Springtime for the Pilgrim: Edward Thomas and W. G. Sebald, Literary Pilgrims in Pursuit of the Fading Past

MA Thesis

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Introduction

This thesis will analyse the works of Edward Thomas and W. G. Sebald, discussing their roles as literary pilgrims and how landscape inspired and impacted them as writers.

Traditionally, pilgrimage is defined as a form of religious devotion. In contrast, there is the figure of secular pilgrim which became popular in literature after the Enlightenment and continued into the Romantic period. The works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth will be discussed as they serve as secular pilgrims inspired by walking in nature and landscape and were pioneers in documenting this as a literary form. Rousseau implored humanity to free themselves from the shackles of society, discussed the developing urban anthills, and encouraged a return to nature. The philosopher wrote about the power of solitary walking, the importance of aesthetic pilgrimages to shape the writer. William Wordsworth was a Romantic poet, an aesthete inspired by the English landscape to write some of the most highly regarded nature poetry in the English language. *The Prelude* (1850) was an autobiography written in verse where his embryonic curiosity and 'spots of time' formed impressionable, vital moments in his evolving imagination. Wordsworth prayed that a second self would follow in his footsteps and continue to write of nature and appreciate its beauty. Edward Thomas and W. G. Sebald share many similarities with Rousseau and Wordsworth. They all found creative inspiration in perambulation, suffered from bouts of melancholy, and had an intense aesthetic appreciation for nature. Both Thomas and Sebald are capable of filling the walking and literary shoes of Rousseau; and both are worthy to be regarded as a second self to Wordsworth.

The poetry and prose of Thomas and Sebald will be explored throughout this thesis and will observe the impact the acceleration of change has upon both writers. As literary pilgrims they were pursuing new pathways into the sacred as they searched for answers not through the rituals of traditional religion but within nature, the past, their memory, and themselves. Thomas at the beginning of the twentieth-century wrote in England, about England, inspired by the English landscape. Sebald at the end of the century, an exile in England, used the English landscape as a portal into different, distant landscapes in Europe and beyond. Sebald, through the springboard of Suffolk in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and the transformative triptych of *After Nature* (1988), traverses vast tracts of collective history and his own subconscious. He circumnavigated the globe within his mind, guided by his thoughts during a peregrination along a decaying coast, crumbling into the sea and occupying figures of the past like a phantom. This ghostly presence is rife within Thomas and Sebald's works as on their individual pilgrimages, they are haunted by past spectres that represent both their uncertainties and anxieties for the present and future. This thesis will draw on biographical and autobiographical material, as well as academic

literature on pilgrimage, landscape, and theories of spectrality in the works of these writers.

It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who opined ‘one can never step in the same river twice’. To adapt this Heraclitan mantra: the literary pilgrim never walks on the same landscape twice, for he is not the same pilgrim, and it is not the same landscape. The landscape transformed drastically between the periods when these writers walked and wrote and this thesis will analyse the impact of these changes.

Chapter 1 - Landscape and Memory: Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Literary Pilgrimage

Margry defines pilgrimage “as a journey that people undertake based on a religious inspiration, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life.” (Margry, 323) Traditionally the pilgrimage was a religious act. However, there is multiplicity and great diversity to the forms of modern peregrinations. In the last century, pilgrimage has evolved increasingly into a more secular act thanks to the impact of tourism, globalisation, and easier modes of mobility. Margry’s definition continues, “The pilgrim seeks at the shrine an encounter with a specific cult object in order to acquire spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit.” (323) There has been a departure from the idea that the destination is a point of collective intention: Lourdes, Santiago di Compostela, Mecca, or the Wailing Wall, for example:

> Although pilgrimage has had a fairly constant pattern for centuries, in recent years this new way of pilgrimaging has emerged: pilgrimages for which the start and the finish are not or are less relevant, but that are focused on being under way. It is only in this form that pilgrimage is primarily reduced to the journey element. (255)

Indeed, religious pilgrimage is still often practised, to say that the act is entirely secular would be incorrect. However, the modern pilgrim, that is to say the secular pilgrim, goes out in pursuit of a thing that is individual to themselves. In contemporary society, an individual can make a personal pilgrimage to the grave of a Rockstar, a football stadium or even a restaurant. A pilgrimage is the physical interaction between agency of space and agency of actors, between an individual and the landscape under their feet. George Simmel defines the concept in *The Philosophy of Landscape* as this interplay between space and actor to the point where if one is lacking, the landscape cannot become a tangible subject:

> For there to be a landscape, our consciousness has to acquire a wholeness, a unity, over and above its component elements, without being tied to their specificity or mechanistically composed of them. (Simmel, 23)

Bleicher, the translator of Simmel’s *Philosophy of Landscape*, draws attention towards the individuality of landscape and how one person interacts with a place differs from another. Both Bleicher and Simmel point to the fact that in order to define nature as ‘landscape’, it must be unlocked through an artist’s perception:

> The tenor of the central question that Simmel poses here concerning the possibility of landscape is essentially Kantian, but the answer he gives seems to be inspired by a line from Goethe: 'Is not the core of nature already inside the heart of human kind?' (22)

A literary pilgrim is similar to a landscape painter insofar as they record their interaction with nature and elevate it into a form of aesthetic beauty. In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama examines the connection between the two titular concepts, defining their significance and symbiosis in physical, metaphorical, and existential terms. He writes how one gains a sense of a place by directly experiencing it "using the archive of the feet." (Schama, 24) Structurally, the physical layers of a landscape are akin to the overlapping metaphorical folds of memory, he writes: "memory had now assumed the form of the landscape itself. A metaphor had become a reality; absence had become a presence." (25) Ghostly memories haunt a place, footprints from pilgrims of the past line the way for those for the literary pilgrim of the present. Paths grow more distinct from the constant trampling of foot traffic whereas the paths not tramped become forgotten and fade with the passage of time.

