

28 October 2004: Finally! I am able to sit down to write the first draft of my travel log to East Anglia. For the last two weeks, I have kept hold of my impressions, trying to reconnect with the experiences before they got lost in the usual din. Now, I am surrounded by maps, photos, postcards and my notes taken in the field. The other night I dreamt that W.G. Sebald was not dead because he was still listed in the Norwich phone book.

Saturday, 9<sup>th</sup> of October: Lise and I had been in London for a few days. We had followed W.G. Sebald's footsteps through London and gone to Oxford to visit the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Lorie arrived early today and now we were in a roomy taxi on our way through light morning traffic to the Liverpool Station to take a train to Ipswich, where we would pick up a car to travel farther north into the middle of East Anglia. Our destination was Wenhaston, a small village a bit east of Southwold, where we had rented a cottage for a week as home base – a place from which to start our excursions tracing some of Sebald's walks through Suffolk and Norfolk, as described in "The Rings of Saturn."




Luckily, there was not much traffic and I was able to master driving on the other side of the road through towns and roundabouts, past fields and hedges – passing the familiar names of places I had been to 35 years ago. There was the turnoff to Leiston and nearby Summerhill, the location of Neil's "antiauthoritarian school," which I had visited with my mother and brother in 1968. Another sign pointed to Sizewell, the 26-year-old nuclear power plant on the North Sea shore.

We stopped in Woodbridge to buy groceries. In the local bookstore, they offered not only books but coffee – one can now find cappuccinos and espressos everywhere – and homemade cookies and cakes. It had

a whole row of W.G. Sebald's books on a shelf. By coincidence, I picked up the London Book Review and came across an article about Michael Hamburger, a poet and close friend of Sebald's. On one of his visits to Hamburger's house in Middleton, Sebald reflects: *Über was für Zeiträume hinweg verlaufen die Wahlverwandschaften und Korrespondenzen? Wie kommt es, dass man in einem anderen Menschen sich selber und wenn nicht sich selber, so doch seinen Vorgänger sieht?*<sup>1</sup> All three of us had felt that correspondence immediately in Sebald's writings, and many years ago, we had agreed that we had found a kindred voice – which had now summoned us to East Anglia.

It took us another half hour to get to Bramfield: a right turn onto a road that looked like a one-way street for miniature cars, another intersection and some re-reading of the map. Farther away, crossing the fields on one of the many footpaths, we saw a solitary walker – and then we found Leman Cottage, at the crossroads to Thorington, Wenham, Bramfield and Blackheath, right next to the Old Hall Farm.

The cottage turned out to be the right place for us. It belonged to the Old Hall Farm, a 17<sup>th</sup> century homestead surrounded by fields, with in the nearby stables. The renovated a few years ago, past had been preserved: beams, an oak-wood wall – the living room – that a comfortable red sofa. A  

 The kitchen had been fitted with all the requisite modern appliances and had a table big enough for dinners and planning sessions.

The crooked floorboards on the second floor had squeaking beams that tilted to the west of the house, which made the beds move at night toward the setting moon. The ceiling rose up like a boat's hull turned


upside down: *Und wenn ich eine Weile die Augen schloss, war es mir, als läge ich in einer Kajüte auf einem Schiff, als wären wir auf hoher See, als höbe das ganze Haus sich auf einem Kamm einer Welle, als zitterte es dort ein wenig und senkte sich dann mit einem Seufzer in die Tiefe hinab.*<sup>2</sup> Even though the sloping bedrooms conjured up the strangest dreams, it was always light and warm in the narrow house, a comfortable place to come back to after our outings in the stormy, wet weather (which, as it turned out, we had to endure).

Sunday, 10<sup>th</sup> of October: We had decided to start our search at Somerleyton Hall and Gardens, Sundays and Thursdays being the only days the hall is open to the public. This particular Sunday promised blue skies with big clouds sailing over the land. Lorie was driving and I navigated her through the maze of small roads via Bramfield and Beccles, past Toft Monks, Haddiscoe and Herringsfleet. The road meandered through hills and forests, past shrubs and hedges, farms and ponds nestled into the end moraine landform. Then, after the rise past Beccles, we arrived on vast flatlands crisscrossed by canals, with here and there the remnant of an old mill: *Nichts ist hier zu sehen als ab und zu ein einsames Flurwärterhäuschen, als Gras und wogendes Schilf, ein paar niedergesunkenen Weidenbäume und zerfallende, wie Mahnmale einer zugrundegegangenen Zivilisation sich ausnehmende Ziegelkegel.*<sup>3</sup>

After passing a sign to the Somerleyton train station, we saw the brick wall that surrounded the grounds. Another sign guided us toward the hall and car park. A WWF event was going on and we followed the arrows right to the main entrance. We were greeted by the hall's curator, who told us in friendly but strict terms that the commoners had to enter through the back doors, around another bend, where the nursery and greenhouses were.

