *Walking to Hollywood*, Self explains that the 'mental pathologies that underlie the three memoirs – obsessive-compulsive disorder for 'Very Little', psychosis for 'Walking to Hollywood' and Alzheimer's for 'Spurn Head' – are themselves displacements of a single phenomenon.'⁵ What becomes apparent, particularly over the first two sections of the triptych, is that technological developments and their cultural outputs are capable of having profound effects upon the psyche of Self the narrator regardless of whether

³ J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 146.

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, 114.

⁵ Will Self, *Walking to Hollywood*, 431-2.

they are transformative or spurious. Yet come ‘Spurn Head’, the focus shifts from technology to pathology, with Self’s detailing of early-onset Alzheimer’s acting as a distressing counterpoint to the irreverence that characterises much of the rest of *Walking to Hollywood*. As such, the emotional responses that Self’s ‘contorted, wayward and melancholic’⁶ narrative prompts are often much less straightforward than those that the almost unremittingly bleak tone of Sebald’s work fosters.

Sebald’s narrative opens with the struggle to frame one’s identity in a post-Holocaust world manifesting itself through a cycle of walking and writing. Initially, the narrator walks ‘in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work.’⁷ It is not long before the grim inescapability of this cycle becomes apparent, however. Far from embodying any kind of psychic relief for the narrator, the constant confrontations with destruction and erosion during his walk bring on the ‘paralysing horror’⁸ that triggers a Kafkaesque physical malaise – the narrator, while hospitalised, compares himself to Gregor Samsa – that in turn makes it necessary for him to chronicle the walking tour. Consequently, it is now the turn of writing to try and occupy a psychologically therapeutic role, but the inescapably paradoxical nature of the memoir ensures this is impossible:

For days and weeks on end one racks one’s brains to no avail, and, if asked, one could not say whether one goes on writing purely out of habit, or a craving for admiration, or because one knows not how to do anything other, or out of sheer wonderment, despair or outrage, any more than one could say whether writing renders one more perceptive or more insane. Perhaps we all lose our sense of reality to the precise degree to which we are engrossed in our own work, and perhaps that is why we see in the increasing

⁶ Ibid., 431.

⁷ Ibid., *The Rings of Saturn*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

complexity of our mental constructs a means for greater understanding, even while intuitively we know that we shall never be able to fathom the imponderables that govern our course through life.⁹

By deed of its genre, then, *The Rings of Saturn* is a work that participates in its own disintegration. Chateaubriand's memoirs further epitomise the futility of this life, as he bemoans 'How wretched this life of ours is! So full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory. My sense of estrangement is becoming more and more dreadful.'¹⁰ Yet Chateaubriand was a man who charted the events of his own, apparently futile, life over thousands of pages. This typifies the idea of the memoir as a necessary monument that will long outlast the writer, but this idea in itself only highlights the pervading entrapment in this act. As Long argues, 'the digressive narrative, the narrative that entails a 'stepping away from', can only be conceived in relation to that form from which it steps away and to which it is therefore inevitably sutured.'¹¹ As such, this idea of writing forming a monument to one's own life inevitably and paradoxically highlights both the futility of life and the inescapability of death, something that both Chateaubriand and Sebald demonstrate an acute awareness of.

Self's 'Spurn Head' shifts the locale from Sebald's Suffolk coast to Holderness in East Yorkshire, but the likenesses between it and *The Rings of Saturn* transcend coastal walking tours. Framed by the overarching, inescapable onset of Alzheimer's disease, it most obviously evokes the latter characteristic of the 'contorted, wayward and melancholic' narrative of *Walking to Hollywood*. This is something of a removal from the previous two sections that are bizarre, harrowing, but often genuinely humorous. In his review of *Walking*

⁹ Ibid., 181-2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 255.

¹¹ J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 145.

to *Hollywood*, M. John Harrison surmises that ‘All along the book has been about death’,¹² and Self’s treatments of death and Alzheimer’s – through his non-fiction as well as his fiction – are a useful foil for establishing the pervading melancholy in *Walking to Hollywood*, and how it compares to Sebald’s work.