Landscape has been manipulated and mutated throughout history to represent diverse symbols. Land has been the battlefield for conquerors and the conquered, patriots and partisans, the source of quarrels and the stage of bloodshed. However, land has also been the muse of poets, philosophers, and painters. Schama in his analysis of the Lithuanian quest for national identity writes:

> …natural history had to substitute for national history as a way of nurturing the Polish-Lithuanian heritage. When shaded with the Romantic cult of nature, the scientific zeal to record and classify the flora and fauna of forest topography acted as a stealthy way to celebrate the glories of the native homeland. (48)

This quest for communal identity made in Schama's ancestral homeland is microcosmic of any budding nation hungry for authenticity. A sense of national belonging requires the invention of collective memories. In the latter half of the 18th century, the Enlightenment and Romanticism had forced thinkers into pondering the Self and the individual's relationship with the physical world. The calls for liberty and equality began to challenge the rigid hierarchical structures of the *Ancien Régime*. In this time of upheaval, landscape was at the heart of both existential and national missions as both endeavoured to delve deep into individual and collective consciousness. This pivotal historical moment in the history of humanity was defined by R. Koselleck and later developed upon by Jurgen Barkhoff, as *Sattelzeit* – the

saddle epoch: “a threshold period that straddled the old and the new, the *Ancien Régime* and the modern world.” (Barkhoff, 209) This saddle epoch saw the birth of new Republics emboldened by a surging wave of nationalism that stirred a new form of deification. This came in the form of worshipping the nation through its landscape in forms of artistic expression. This form of metaphorical-geo-political and geo-historical reverence was defined in the vernacular of nationalism: blood of revolution flows down the rivers, the bones of dead martyrs and enemies sink into the earth, the republic rises like the high mountain peaks - nations built on metaphor. The burgeoning cult of patriotic landscape allowed leaders to define themselves while also, more importantly, distance themselves from others and the structures of the past.

The ground beneath rebels and martyrs was the stage upon which all their nationalistic foundations were laid, without the land they were only metaphor, the land gave them a tangible image. French revolutionary thought was influenced by the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau but the well-spring of his devotion to *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* was founded on his commitment to nature. His writings on ‘the noble savage’ and his glorifying of ‘the state of nature’ inspired the Jacobins and their ‘Natural Law’. He wrote *“*most of our ills are of our own making, and that we might have avoided them all by adhering to the simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by nature.” (Rousseau, *A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, 93). *The Social Contract* (1762) opens with: “Man is born free, and everywhere He is in chains” (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 94), and his works discussed the corruptible impact of urbanisation on humanity. The philosopher wrote about walking in nature rather than in the city, writing “Men are not made to be crowded in anthills…the more they congregate the more they corrupt each other”. In his confessional auto-biography *Confessions* (1782), the verb to walk, in its various guises and conjugations appears one hundred and thirty-five times. He writes:

> “For never did I exist so completely, never live so thoroughly, never was so much myself, if I dare use the expression, as in those journeys made on foot. Walking animates and enlivens my spirits; I can hardly think when in a state of inactivity; my body must be exercised to make my judgment active.” (Rousseau, *Confessions*, 104)

The link between cognition and walking, memory, and landscape pre-dates the period of Romanticism and the saddle epoch, however Rousseau certainly was a

primary player in making it a popular act. Published in 1796 posthumously, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* shows the importance of walking to Rousseau's individual wellbeing:

> I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbour, friend of society other than myself…But I, detached from them and from everything, what am I? That is what remains for me to seek. (Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 52)

Rousseau's *Reveries* are an early example of literary pilgrimage. The Romantics viewed nature less as a danger but more as a place of aesthetic beauty that could ignite creativity. The word landscape has its root in the German word *Landschaft* and the verb *schaffen* which means to create. Thus, representing the individual's artistic response to the land. In his solitary walks, Rousseau is not seeking religious enlightenment but by his journeying outward, he goes inward into his subconscious and memory. Rousseau walked in dialogue with himself, and through walking the conversation was intensified:

> Let me give myself up entirely to the sweetness of conversing with my soul, since that is the only thing men cannot take away from me…The leisurely moments of my daily walks have often been filled with contemplation which I regret having forgotten. I will set down in writing those which still come to me…reading them will recall the delight I enjoy in writing them and causing the past to be born again for me will, so to speak, double my existence. (155)