We spent odd hours there at Somerleyton: trailing through the past of the 18<sup>th</sup> century home and thinking about Sebald's encounters and our

own presence there on an October day, with the other tourists being guided through the Hall. I felt as if I existed in three time zones at once. I was not finding behind. He had described the to California; Argentina and




looking, but not seeing; searching, but whatever trace Sebald might have left walked through this park, had old sequoias and ancient cedars native there were three monkey-puzzles from “Platanenarten (die) sich über das Land ausbreiten wie konzentrische Ringe auf dem Wasser.”<sup>4</sup>

Sebald had examined the contents of the library and looked at the knickknacks and paraphernalia of dukedom and its portraits as we did. But why didn't he mention that there were two polar bears in the entrance hall? Did I miss the African mask and safari trophies? Had he really been inside the house or did he not like to participate in this kind of tourist activity? Had he ever taken tea, with scones and clotted cream, in the adjacent tearoom as we did? Did he stare into the lily pond, where once the old palm house had been, watching the other visitors walk by and listening to their chatter?

We passed the aviaries, mostly deserted, on our way to the maze of shaped yews. There was a group of children running around in circles, playing hide-and-seek between the hedges. After a while, we saw them waving from a pagoda centered on a rise in the middle of the maze, and then we were able to look over the hedges into the adjacent gardens. We tested each other on our way back out of the maze. How had we remembered which way to turn at each turning point – by a white feather stuck on a branch, markings on the ground or pure intuition?

On our way back to Wenhaston, we stopped over at Southwold, where Sebald had spent many a day on his frequent visits to the coast. The wind was roaring around the structures on the pier, where we parked the car. There was the familiar North Sea smell – fresh and salty. The

waves pounded the beach, beating any kind of plant matter into white foam, which the wind then carried off toward the town. Ah, a head-clearing wind tugging at our clothes, pushing and shoving – here and there, the faint odor of civilization: fish and chips. From the pier, you could see a row of brightly colored beach houses leaning against the wind. The season was walked along the lighthouse, looked into candy store – Lettered Liquorices (which, as it tasted much better in around another bend and there it was: The Sailors' Reading Room, a two-story, square brick building.



over, for sure! We promenade to the the windows of a Rocks, Fudges, turned out, had the past) – turned

Through a set of double doors, we stepped out of the howling wind into a spacious, warm room, with high windows looking out onto the sea. On one side of it was a huge display case housing all kinds of model freighters and sailing ships, fishing equipment, photos of ships and the black-and-white photo of a very young queen. The other two walls were lined with photographs and paintings of fishermen and seamen and their ships, newspaper clippings and postcards from faraway places. “On the tables are harbormasters' registers, log books, treatises on sailing, various nautical periodicals”<sup>5</sup> and the dailies, with their gory covers. In the corner under the windows were two easy chairs next to the former fireplace, which now was occupied by a space heater. “Besser als sonst irgendwo kann man hier lesen, Briefe schreiben, seinen Gedanken nachhängen oder, während der langen Winterzeit, einfach hinausschauen auf die stürmische, über die Promenade hereinbrechende See.”<sup>6</sup>

Over time, I became aware of the howling wind again. Looking out of the window, I had the sense of being in a wheelhouse, navigating over the sea toward the east. While studying the mementos of a sailor's hard life at sea, I thought about my brother, who had spent so many years sharing that life, working on coastal container ships that took

him from Hamburg or Bremen down to Lisbon and into the Mediterranean. What a place to have: after one has traveled the oceans for decades, to come sit a spell in the Sailors' Reading Room and listen to the regulator ticking away and the wind moving around the building – a place to remember the ones who never came back, a place to remember the past, to remember the Lingering Absence of a father and a brother who each died too young and an uncle who vanished during the Second World War, leaving behind a mother who went mad and a sister who continued to look for him until the late 1960s, and to remember the Lingering Absence of an admired writer.