As with *The Rings of Saturn*, ‘Spurn Head’ opens with Self the narrator ruminating over the cause and effect relationship between walking and writing, coming to the conclusion that:

all of my little walking tours were methods of legitimizing. Towards the end of my drug addiction it had occurred to me that the manias of cocaine, the torpors of heroin and the psychoses of the hallucinogens – all these were pre-existing states of mental anguish that only appeared to be self-induced, and so, perhaps, controllable, because of the drugs. So it was with the walking, which was a busman’s holiday; for, while I trudged along... I remained sunk deep in my own solipsism – then I returned to the chronic, elective loneliness of the writing life.¹³

Sebald’s narrator meditates on the emptiness that grips him following a long stint of writing, and returning to his theme of the difficulties of comprehending one’s identity in a post-Holocaust world, the ubiquitous destruction that he encounters during his walk only exacerbates his despair. The despair inherent in this cycle is therefore obvious at the outset of *The Rings of Saturn*, but with Self things are slightly more complicated. This is not least because the mental issues that propel Self into this cycle are facilitated by prolonged drug abuse, and these addictions and walking both purport to offer a semblance of agency for him. Similarly, while there is still an overarching sense of isolation in this rationale, it in itself

¹² M. John Harrison, ‘Walking to Hollywood by Will Self’.

¹³ Self, *Walking to Hollywood*, 336-7.

suggests a measure of control – Self mentions the ‘elective loneliness’ of writing – rather than the paralysing ramifications of the Holocaust that play upon Sebald.

The idea of constructing a self-destructive monument in the vein of Chateaubriand’s *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb* is given an idiosyncratic treatment by Self in the eponymous central section of the triptych. This charts the events of June 2008, when Self embarked upon a 120-mile circumambulation of Los Angeles in order to simultaneously discover, avoid, and bring down whomever ‘killed film – for film is definitely dead, toppled from its reign as the pre-eminent narrative medium of the age.’¹⁴ As in ‘Spurn Head’ and *The Rings of Saturn*, there is also an especial significance attached to walking at this juncture:

If I want to discover who – or what – did for film I’ll be better off walking. Walking is so much slower than film – especially contemporary Hollywood movies, with their stuttering film grammar of split-second shots – and it isn’t framed, when you walk you’re floating in a fishbowl view of the world. There can’t possibly be any editing: no dissolves, no cuts, no fades, no split-screens – and, best of all, no special effects, no computer-cheated facsimiles of the world. You see, if I walk to Hollywood I’ll be creeping along outside the ambit of the filmic – like Vietcong insurgent tunnelling through the jungle – and they won’t be able to see me coming!¹⁵

While this spiel insinuates that Self’s mission is a quixotic quest to avenge film, the actual role of film is more complex, even destructive than this. In a 2014 article, Self espoused that film provided us ‘with a new method of shaping our sense of both individual and collective reality’, adding that ‘another way of looking at our time’s wilful, but mostly unconscious

¹⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹⁵ Ibid., 124-5.

substitution of the virtual for the real, is that it's a kind of disease.'¹⁶ This is a train of thought that plays out in 'Walking to Hollywood', as despite his insistence that his mission will take place outside the realm of the filmic, he eventually decides to have the walk itself filmed 'as a single continuous shot, at times static, at others panning, at still others tracking or zooming.'¹⁷ Such a decision exposes both the insidiousness of this 'kind of disease', and just how caught up he is the very thing he is trying to work against. In terms of the genre of *Walking to Hollywood* as a whole, this entrapment is manipulated in an overtly metafictional way. A conversation Self has with his psychiatrist Dr. Zack Busner (who also happens to be Self's most notorious recurring fictional character), that is passed off as 'minted lamb', is accompanied with a footnote that reveals:

I cannot recall tasting pre-minted lamb until the early 2000s, when Sainsbury's began to offer it among their selection of barbecue meats. This was over twenty years after the events described, so the phrase 'minted lamb' is interjected here to convey the implausibility of this reconstructive memoir, and indeed of the genre as a whole.¹⁸

This footnote that occurs near the beginning of the eponymous centrepiece of the triptych is the most overt instance of how aware Self is of the intricacies, and specifically pitfalls, of the memoir. Such an acute awareness is something that *Walking to Hollywood* and *The Rings of Saturn* share, but at this juncture of the triptych at least, the emotional responses of the two chroniclers are markedly different. Far from the poignant disillusionment of Chateaubriand and Sebald, Self is currently dealing in mere incredulity.