The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment – the quest for progress – shifted individuals away from the darkness of the human interior to the light of the natural exterior. Nature contained the paths to escape from the corruptible urbanity and the overbearing pursuit of all-knowledge. Going out into nature was a voyage of self-discovery, self-knowledge, and a means of contemplation. There are parallels between Rousseau and the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth: writers, avid walkers and both held a disdain for modernity, disappearing nature and the acceleration of urbanisation. Solnit writes, "Rousseau is an obvious precursor for Wordsworth, who walked as both a means and an end—to compose and to be. (Solnit, 107) Wordsworth, born in 1770, began composing an autobiographical poem in fourteen short books in 1798. He worked on the autobiography his whole life and it was released posthumously in 1850 only given the title *The Prelude* after his death. It is a story of the poet's life written in blank verse, bearing similarities to Rousseau's *Confessions*. Mitchell points out how these similarities in "the Rousseauist sentiments of natural religion in the early 1790s, and what were soon to become the

basic doctrines of Wordsworth and the Lake School of English Poetry." (Mitchell, 650) In *Confessions*, Rousseau highlighted this form of landscape worship that is devoid of religious sentiment but focusses on the individual's interaction with the landscape:

> I cannot understand how those who live in the country, and the solitary especially, can be lacking in faith. How is it that their souls are not raised in ecstasy a hundred times a day to the Author of the wonders that strike their eyes? In my room I pray less often and with less fervour, but at the sight of a beautiful landscape I feel moved. (Rousseau, *Confessions*, 409)

Here, Rousseau defines the literary pilgrim and their role in documenting their experience in nature and thus, transforming the interaction into artistic beauty. Wordsworth wrote with similar affectation for the landscape. In the ultimate lines of Book One of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth dictates that as he journeys back into his childhood in an act of self-discovery and in the laborious task of inwardness, he sees his memory as a barren landscape, a road stretching out before him. His mind wanders, his feet traipse back into his past: "Through later years the story of my life, / The road lies plain before me!" (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 25) In both these quotations, Rousseau and Wordsworth view nature and landscape as comparable to their memory and mind. In their work, both Rousseau and Wordsworth were angered by the insatiable thirst for progress. For example, such observations are shown in Book Eight of *The Prelude*:

> Happy in this, that I with nature walked
> Not having a too early intercourse
> With the deformities of crowded life […] (146)

They believed in the pilgrimage devoid of nationalist sentiment or religious dedication. The ever-accelerating challenge to their form of literary pilgrimage in nature, however, was the rapid development of urban centres and the thirst for progress which aimed to destroy nature, the poor were displaced and moved from the rural scene to the urban and the industrial revolution loomed was on the horizon. Wordsworth, like Rousseau above, viewed urbanisation as asphyxiation: the smog, the crowds, the filth was as harmful to the lungs as it was to creativity and the self. Wordsworth fearfully wrote of a disappearing nature in the opening stanza of *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*:

> There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it has been of yore; -
> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day,
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, 342)

The nineteenth century saw revolutions in industry and boundless developments in science and technology. Factories, cement, cannons, tanks, cars, trains, planes battered and shrunk the landscape, the act of walking no longer became a necessary activity. In search of convenience, it became apparent that much was lost, the Rousseauian return to nature became more difficult with the passage of time as the individual was sucked into the maelstrom of urbanity. Margery Sabin discusses the connection between these confessional themes of personal suffering and melancholy in Rousseau's *Confessions* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (Sabin, 328). Spread throughout *The Prelude* are epiphanic moments key to the transition from embryonic curiosity to his eventual evolution into a figurehead of English Romantic poetry: "At the centre of our experience of *The Prelude* are those "spots of time" where Wordsworth is endeavouring to express key moments in the history of his imagination." (Bishop, 45)

Wordsworth in *The Prelude* discussed his childhood and his descriptions throughout are structured like steppingstones in the development of his evolving poetic mind. There is a spectral quality to his meandering mind that moves through the memories of his early, formative years. In Book Two, he writes:

> For I would walk alone
> Under the quiet stars, and at their time
> […] Listening to notes that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds. (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 34-35)

In his long poem 'Michael', the titular Michael is a figure of a passing age, and he sits idly by, not able to remain up to speed with the acceleration of change, abandoned by the wayside as the whirlwind towards the future drives on. Michael is a mirror of Wordsworth's own anxieties towards a disappearing English landscape that he cherished:

> Therefore, although it be a history

> Homely and rude, I will relate the same
> For the delight of a few natural hearts;
> And, with yet fonder feeling, for the sake
> Of youthful poets, who among these hills
> Will be my second self when I am gone. (304)

Wordsworth hopes that in the future, poets will follow in his footsteps. He died in April 1850 in Rydal in his beloved Lake District in the North of England. Indeed, second selves of Wordsworth, literary pilgrims, appeared after his death. Much of the poet's anxieties of urbanisation, progress and modernity would change the landscape drastically and this would be reflected in the works of future literary pilgrims in the coming century.