In the room next door, we could hear the clicking of billiard queues (pool games for members only). Lorie tried to capture the atmosphere on video. As it turned out, the camera had picked up some kind of static disturbance that made the images jump back and forth.

Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> of October: The next morning, we went back to Southwold to walk through the streets searching for the Crown Hotel, look for a coffee shop and take another reading of the Sailors' Room. This time there were two men sitting and talking, which made it difficult to connect to the space – we had so wished for privacy to sit down, observe and listen to the voices of the past. The visitors talked about the weather, the heavy winds blowing up the sea foam and a tourist who complained that his car had gotten dirtied by it.

We left and walked down to the River Blyth to search for the bridge that had been built for train in 1875. It turned out to be another narrow-gauge heavy wind across the sky. We walked through Southwold, past the library, the police station, a plot with allotment gardens and the rubbish tip. The bumpy farm road



brought us to a parking lot. Passing through a gate, we walked farther up a footpath through whin bushes still in yellow bloom. To the left fell the wide expanse of the Southwold commons, topped by a water tower. And there it was: the bridge over the Blyth. But it was a new one, as a sign informed us, built for walkers and bicyclists. The river meanders through a wide estuary affected by the tides to the west of the bridge. Once it passes under the bridge, the river is regulated and boats are moored in its channel. We spent some time there taking in the view over the mudflats and collecting soil and water.

From here, I started my journey on foot toward Dunwich, where Lorie and Lise would pick me up later that afternoon. A small path took me eastward along the river toward Walberswick, a village with a small passenger ferry that crossed over the River Blyth to the Southwold side on weekends. Here the summerhouses were all painted dark brown; the smell of tar lingered in the ocean air. From the small common, I walked toward the sea. I passed reeds and ponds, crossed a wooden bridge and then started along the shingly beach. There was the wind again, pulling at my rain jacket and my heavy backpack, blowing my hair all over the place. I had to rearrange the cameras and put a scarf around my head: It would not be an easy walk. Looking up over the land and sea, I saw the sandy cliffs of Dunwich far away; behind the cliffs, at the horizon, loomed Sizewell, "its Magnox block a glowering mausoleum."<sup>7</sup>

I began to walk south. Because the tide was still high, I had to stay on a levee made of shingle. I could already sense that it would be a strenuous walk. The 2- to 4-inch flint stones, or shingle, were piled up into a 6-foot-high, 8-foot-wide levee to protect the estuary from the ocean waters. People were allowed to walk over it, but it was not easy. With each step, I sank back into the loose pebbles. It took twice as much effort as it usually takes to move forward. The sky had turned darker, though there were still islands of sunlight here and there across the former estuary of the River Dunwich on my right. I saw the cone-

shaped ruin of an old mill. Toward the hills, a stand of trees, ponds and reeds, some cows grazing. From the left, the roar of the North Sea combined with the howling wind that pulled and pushed constantly. I walked for an hour, which seemed so much longer with having to fight the elements. Now I knew why Sebald had written that this was a very strenuous stretch in his pilgrimage: *Stunden, kam es mir vor, war ich gegangen, ehe sich in blassen Farben allmählich ein paar Schiefer – und Ziegeldächer und eine bewaldete Hügelkuppe abzuzeichnen begannen.*<sup>8</sup>

I met only one solitary walker coming from Dunwich, looking as wind-beaten as I felt. Good exercise for sure, but not a place for inspiring thoughts. All I could do was press forward. It was hard to get the cameras to work. The 8 mm camera actually gave up at one point; the air was too moist and it had gotten colder.

Slowly, I approached the slippery dunes of Dunwich. The wooden houses I saw turned out to be a fish-and-chips place next to a parking lot. There were some fishermen on the beach, windbreak, and a row of sheltered by a group of school kids old fishing boats. A car park from looking at the sand dunes moving into the ocean just a few yards beyond. I turned away from the beach – it felt good to have solid ground under my feet again – and walked toward the village center to look for the Dunwich Museum, where I would meet my friends. We wanted to spend some time at the museum re-reading the history of Dunwich, then visit the ruins of the Greyfriars monastery up on the cliff and drive home to Wenhamston through the Dunwich Heath and Forest.