Furthermore, the ironic entrapment that stems from the peculiar monument of the filmed walk, coupled with the fact that everyone he encounters during his trip to and around

¹⁶ Ibid., 'I had planned to write *Jaws* without the shark'.

¹⁷ Ibid., *Walking to Hollywood*, 173.

¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

Los Angeles is played by a celebrity, highlights the Debordian leanings of Self's work. This works in the sense that he is attempting to figure out his own identity through the fugue of psychosis in a remarkably literal take on Guy Debord's first thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.'¹⁹

This Debordian influence appears again in 'Spurn Head', and it does so in relation to the event that looms over *The Rings of Saturn* like a spectre, the Holocaust. In this instance, the historical event is held up against the inevitable march into the future, with Self suggesting that:

And so, there will be Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day – until the significance of the Holocaust itself – which no one any longer living has had direct experience of – is quite forgotten.²⁰

Blanchot's point that 'there is no affirmation possible' following the atrocities of the Holocaust crystallises the struggles of Sebald's narrator and the intrinsically futile 'desire to resist modernity'. Sebald achieves this by detailing the profound and, importantly, ongoing effects of the Holocaust without resorting to egregious descriptions of the atrocities themselves. Yet Self forges his own path at this juncture, in the respect that he visualises the distant future in which these ongoing effects will inevitably have ceased to have any meaning, by outlining the myriad and increasingly distant levels of remembrance, with each

¹⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

²⁰ Self, *Walking to Hollywood*, 343.

successive generation living through another Debordian layer of representation that is ever more detached from the direct, horrific experience of the Holocaust. On one hand this may suggest a sense of cynical detachment as far as Self is concerned, but ultimately if one is wondering why Sebald still feels the need to construct a monument of his own experiences through his writing, Self's explanation of this future, with its 'forgotten' experience of the Holocaust, offers a valid reason. Therefore, charting one's own experiences becomes vital for Sebald, even if, as he laments, 'in reality, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable.'²¹ For Sebald, then, the memoir is essential and flawed in equal measure.

Similarly, some of the moments of real pathos in 'Spurn Head' come about through the unreliability of memory, in this case notably exacerbated by the onset of Alzheimer's. The narrative becomes particularly touching when Self details a documentary about an unknown woman suffering from the disease. Although Self has his own reasons for finding the documentary 'unutterably poignant',²² because of the likeness the woman's swimming technique bears to his father's, it is nevertheless a poignancy that also draws the reader in. Initially, the development of the woman's illness shares some traits of the narrator's own mental health. As Self notes, 'To begin with, she was giddy with the fall – amused by her own forgetfulness',²³ just as the narrator finds himself describing his psychotic delusions as 'a form of entertainment'²⁴ come the reflexive denouement of 'Walking to Hollywood'. This is transient, however, as her mental state deteriorates to the point at which she cannot be taken to the Suffolk coast as she desires, 'for fear that [she] would simply swim out to sea and submerge her own incomprehension in the liquid unknown.'²⁵ The question that arises

²¹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 177.

²² Self, *Walking to Hollywood*, 335.

²³ *Ibid.*, 334.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

from this concern hinges upon whether the submerging of oneself into ‘the liquid unknown’ becomes a conscious, deliberate act for the woman. Keeping Harrison’s claim in mind – that the book is primarily concerned with death – this passage becomes important in relation to Self’s distinctive views on death, and specifically suicide.