One such second self was Edward Thomas, born in 1878 in Lambeth, a borough of London. Thomas was a writer, poet, and literary pilgrim. He followed routes walked by Wordsworth footsteps in his prose biographical work *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (1917). Thomas wrote prose before transitioning to poetry, encouraged by his friend and fellow poet Robert Frost. His poetry was written in a prolific period between 1914 and his early death at the Battle of Arras in 1917. Thomas, like Wordsworth before him, sourced his creativity from the English landscape. Wordsworth walked and delved into his own imagination and, like Rousseau, realised the symbiotic relationship between cognition and walking:

> Their human names, have into phantoms passed
> Of texture midway between life and books. (56-57)

Thomas's work glorified nature and highlighted his own displeasure towards the corruptible power of progress that eroded the English landscape. Thomas was born at a hinge period of modernity, where technology and science was advancing at such a speed that the people and the landscape were witnessing a future and shock:

> Thomas's sensibility strikes most readers as so modern that it comes as something of a shock to realize that he was born a Victorian, into an era of horse-drawn omnibuses, four-wheeled carriages, gas lighting, gin-palaces, crinolines and live-in servants for all but the poorest of families. There were as many as six to eight postal deliveries a day in London, but the telephone was virtually unheard of. (Moorcroft-Wilson, 11)

Thomas was a poet with the eagerness of a Romantic to explore and be inspired by nature. His writing contains a voice of frustration as he walks the paths of the surrounding landscape, annoyed at the construction of cities and suburbs, train

tracks and roads, telegraph poles and advertising hoardings that are disrupting and dismantling nature. The next chapter will explore Thomas's prose pilgrimage *In Pursuit of Spring* and his poetry. Margry discusses the changing forms of pilgrimage that are applicable to Thomas's peregrinatory prose and poetry:

> It turns out that due to his primary existential insecurities, man still has the need to be able to call on higher powers. If existing churches and religious movements do not offer sufficient opportunities for this, or if those opportunities no longer correspond with modernity, then man will look for his own, new itineraries into the sacred. (Margry, 327)

Wordsworth and his second self, Thomas both found new itineraries into the sacred, new avenues, paths, hills, and groves; the journey was their pilgrimage and the rhythm of their feet hitting the ground was a beating rhythm which inspired their writings and confirmed their roles as literary pilgrims.

Chapter 2 - Edward Thomas: A Literary Pilgrim on a Path into the Past

English author Eleanor Farjeon, a close friend of Thomas, wrote in her memoir about the moment she asked Thomas why he had voluntarily enlisted to fight in Flanders in 1915:

> Do you know what you are fighting for?" and Thomas "stopped and picked up a pinch of earth", and then before slowly crumbling it between his finger and thumb, he stated "Literally, for this. (Farjeon, 154)

This chapter will be an analysis into Thomas as a literary pilgrim writing about the changing English landscape. Through biographical and autobiographical material, his own prose and poetry, it will show how landscape and walking the paths, the roads, the hills, the chalk dust in changing seasons formed the foundations of Thomas's inspiration. Thomas was a pilgrim in pursuit of creativity and on an ongoing aesthetic journey of self-discovery. In these excursions into the depths of the self, Thomas engaged with themes of personal and collective memory, identity, and the past. History haunts Thomas in his writing. His character 'The Other Man' in *In Pursuit of Spring* is a fabricated character, like a spectre, used as a mirror to the poet's anxieties as he wanders through a vastly altering landscape. In this regard Thomas belongs to the form of pilgrimage defined by Hyndman-Rizk:

> While mobilities are defined as the pursuit of meaningful movement, pilgrimage can be understood as a specifically spiritual conceptualisation of mobility, which emphasises the pursuit of self-realisation through the process of journeying. However, […] the journey is not always linear and sometimes is inward. Furthermore, the pilgrim does not always arrive at their intended destination and the sacred may instead become profane. But in order for the pilgrim to *find themselves*, according to Don Juan, in the *Journey to Ixtlan,* they first must lose themselves. (Hyndman-Rizk, xxi)

Simmel in *The Philosophy of Landscape* discusses this idea of landscape and how an artist, or writer in this case, can absorb the landscape and transform nature into a product of lyrical beauty:

> An artist is someone who carries out the formative act of contemplative perception and feeling in such a pure form and with such vigour, that the given material gets completely absorbed and then, seemingly out of its own, comes to be created anew. While the rest of us remain more tied to this material, and still tend to note only this or that separate part, only the artist really sees and creates 'landscape'. (Simmel, 29)

Writing in a self-reflective piece of short prose ‘How I Began’, Thomas commented that “the radical and free-thinking influence of home” had caused him to “neglect” in his writing “the feeling that belonged to my own nature and my own times of life” (Thomas, *Selected Poems and* Prose, 106-109). As Moorcroft Wilson finds: “From a young age he turned to nature to satisfy his religious needs.” (Moorcroft Wilson, 17) In this regard, Thomas can be considered a pantheistic pilgrim who sees God in nature. However, Thomas’s love of landscape is not a nationalistic passion searching for patriotic authenticity. In a late prose work before going to war, he pondered what England meant to him in ‘This England’, written in September 1914:

> All I can tell is, it seemed to me that either I had never loved England, or I had loved it foolishly, aesthetically, like a slave, not having realized that it was not mine unless I were willing and prepared to die rather than leave it […] Something, I felt, had to be done before I could look again composedly at English landscape, at the elms and poplars about the houses, at the purple-headed wood-betony with two pairs of dark leaves on a stiff stem, who stood sentinel among the grasses or bracken by hedge-side or wood’s-edge. (Thomas, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 145)

In Pursuit of Spring

In Pursuit of Spring is Thomas’s literary pilgrimage both on bicycle and on foot, hunting down indications of seasonal changes in the responses of flora and the fauna. He carried Romantic motifs in his work, concerned by modernity and the development of cities, suburbs, and machines of convenience. As a microcosm for his distaste for the changing of traditions in the quest for convenience, he laments the loss of good quality pipes and the popularisation of the cigarette. He meets a nameless pipe-maker – whom he calls The Other Man - who was frustrated due to the decaying of the traditional pipe industry and becomes bemoans the popularity of the cigarette. This serves as an example of convenience replacing tradition (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 95). From cigarette to steam train, bicycle to suburbs, all were signs to Thomas of an old English landscape and identity being replaced in the name of progress. Despite qualities of a pastoral, folk, lyric poet, Thomas was indeed a *modern* writer on the precipice of high modernity. In a world fuelled by progress, he was a writer desperately in pursuit of a past that was always out of his reach. Thomas sets out from London to find signs of Spring, cycling west, and shares with the reader his views of growing urbanisation and sprawling suburbia:

> In the streets, for the present, the roar continued of the inhuman masses of humanity, amidst which a child's crying for a toy was an impertinence, a terrible pretty interruption of the violent moving swoon. (26)

In the city, Thomas feels belittled and unimportant, like a rat in a cage. The birth of the modern metropolis was viewed in the mid-nineteenth century with both bewilderment and admiration. He is the anthesis to Charles Baudelaire who wrote about the urban experience in Haussmann's Paris with an optimistic fervour and the curiosity of a child. As Baudelaire chronicled in 'The Painter of Modern Life', 1863:

> The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always drunk (Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 8).

On the contrary, Thomas disliked the intense inebriation of the metropolis where modernity paves over the verdant paradise. Walter Benjamin defined, in his 1938 essay 'Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism', the *flâneur* as one who "goes around botanizing on the asphalt." (Benjamin, *The Paris of the Second Empire of Baudelaire*, 36) The *flâneur* was a chronicler, a mobile philosopher, sauntering through city streets for the pleasure of observation. Baudelaire addressed the impact of progress within the social sphere, believing in the redundancy of history and cursing artists who dressed in the garments of the past. Man was obliged to *épouser la foule*, join the crowd, in the moving chaos of progress. (Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 12) Baudelaire stood for a lot of what Thomas detested: progress, urbanisation, wide avenues, convenience, and large crowds packed together sardine-like in rising concrete. For Thomas, botanizing belonged solely to nature; he was a bucolic *flâneur*. The loneliness and disconnection of the city made Thomas uncomfortable:

> Rain lashed and wind roared in the night, enveloping my room in a turbulent embrace as if it had been a tiny ship in a great sea, instead of one pigeon-hole in a thousand-fold columbarium deep in London […] Yet I could not directly feel the air, because the windows were tightly shut against the soot of four neighbouring chimney stacks (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 29)

In Guildford, Thomas is surrounded by the growing suburbs of the capital's periphery. Like the manicured gardens detested by Rousseau, Thomas holds a similar dislike towards the gardens he passes, he documents the mulberry and apple trees "caged" in gardens, creatures "detained from some world so far than ours" describing them as "the lost angels of ruined paradises." (42) He continues with such

disdain for suburbia writing of “The monotony of the tiny front gardens,” disgusted by their “charmless artificiality,” and how “Little or no wildness of form or arrangement can survive, with no wildness, a landscape cannot be beautiful,” (47) he is disgusted by how this area “smacked of suburban fancy, as if it had been bestowed to catch pennies of easy-going lovers of quaintness.” (52) Thomas only cycles out of necessity, angered at this two-wheeled machine that disconnects from the landscape:

> In cycling chiefly ample views can be seen, [but] the mist conceals them. You travel too quickly to notice many small things; you see nothing save the troops of elms on the verge of invisibility. But walking I saw every small thing one by one…. (154)

The photographs placed within the text give the impression of a deserted, almost apocalyptic, landscape where Thomas is presented as a lone traveller. Many of the photos are labelled with ‘Untitled, Unknown Location’, further enforcing the sentiment that this moment documented by Thomas was a singular moment of a space that no longer remains. Eventually, he begins to see signs of Spring – the point of his sacred journey - that brings him great joy:

> It was here, and at eleven, that I first heard the chiffchaff saying, ‘Chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff, chiff!’ […] I was satisfied. Nothing so convinces me, year after year, that Spring has come and cannot be repulsed. (78)