Lise and Lorie arrived with a story to tell. Walking through Southwold, they had seen an older man with a shock of white hair coming out from under his cap, wearing a familiar-looking, gray fabric rucksack on his back, photo equipment shouldered, a walking stick in



his hand. They caught his apparition on film before he vanished into the crowd. A doppelgänger? Of whom?

That night I had the first in a series of odd dreams. When I woke up, I could not remember the content, but I had a very clear thought in my head: These were not my dreams; these were other peoples' dreams.

Tuesday, 12<sup>th</sup> of October: We had made an appointment to meet with Alec Garrard, who had constructed a model of the Temple of Jerusalem, at 1 p.m. at his new workshop. As we later learned, he had just moved the temple a few months ago from Moat Farm, where Sebald had visited him, to Needham.

We spent the morning reading and making notes, looking out into the drizzle. We also talked about the curious aspect that Sebald's texts are circular. As soon as one has finished reading one of his accounts, one immediately wants to start from the beginning again – and in the re-reading, one will discover new aspects in the course of events. Why is that? In an interview, Sebald had said that his texts develop in the form of a bricolage, referring to a method used by Levi-Strauss. "It is a form of intuitive working, of pre-rational thinking, where one digs into accumulated found materials until it all fits together and makes sense."<sup>9</sup> It seems to me as if his accounts had waited for him for centuries, just to be collected and transformed by him into varied interpretations.

It took us quite some time to follow the meandering country roads – through small villages, across fields, around sharp bends, alongside deep hedges – toward Harleston, the misty rain covering the entire landscape in every shade of gray. Mr. Garrard, an elderly gentleman cloaked in deep melancholy, was expecting us, impatient, it seemed, to show us his version of the Temple of Jerusalem.

We learned that the Garrards had had to give up the farm that had been in their family for four generations: It was too hard to be a farmer



at 75. But still, Mr. Garrard was a model-builder and he had reconstructed his model of the temple – 12 feet by 20 feet – in his new, spacious workshop. He just had to finish painting the landscape panorama. The discussion quickly turned to the layout of the temple: its courtyards and gates, the Roman additions of hallways and fresh-water pools and the many scenes from Jesus's life that had taken place in and around the temple and that he had incorporated into his model.

As Mr. Garrard described a few of the many details hidden away in the inner chambers of the temple, some not even visible to the eye, his gestures became lively and his eyes sparkled. There was a joyful fire in his speech; here was an artist talking about his heartfelt work of 25 years. He said that when people asked him why he built the temple in the first place, he told them that everyone had to follow his inner voice. He, for example, had been making models from an early age. He had been interested in history and religion for a long time, too, and somehow got drawn into the history of the Temple of Jerusalem. His study of the conflicting biblical descriptions of the layout of the temple made him continue his research. *"Unsere ganze Arbeit beruht doch letzten Endes auf nichts als auf Ideen, Ideen, die sich im Verlauf der Zeit andauernd verändern und die einen darum nicht selten veranlassen, das, was man für bereits vollendet gehalten hat, wieder einzureissen und von neuem anzufangen,"*<sup>10</sup> he had told Sebald during one of the author's many visits. It was wonderful to watch him talk with humor and knowledge, with understanding and an open mind. I could sense that he enjoyed the visitors who came from all over the world to see his model and discuss his findings.

I felt a deep loss when we left. When he is gone, what will happen to his work? That question was on all our minds. We were stunned and at a loss for words for awhile, as we walked around Harleston looking for some place to get warm. Who would have guessed that we would find a kindred spirit in the guise of a gentleman farmer!

We spent that night watching Lorie's footage from a visit to St. Paul's Cathedral in London. She had filmed rows of ancient books and some models of past building projects in the cathedral's hidden library.

Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> of October: The storm that had been predicted for days finally hit the coast during the night. It was pouring rain. I had gotten up early again, after the first or second rooster wake-up call, to write down my experiences from the previous day. I liked to have these early morning hours to myself to reflect on and consider Sebald's meanderings and compare them to my stumbling efforts. Also, I had had another strange dream that I couldn't remember the events of. I only recalled what seemed to be the last scene: many, too many, people were visiting the temple and the three of us were trying to find "the pool of knowledge" in that crowded place.