In a 2014 RSA talk, Self espouses that ‘It’s meaningless to talk about death as distinct from life, it’s really one thing. It’s death/life, like space/time, after Einstein’s second paper on General Relativity – death and life are the same phenomenon.’²⁶ This assertion that death and life are inter-related components of one larger phenomenon is something that runs throughout Self’s work. It is, for instance, the premise upon which ‘The North London Book of the Dead’ (1991) and *How the Dead Live* (2000) are exclusively predicated. As well as this, it is an idea explored in Self’s 1993 article on cryogenics and cryonicists, a group whose beliefs, despite being ‘Dagenham – two stops beyond Barking’²⁷ are ‘yet unsettling, because the very form that their delusion takes mirrors the profound spiritual difficulties our culture has in coming to terms with death.’²⁸ It is a point that transcends mere mockery, in the sense that it introduces a link between technology and death (namely, the idea that technology can in fact stave off death, or at least will be able to in the future if not the present) while highlighting Self’s belief that the way in which modern secular society treats death must be open to re-evaluation.

Yet if Self’s ‘death/life’ phenomenon is nothing groundbreaking in itself, what is significantly more provocative is the candour with which he explains how to tackle this problem of how death is perceived by secular society. More specifically, this deals with transcending the taboo of unassisted suicide, through Self’s belief that we should end our

²⁶ Ibid., ‘RSA Replay: Let’s Talk About Death’.

²⁷ Ibid., *Junk Mail*, 252.

²⁸ Ibid., 254.

own lives once they ‘no longer have any utility, value, and that it would be better to die.’²⁹ However, the audible unease that his claims elicit from the audience validate his acknowledgement of the monumental amount of courage still required to carry out such an act. As such, showing an awareness of the point at which one’s life begins to lose worth – upon the diagnosis of a terminal illness, for instance – and consequently exhibiting the freedom of choice that is, as Self puts it, ‘grasping the nettle of unassisted suicide’,³⁰ becomes a hugely valuable act, the ultimate act of self-appraisal. That both the reader and Self are potentially about to become privy to such a moment playing out in ‘Spurn Head’ affords the story of the unnamed woman an even greater degree of poignancy.

Of course, this remains a highly controversial viewpoint, one that is still some way from being comprehended, much less accepted – and the reasons for this are as innately paradoxical as the idea of constructing a memoir. These reasons behind such a refusal to contemplate the end of one’s own life are what Ernest Becker examines in his work *The Denial of Death*, arguing that man’s innate narcissism leads to the formation of social and cultural ‘hero-systems... in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.’³¹ These consequences of such an ingrained sense of narcissism lead to the impossibility of considering one’s own death; as Becker adds, ‘It is one of the meaner aspects of narcissism that we feel that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves.’³² Consequently, this acknowledgement of the delicate mortality of others coupled with a total refusal to believe in one’s own expendability provides an example of what Stanley Cohen calls the ‘denial paradox’:

²⁹ Ibid., ‘Let’s Talk About Death’.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 5.

³² Ibid., 2.

Denial is a high-speed cognitive mechanism for processing information, like the computer command to ‘delete’ rather than ‘save’. But this assumes the denial paradox. In order to use the term ‘denial’ to describe a person’s statement ‘I didn’t know’, one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know – otherwise the term ‘denial’ is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the only legitimate use of the term ‘denial’.³³

Cohen’s idea that there is necessarily an implicit knowledge of what is being denied is helpful when it comes to considering the ways in which society – immaturely, as far as Self is concerned – deals with death. For the knowledge of death exists, it is just so hugely unpleasant to truly comprehend. Yet for Self it is notably less unpleasant than the prospect of terminal illness or a slow, painful decline into what is an inevitability anyway, and this is an outlook that is significant as the narrator of ‘Spurn Head’ journeys up the East Yorkshire coast and deeper into memory loss:

Middle age – the fulcrum around which the mind-world turns. In youth the future is murky, while the past has a seeming clarity – but now it’s the future that becomes crystal clear: blackberries shining in a hawthorn hedge after sudden autumnal rain. Decline – then death. Meanwhile the past recedes, lapping back from a muddied shore across which it’s unsafe to wade – who knows what might have happened there?³⁴

Death, and the certainty of it, seem a perverse relief for Self here, compared to an inexorable decline into a terminal illness that will only further cloud the idea of what is real anymore. This thought encapsulates the change in tone of ‘Spurn Head’, in comparison to the preceding sections of the triptych. In particular, ‘Walking to Hollywood’, with its depictions of film,

³³ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, 5-6.