Despite the documented birdsong, blossoming flowers, bustling hedgerows, and rolling green meadows, the black and white photographs provide a ghostly quality. When not listening out for the noises of nature, Thomas is bothered by an orchestra of modernity: the chug of an occasional car engine, the rattle of a passing train or telegraph wires like Aeolian harps heralding a grim future, as they “wailed their inhuman lamentation.” (61) The photographs permeate the pages, shots of an England lost in time. While reading *In Pursuit of Spring* the reader becomes aware of Thomas’s frustrations at the changing state of his beloved landscape. He is delighted when he is seeing advertising hoardings being eaten up by foliage: “Opposite the last of the trees it was a pleasure to see on a wayside plot, where the elms mingled with telegraph posts, a board advertising building sites, but leaning awry, mouldy, and almost illegible.” (88) He finds himself visiting old churchyards where he partakes in graveyard tourism, a pilgrim worshipping at gravestones, reclaiming a past that is certainly buried:

> I went into the church, which was decorated by the memorial tablets of people named Wright and an eighteenth-century physician named William Cowper, and by daffodils and primroses arranged in moss and jam jars. Many dead flowers were littered about the floor. (81)

A modern form of secular pilgrimage discussed by Margry is where pilgrims visit graveyards to stand at the burial site dead icons. For example, Jim Morrison and Oscar Wilde in Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris have developed a cult status for mourning fans. (Margry, 326) Despite Thomas's quest for signs of life, his *Pursuit* is burdened by the weight of history and the morbid thoughts of death as he visits graveyards, pondering those of the past and occupying them as if a phantom. Harris describes Thomas as "a solitary Spring pilgrim standing alone in quiet churchyards" (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 15)[1] To the reader, this represents Thomas entering, portal-like, into the past, walking along the landscape and the palimpsests of those of an England that is leaving him behind. In a dialogue with The Other Man, Thomas fabricates a conversation in his own mind between Death and the Traveller:

> Nevertheless, I took the liberty of entering myself, chiefly to look again for those figures of Death and the Traveller, where the Traveller says:
>
> > Alas, Death, alas, a blissful thing that were
> > If thou wouldst spare us in our lustiness
> > And come to wretches that be so of heavy cheer…
>
> And Death retorts:
>
> > Graceless gallant, in all thy lust and pride,
> > Remember that thou shalt give due.
> > Death shall from thy body they soul divide.
> > Thou must not him escape certainly.
> > To the dead bodies cast down thine eye,
> > Behold them well, consider and see,
> > For such as they are such thou shalt be. (108)

Debates on life and death blur with Thomas's own thoughts on pilgrimage the gauntlet of existence and the oblivion of mortality. This is perfectly summarised when Thomas stops at a gravestone where the epitaph reads:

> How strangely fond of life poor mortals be,
> How few that see our beds would change with we.
> But, serious reader, tell me which is best,
> The painful journey or the traveller's rest" (110)

[1] This is a quotation from Elizabeth Harris's Introduction to *In Pursuit of Spring*.

Death continues to occupy the literary pilgrim's mind while travelling across the Salisbury Plain. The pendulous movement in nature, ever-ticking, between life and death, a symbiotic relationship of wilting and blossoming, chirping and silence: "the dead are more numerous than the living" and "Next to the dead the most numerous things on the Plain are sheep, rooks, pewits and larks." (115-116) The seasonal change from Winter to Spring itself is the growth of flowers out of the pulp of dead flora. This pilgrimage towards Spring is also a journey into the past as the symbiotic relationship of death and life make Thomas ponder those people that lived in the past and the landscape that existed before his time. Thus, as with the Romantic poets, a tide of melancholy washes over Thomas as he ponders the altitude of an aeroplane disconnected from the earth below:

> It makes us feel the age of the earth, the greatness of Time, Space and Nature; the littleness of man in an aeroplane, the fact that the earth does not belong to man, but man to the earth. And this feeling, or some variety of it, for most men is accompanied by melancholy, or is held to be the same thing. (116)

Thomas writes short biographies of Stephen Duck, William Barnes and Thomas Hardy in the chapter Three Wessex Poets, as well as analysing the poetry of Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. As he follows in the footsteps of these writers, he has become the second self for which Wordsworth yearned. Robert Macfarlane's biographical chapter on Thomas in *The Old Ways* is aptly titled 'Ghost' as these areas and paths are haunted by the phantoms of the past, their feet stamping the way for walkers of the future (MacFarlane, 333-355). Thomas was aware of this and walked in the footsteps of writers on literary pilgrimages, seeing what influenced them and what if the same landscape could do the same to him:

> He was the most topographically alert of readers […] so that in cycling through different landscapes he was aware of crossing from one writer's imaginative territory into another's. He never found for himself a satisfactory home in which he could feel permanent, but these wide literary allegiances gave him a sense of company and belonging in the places he passed. (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 18-19)[2]

After pondering the poetry of Barnes, Thomas writes of the past and how the child-like curiosity of nature is heighted in one's youth. However, nature also reminds the

[2] This is a quotation from Elizabeth Harris's Introduction to *In Pursuit of Spring*

individual of the ephemerality of life and the fleeting passing days of one's youth. Thomas takes strange comfort in this:

> The children are always laughing, playing, dancing in their 'tiny shoes', but their heavy elders and the home under the elm or in the 'lonesome' grove of oak remind us, if not them, of age and death. (144)