Because of the storm, we canceled another walking tour and decided to drive south to look for Edward FitzGerald's grave, stop for tea in Woodbridge and then travel out to Orford. During the 45-minute car journey, we were pounded with water, but when we arrived at Bredfield, the rain stopped. Our search at the Bredfield churchyard was not successful. We realized then that he must have been buried directly in Boulge Park, at the estate's churchyard. Following winding roads, we suddenly found a sign hidden in the forest directing us to the right place. There was the family crypt, as Sebald had documented it. Next to it, a flat stone of red granite with an intricate cross carved into it and, along the side, the words "Edward FitzGerald 1809–1883." A tiny rosebush at the head of the grave was surrounded by wire mesh. A sign read, "This rose tree raised in Kew Gardens from seed brought by William Simpson, artist-traveler, from the grave of Omar Khayyam at Naishapur, was planted by a few



admirers of Edward FitzGerald in the name of the Omar Khayyam Club. 7<sup>th</sup> October 1893.”

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2004 – 111 years later – Lise and I had traveled to Oxford to explore the museums. We had discovered an exhibition of old maps at the Bodleian Library and come across a quote from Edward FitzGerald’s “Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam” on a wall-mounted information panel introducing the “Medieval Views of the Cosmos”:

Up from Earth’s Center through the Seventh Gate  
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,  
And many Knots unravel’d by the Road;  
But not the Master-Knot of Human Fate.

We spent some time in Woodbridge checking e-mail at the bookstore/coffee shop and exploring charity shops and used bookstores (not that we could possibly carry any more books home). In the afternoon, we drove out to Orford through Rendlesham Forest, passing Chillesford. We already knew that we could not cross the River Ore to Orfordness. In the off season, ferries only took passengers on Saturdays over to the former Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, where the British had experimented with nuclear weapons from 1950–1971. The concrete structures, some of which looked like pagodas, were used for both mechanical and vibration testing and for drop tests. We hoped that we could at least get a glimpse of some of the structures, a sense of the overall atmosphere: *Je näher ich aber den Ruinen kam, desto mehr verflüchtigte sich die Vorstellung von einer geheimnisvollen Insel der Toten und wähnte ich mich unter den Überresten unserer eigenen, in einer zukünftigen Katastrophe zugrundegegangenen Zivilisation.*<sup>11</sup>

The weather had turned stormy again and it was cold and windy at the harbor. We looked across the river and wondered about human ingenuity, so much of which was spent creating weapons of mass

destruction to sell to other countries and then destroying those foreign armories with newer models of precision killing machines – a vicious, destructive cycle. We had planned to visit the castle and climb up to the top tower. But when we arrived, the castle doors were locked; a sign informed us that the castle was closed on Wednesdays during the winter.

That night I had a dream stranger than any so far: It took place at our old house in Cologne, or more precisely, in the garden. I was tending the small fruit trees that were overshadowed by the neighbor’s enormous chestnut trees. When I looked through a crack in the wall, I saw a familiar “dream” landscape: a bombed-out urban landscape, with the rubble already overgrown by weeds and grass. Under one of the apple trees was a pile of leaves and branches made into a nest for something that was cobalt blue. I stirred the leaves a little and woke the creature, which turned out to be a huge, blue snake. I was scared and moved slowly toward the house. The snake followed me, telling me that she would like to have a more comfortable nest and asking if I could build it for her. I collected all kinds of materials – leaves and old newspaper, wool and fabric – to make the nest. Then I looked again through the crack in the wall to find, right next to the wall, a complete, old-fashioned, furnished study lined with books and a standing desk covered with papers and pens. The room didn’t have a ceiling anymore, but everything was still intact, waiting to be used, despite having been exposed to the elements.

Thursday, 14<sup>th</sup> of October: We had decided to spend the Thursday at home to read and discuss the many proposals we had received for the Institute of Cultural Inquiry’s publication about Sebald’s use of visual imagery in his writings. When I discovered Sebald’s books, I was so surprised to find photos and images embedded in the text; it was such an unusual way to illustrate prose. Some of the images correspond to

the written word, some are used instead of words and some are so ephemeral that, in the end, the readers seem to be making them up.