³⁴ Self, *Walking to Hollywood*, 344.

celebrity and psychosis, has been focused on how technology is capable of altering the boundaries between real and false. Here, however, the focus shifts to the deeply personal and unfortunately natural effects of the pathology itself.

Self's meditations on middle age are another example of the complex interplay between past, present and future that feature in both *Walking to Hollywood* and *The Rings of Saturn*. This interplay also takes on prevalence in relation to another notable formal convention of the two works: the black and white photographs that are intermittently spread throughout the memoirs. This technique is a hallmark of Sebald's work, but Self apes it in ways that make his memoir even more problematic. Where the photography in *The Rings of Saturn* corresponds with the historical event or location that is being depicted on that page, in order to instill a degree of pseudo-realism into the digressive narrative, this is not the case in *Walking to Hollywood*. Rather, where an image appears in relation to the text that describes it is almost totally arbitrary. Therefore, not only do the images of *Walking to Hollywood* provide Self with another means of teasing his reader, but they act as a visual representative of how a linear past, present and future become inexorably indistinct through the act of chronicling one's own existence.

'*Kunstschadenfreude*... Meaning the art that indulges its creator's sorrow until it completely takes him over.'³⁵ This is the term Busner coins to pejoratively define Self's quest in 'Walking to Hollywood', but it is a concept that resonates profoundly throughout the triptych. It is also a phenomenon that offers a concise packaging of the following argument from David Foster Wallace:

You don't have to think very hard to realize that our dread of both relationships and loneliness, both of which are like sub-dreads of our dread of being trapped inside a

³⁵ Ibid., 134.

self (a psychic self, not just a physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me... I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.³⁶

Wallace's point crystallises the duty literature and art have in relation to the paradoxical denial of death, and through their manipulations of the memoir, both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Walking to Hollywood* go a long way to aggravating this 'sense of entrapment'. Framing his walking tour against the historical backdrop of the Holocaust, Sebald's work is a deeply affecting one. While not recounting the horrors of the Holocaust directly, its influence remains palpable enough to ensure that it is impossible to establish an identity after it. Yet, so as not to lose sight of the horrors of direct experience, Sebald must still attempt to do this, despite knowing full well he is doomed to fail. As such, the distinctive melancholy of his work is borne out of facing, as Wallace puts it, 'what's dreadful' – in this case one of the most horrific atrocities over the course of history. If history is the catalyst for Sebald's sense of melancholy, then the pathology ultimately becomes the focus come the end of *Walking to Hollywood*. 'Spurn Head' depicts the difficulties of attempting to compose a narrative amidst the first throes of a degenerative disease, and the inevitabilities associated with Alzheimer's play a prominent part over the course of this narrative. As such, the ending of *Walking to Hollywood* goes beyond being, as Harrison suggests, all about death. Instead, it resembles an interplay between death, entrapment and loneliness, in keeping with Wallace's point. If this interplay were not complex enough, it is offset against the often-humorous first two sections of the triptych, which fall in line with both Self's theories on mental health and technology,

³⁶ David Foster Wallace, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace by Larry McCaffery'.

and also his more typically irreverent tone. This ensures that the shift in tone of ‘Spurn Head’ is all the more abrupt, meaning that in this final tale of the triptych Self is able, like Sebald before him, to effectively and affectingly portray the inherent paradox of the reconstructive memoir. For the genre is, as Sebald asserts, an act of ‘self-mutilation’, a monument that represents an attempt to ascribe one’s experiences on the world in the hope (if not the expectation) that they can resonate in that world long after the writer has departed.

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