And in his thoughts on Thomas Hardy, he is again reminded of such ephemerality: "The skull and crossbones, Death the scythed skeleton and the symbolic hour-glass have been as real to him as to some of those carvers of tombstones in country churchyards." (150) Thomas is jealous of cows in the field as they are: free from all the disadvantages of believing or wanting to believe in the immortality of the soul." (157) Even cheddar cheese leaves a stain on a shelf: "Against the wall leaned long boards bearing the round stains of bygone cheeses." (158)

Thomas occupies the past and fills his present with memories of past poets. He uses the *doppelgänger* of The Other Man to enter dialogue on his insecurities as a writer and anxieties towards the disappearance of both his own memory of a moment and the nature he is absorbing.[3] Kavanagh argues, Thomas is "publicly debating in front of his reader his doubts about whether he can write [his book] at all" (Kavanagh, 182):

> He [The Other Man] abused notebooks violently. He said that they blinded him to nearly everything that would not go into the form of notes; or, at any rate, he could never afterwards reproduce the great effects of Nature and fill in the interstices merely – which was all they were good for – from the notes. The notes – often of things which he would otherwise have forgotten – had to fill the whole canvas. Whereas, if he had taken none, then only the important, what he truly cared for, would have survived his memory, arranged not perhaps as they were in Nature, but at least according to the tendencies of his own spirit. (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 169)

Thomas reflects on the arduous task of transforming nature into landscape through lyrical and poetic prose. As well as a literary pilgrim, Thomas can be considered a meteorological pilgrim who pays intense attention to the weather and its impact on the walker, landscape, and environment. This practice of transformation can impact

[3] Thomas was familiar with the figure of the Other in literature: "Even before the *Doppelgänger* of German Romanticism popularized the concept, Sir Thomas Browne had written in one of Thomas's favourite books, *Religio Medici* (1642): 'There is another man within me, that's angry with me,' Having read Poe 'over and over again' by 1908, Thomas would have known Poe's 'William Wilson' (1839), the story of a 'double' who pursues the protagonist. (43) He would have been familiar with Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). And he had almost certainly read Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (1910)" (Moorcroft Wilson, 232).

the writer's overall mental state. Indeed, the passing seasons reflect Thomas's moods where Spring symbolise hope and the future and Winter represents the past riddled in death and layers of memory, where all new creation stems from the destruction of what was there before:

> I had found the Spring in that bush of green, white and crimson. So warm and bright was the sun, and so blue the sky, and so white the clouds, that not for a moment did the possibility of Winter returning cross my mind. (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring*, 193)

Humanity has forever seen the returning light as regenerative, from a Neolithic man at Newgrange to the artist David Hockey painting on his iPad in Yorkshire or Normandy, trying to capture the arrival of Spring. Thomas is reminded of humanity's destruction of nature when seeing an ancient, felled tree pass him by, toppled for the sake of human indulgence: "A rough-barked elm tree, a hundred and fifty years old, slung on a timber carriage outside the Street Inn, was the chief sign of Spring here after the dust." (194)

Thomas reaches the coast and stands looking out. The horizon is dark, and it reflects his own views of the future being dark and grim. This is where his landscape ends and the unknown begins:

> A ragged sky hung threatening over a sea that was placid but corrugated and of the colour of slate, having a margin of black at the horizon. The water was hardly distinguishable, save by its motion, from the broad beach of grey pools, blackened pebbles and low rock edges. (214)

The symbiosis between decay and birth, between Winter and Spring is detailed in the final chapter – The Grave of Winter:

> "Winter may rise up through mould alive with violets and primroses and daffodils, but when cowslips and bluebells have grown over his grave he cannot rise again: he is dead and rotten, and from his ashes the blossoms are springing." (228)

This is the end of Thomas's pilgrimage, he has found Spring on his journey but when he arrives in Somerset, he is so far westward that Spring is still about to emerge. Thomas can now retrace his own steps back towards London, back through the English Spring which has, despite thoughts on mortality, given him much joy in his countryside ramble:

> I have found Winter's grave, I had found Spring, and I was confident that I could ride home again and find Spring all along the road. (228)

From Prose to Poetry

In Pursuit of Spring documented a journey Thomas took in 1913 and the resulting piece of literature was published the following year in 1914. This was the same year where he began to write poetry. He was encouraged by his friend and fellow writer Robert Frost who saw great poetic beauty in his prose:

> We were greater friend than almost any two ever were practising the same art […] He gave me standing as a poet – he more than anyone else […] I dragged him out from under the heap of his own work in prose he was buried alive under. (Robert Frost to Grace Walcott Hazard Conkling, 28 June 1921)[4]

The themes of *In Pursuit of Spring*: disappearing nature, walking pathways, journeying into the past – all the characteristics of a literary pilgrim – featured heavily in his prolific period of poetry writing between 1914 and his premature death at the Battle of Arras in 1917. Thomas's long poem 'Lob' bears a striking resemblance to Wordsworth's 'Michael'. Both the titular characters represent an individual being left behind in the past as the wheel of progress continues to churn and the times keep changing:

> In its attempt to convey Englishness, 'Lob' is the verse equivalent of *This England*, which has set out to anthologize 'what England means to people.' Thomas had known the character of 'Lob' since the age of 8, when he encountered him in the story 'Lob Lie-by-the-fire'. (Moorcroft Wilson, 328)

Lob was a character that haunted the north-county homesteads and worked as a farm labourer across the landscape. Lob is like Thomas's The Other Man where the individual serves as a mirror for Thomas's own anxiety for the disappearance of 'village England', a local, rural and *English* place. In 'Lob', there is a pursuit, a pilgrimage around Wiltshire, for this character of Lob. However, he always is too far out of reach, when locals are asked of his location, their descriptions are vague and always differing.