Which brings back an experience I had a couple of months ago: While re-reading the story about Frank Auerbach in *“Die Ausgewanderten”* (“The Emigrants”), I came across the part where Sebald describes his stay in the Midland Hotel in Manchester. Stimulated by the atmosphere in the room of the old hotel, he experiences one of his metaphysical states of being and hears *“nebenan in der Free Trade Hall das dort ansässige Symphonieorchester ... die Instrumente ausprobieren, und ich hörte auch, weit, sehr weit in der Ferne den kleinen ... wohl nicht mehr als fünf Fuss grossen Heldenenor.”*<sup>12</sup> Immediately, I had an image in my head of a tiny man in an old-fashioned suit standing in a room. I looked for the photo in my German edition. I got up to get the English translation; there was no image there, either. It had to be somewhere in the text. This was all very confusing. I even experienced some kind of vertigo. It was too unsettling – I had seen an image described in words, vague words I have to confess, of an “impresario in his room.” I can’t remember how long it took before it dawned on me that I had seen the photo at the Diane Arbus show in San Francisco a couple of weeks back.

When the sun came out at noon, we took a break to explore the roads surrounding our neighborhood. We walked to Wenhaston, the small village nearby, spent the churchyard and the windows of the pub, closed. Then we took to the public footpath that hedges and ditches. The changed since the storm. It was definitely fall. A bittersweet smell of decaying nettles and blackberry leaves hovered in the air, which reminded me of fall days in Cologne. I realized how much I missed that smell of decaying leaves, moist soil, tilled fields. It brought back



some time at looked through which was still the fields, using followed the weather had

memories of the family home, with its orchard garden and the nearby city forest. Huge flocks of ravens were racing across the skies, pigeons roosted in a stand of tall trees. Larks, blackbirds and tomtits were singing. So many different voices in the air. Good company for a solitary walker.

That night, our landlady, Trish, had invited us to join her and a friend for dinner; her friend had read Sebald and taken writing classes at the department where he had taught. She had built a fire in the old fireplace in one of the living rooms of the Old Hall. Over wine we learned more about our hostess, who had studied environmental science in the 1970s, traveled to India and Australia and was now raising two beautiful daughters. They had spent their early years in London but when Trish’s father died, the family moved back to the farm. Her husband was nevertheless spending the week in London working at the foreign affairs department. Hired men took care of the farm animals and the fields, and Trish had just started renting the cottage to holiday guests.

Her friend had grown up in the area, too, and one summer he had worked on Trish’s family’s farm when they were both kids. Now Jack was growing asparagus and other specialty crops on his own farm, right in Middleton, where Sebald’s colleague Michael Hamburger lived. Jack’s father had come from America after the war, as a newspaper journalist. He stayed in Great Britain and raised a family. Jack decided to spend his college years in Phoenix, but when the American government started drafting young men to fight in Vietnam, he rushed home to England and renounced his American citizenship. A bold move – then and now – that was not appreciated by the officials at the embassy at all! Of course, we discussed the political situation in the United States and Great Britain and the upcoming election, rolling our eyes all the while. Little did we know then what was in store for us.



Then, they each described in vivid terms the night of the hurricane that had hit the country in 1987. No one knew that the storm was coming. The “weatherman” had said that the storm would roll off the continent into the sea. Instead, “the storm came up out of the Bay of Biscay, moved along the French west coast, crossed the English Channel and swept over the south-east part of the island out into the North Sea.”<sup>13</sup> *“Es war im Morgengrauen, als der Sturm etwas nachgelassen hatte, dass ich mich hinaustraute in den Garten. Mit zugeschnürter Kehle stand ich lang inmitten der Verheerung. (...) Die über hunderjährigen Bäume, die den Spazierweg gesäumt hatten, der am Nordrand des Parks entlangführte, lagen alle, wie in einer Ohnmacht niedergesunken, am Boden, und unter den riesigen türkischen und englischen Eichen, Eschen, Platanen, Buchen und Linden war zerfetzt und zerbrochen das niedrige Gehölz, das in ihrem Schatten gestanden hatte, die Thujen und Eiben, die Hasel- und Lorbeerstauden, Stechplamen und Rhododrenden.”*<sup>14</sup>

Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> of October: Our last day! It had gotten very cold overnight. In the morning, I walked with Lorie through the fields again. We visited Thorington church, with its round flint tower. It was so quiet here, the land covered in silence. Mist was hanging in the trees; you could hear the water dripping from the leaves. At one point, we lost track of the public footpath and had to cross over a stubble field, before trying to jump over a ditch that turned out to be a broad, grass-covered ha-ha.

When we left the house later in the morning for our last excursion, the sky was still gray. We wanted to visit The Saints, stop in Margaret St. Iskeshell, look at Ditchingham Park and the adjacent churchyard, stop at the Mermaid in Hedenham and go for tea in Bungay. The drive to The Saints took us along the old Roman road past Halesworth. We were traveling on a flat plateau, from which you could see the many church towers hidden by stands of trees. Otherwise, there were only

ploughed fields and hedges. *“Ich selber dachte mir beim Dahingehen über die grossenteils baumlose und dennoch unübersichtliche Ebene, that I might well get lost in zwang mich das Fusspfadssystem, wechseln oder an Karte markierte überwachsen war, auf gut Glück querfeldein weiterzugehen.”*<sup>15</sup>



*The Saints, so oft verwinkelte englische die Richtung zu Stellen, wo der auf der Weg aufgepflügt oder*

At Margaret St. Iskeshell, a black cat followed us through the cemetery, with its askew gravestones and sunken plots overgrown with weeds. The cat escorted us back to the gate, then turned around and vanished behind the gravestones. We drove the narrow streets through Bungay toward Ditchingham and traveled for some time along the brick wall of Ditchingham Hall and Park, passing the parish church. Right at the end of the park, there was a pub across the road, with the sign of a smiling mermaid swinging in the wind. She wasn't able to lift our melancholic mood, though. We turned around to our final destination, a visit to the graves of Charlotte Ives's son, Samuel Ives Sutton, and Sarah Camell in the parish churchyard. From where we stood, next to the two graves, we were able to look over the brick wall into Ditchingham Park, with its hundreds of ancient trees, though many had been destroyed in the hurricane.

In the early evening, a friend of Trish's and Jack's came for a visit. Ted had been raised in America. He told us that from 1970–72, he fought for the United States in Vietnam. When he was discharged, he stayed on in Bremen to work first as a nurse in a hospital and then at a shipyard. He spent two years in Bremen during a very active time of political unrest and change. He came to England to study philosophy and literature and had been teaching at a school in Leiston for many years. Ted had met Sebald a couple of times around 1999. At the time, he was writing a fictional account based on his experiences in Vietnam. His agent had suggested a meeting with the local writer W.G. Sebald.

The two men came to an understanding through their mutual interest in the “History of Destruction.” (What would Sebald have said about the invasion of Iraq and the current bombardment of Fallujah? I wonder as I write these field notes.)

Ted told us also that one afternoon, during a visit to Sebald’s house, they both looked out of the window of Sebald’s study into the garden, over to a stand of old trees. Sebald said, “I can still see the wounds the 1987 hurricane has cut into the old grove.” He went on to say that nothing had been the same since then and that the storm had been a sign that the world as we know it was coming to an end.

Later that night, the three of us sat in front of the fireplace and talked about the role of cultural critic that Sebald had assumed in the last years of his life. Most of his prose writings are about existential exile, about the cultural memory of European history from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the present and about the modern devastation of the natural world – though human folly and cruelty rank first. He circumvents a direct confrontation with the Holocaust but asks the reader again and again: What have those events done to the psyche of a people? What have they done to the collective consciousness?

Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> of October: It was still dark when we left in the early morning to return the car to Ipswich. We had to get on a train to Harwich and catch the ferry to Hoek van Holland. That journey was the strangest sea taken. Somehow, we had shopping mall, with fast-casino. I wandered around upset and disappointed. I had wished for something else – a return to my ferry journeys of 30 years ago. I felt quite lost in that place, disconnected from my fellow travelers.



Suddenly, I knew, Sebald had been here. He must have taken this ferry many times, and looked at all the modern-world trappings in horror and disgust.

The train from Hoek van Holland to Den Haag was crowded with people returning from a day trip to Amsterdam. After a week in the country, it felt strange to be surrounded by so many people again, even claustrophobic. At least the hotel I had booked over the Internet had a very pleasant atmosphere. The lobby doubled as a coffee shop and restaurant, with candles burning everywhere, strange objects scattered about and paintings and weavings on the walls. A couple of women ran the place. They could have used some advice on how to make the rundown bedrooms a bit more inviting, but we hadn’t crossed the water to give decorating advice: We had come to Den Haag to see the “Anatomy Lesson” by Rembrandt.

Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> of October: It had rained during the night and it looked like there would be more rain to come. We packed umbrellas and other rain gear for our walk through the old town of Den Haag to the Mauritshuis to see the Rembrandt. It was very busy in the museum that morning because of an event organized by Siemens, one of the museum sponsors. We had made it just in time to have some quiet moments looking at the “Anatomy Lesson.” Dr. Tulp and his colleagues were staring back at us through the centuries, over the body of a dead human being. *“Die unförmige Hand ist das Zeichen der über Aris Kindt hinweggegangenen Gewalt. Mit ihm, dem Opfer, und nicht mit der Gilde, die ihm den Auftrag gab, setzt sich der Maler gleich. Er allein hat nicht den starren cartesischen Blick, er allein nimmt wahr, den ausgelöschten, grünlichen Leib, sieht den Schatten in dem halboffenen Mund und über dem Auge des Toten.”*<sup>16</sup>

Why had Sebald decided to include an image of this painting into the Rings of Saturn? It couldn’t have been only because of Rembrandt’s

craftsmanship or the assumption that Thomas Browne was present at the dissection. Was it an allegory for the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis? Or perhaps even an allegory for the suffering of ALL mankind, afflicted by the ruling powers accelerating progress for a “better world”? We pondered this while sitting over tea and coffee in a tavern lined with old bookcases and prints from Diderot’s Pictorial Encyclopedia. Later in the day, we wandered aimlessly around the old city, came across an arcade built in the late 1800s and visited the “Panorama of Scheveningen,” painted by Mesdag. We had to part the next day. Our physical journey had come to an end: The world of imagination was summoning us.



## Footnotes

Quotes in German from “Die Ringe des Saturn” (Fischer Taschenbuch, 1998), quotes in English from “The Rings of Saturn,” translated by Michael Hulse (New Direction Publishing, 1998)

<sup>1</sup>Seite 217 / Page 182: Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one’s own precursor?

<sup>2</sup>Seite 247 / Page 208: And if I closed my eyes for a while it felt as if I were in a cabin aboard a ship on the high seas, as if the whole building were rising on the swell of a wave, shuddering a little on the crest, and then, with a sigh, subsiding into the depths.

<sup>3</sup>Seite 42 / Page 30: 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 relics of an extinct civilization.

<sup>4</sup>Seite 51 / Page 37: “... plane tree[s] spreading over the country, just as concentric circles ripple across water, ...”

<sup>5</sup>Page 92

<sup>6</sup>Seite 115 / Page 93: It is better than anywhere else for reading, writing letters, following one’s thoughts, or in the long winter months simply looking out at the stormy sea as it crashes on the promenade.

<sup>7</sup>Page 175

<sup>8</sup>Seite 187 / Page 155: It was as if I had been walking for hours before the tiled roofs of houses and the crest of a wooded hill gradually became defined.

<sup>9</sup>Sigrid Löffler, “Wildes Denken,” Gespräch mit W.G. Sebald: *Das ist eine Form von wildem Arbeiten, von vorrationalen Denken, wo man in zufällig akkumulierten Fundstücken so lange herumwühlt, bis sie sich irgendwie zusammenreimen.* Aus Porträt 7, Edition Isele, Eggingen, 1997.

<sup>10</sup>Seite 291 / Page 245: In the final analysis, our entire work is based on nothing but ideas, ideas which change over the years and which time and again cause one to tear down what one had thought to be finished, and begin again from scratch.

<sup>11</sup>Seite 282 / Page 237: But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe.

<sup>12</sup>W.G. Sebald, “The Emigrants” (Page 234/235): “... the orchestra tuning their instruments ... also heard the little opera singer ... who cannot have been more than one metre fifty tall. ...”

<sup>13</sup>Page 265

<sup>14</sup>Seite 317 / Page 267: In the first light of dawn, when the storm had begun to abate, I ventured out into the garden. ... The ancient trees on either side of the path leading along the edge of the park were all lying on the ground as if in a swoon, and beneath the huge oaks, ash and plane trees, beeches and limes lay the torn and mangled shrubs that had grown in their shade, thuja and yews, hazel and laurel bushes, holly and rhododendrons.

<sup>15</sup>Seite 296 / Pages 249-250: My own feeling, as I walked over the featureless plain, was that I might well lose my bearings in The Saints, so often was I forced to change direction or strike out across country due to the labyrinthine system of footpaths and the many places where a right of way marked on the map had been ploughed up or was now overgrown.

<sup>16</sup>Seite 27 / Page 17: That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, ... that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity. He alone sees that greenish annihilated body, and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man’s eyes.