> Thomas's aim in 'Lob' is both mystical and patriotic in the widest sense, that is to convey an impression of the continuity of English rural life through history in the character of Lob. (330)

Lob is the personification of a past left behind by an England that is transforming into something different, where traditional and identity is chipped away:

[4] Referenced in Moorcroft-Wilson, 239.

> The man was wild
> And wandered. His home was where he was free.
> Everybody has met one such man as he.
> Does he keep clear old paths that no one uses
> But once a life-time when he loves or muses?
> He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire."
> (Thomas, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 188)

Lob is the culmination of Thomas's "relish and admiration for a series of old countrymen encountered in life, literature and legend." (Moorcroft Wilson, 329) Thomas also uses nature to depict his own individual fears of memory fading and youth being forgotten. As Thomas wrote in the final stanzas of his poem 'Old Man', dedicated to an herb bush and his efforts to recall its scent with the passing of time:

> Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
> I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
> Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
> Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
> Always in vain […]
>
> I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
> And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing […]
> For what I should, yet never can, remember:
> No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
> Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
> Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
> Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (154)

This attempt at olfactory recollection is akin to the efforts of Marcel Proust's Narrator in the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. The Narrator maps the paths of his memory in a singular moment of sensory stimulation: smelling the aroma of a *petite madeleine* infused with lime blossom tea. In the case of the Narrator, olfaction swings open the gates to his memories, his youth springs forth and he relives his early days spent wandering along country paths, on *Swann's Way* and the *Guermantes Way*. The lyrical 'I' in 'Old Man' also attempts to relive memories through olfactory response. The confusion between narrator and Proust is also evident in Thomas's poem as it is in Sebald's works to be discussed later. The scent of the Old Man bush has lost its potency, the scent unable to shine a torchlight into his past. All he can muster is the image of an indistinguishable and uninspiring path snaking away into the dark, his past eluding him yet again. As is relevant evident in 'Lob' and 'Old Man', moving along paths and through landscapes is prevalent across Thomas's style and writing. Several of Thomas's poems deal with pathways, roads

and as a writer he was a ‘psychogeographer’, a term coined by Guy Debord in 1955. Psychogeography is the exploration of cities and other landscapes by means of drift – the *derive* – and randomly motivated walking, encouraging a re-imagining of terrain and the exploration of how environments affect emotions (Debord, 1958) Thomas’s style of psychogeography was bucolic and in fact Debord’s term can be adapted for Thomas into psychogeology, where the layers of the landscape impact the pilgrim.

In a similar fashion, French New Wave film director Agnès Varda’s autobiographical documentary, *Les Plages d’Agnès*, is a journey of self-reflection. In the opening sequences, Varda wanders through mountains of copper-coloured kelp and says: “If we opened people up, we’d find landscapes. If we opened me up, we’d find beaches.” (Varda, 2008). If such a biopsy was performed on Edward Thomas, the surgeon would find landscapes of the old England through which he walked, the vascular pathways representing the myriad routes he wandered throughout his life that had such a dramatic impact on his writing. Varda, later in the documentary, announces: “Memory is like sand in my hand.” (Varda, 2008) Indeed, the sand falling through her hand is reminiscent of the earth rubbed by Thomas between his finger and thumb, as he displayed to Elizabeth Farjeon why he chose to go to fight in Flanders. The walker-writer has a symbiotic relationship with landscape, that of recording “the transition from a perception exercised by the self upon the stones to the perception exercised upon the self by the stone.” (MacFarlane, *The Old Ways*, 340-341) The Icknield Way is an ancient trackway that runs from Norfolk to Wiltshire, running along a spine of chalk. Thomas wrote a travelogue detailing a walk along the route. He opens:

> Much has been written of travel, far less of the road. Writers have treated the road as a passive means to an end and honoured it most when it has been an obstacle; they leave the impression that a road is a connection between two points which only exists when the traveller is upon it. (Thomas, *The Icknield Way*, 1)

Thomas has found a new itinerary into the sacred where the journey, not the destination, is the pilgrimage. As well as the well-trodden paths, Thomas throughout his rich walking life was guided by maps, singing birds and the literary pilgrims of the past. As Wordsworth and the Romantic poets before him, Thomas saw nature and landscape as a mode of inspiration. In the poem ‘The Path’ from 1915, he writes:

> The path, winding like silver, trickles on,
> Bordered and even invaded by thinnest moss

> That rises to cover roots and crumbling chalk
> With gold, olive, and emerald, but in vain.
> The children wear it. They have flattened the bank
> On top, and silvered it between the moss
> With the current of their feet, year after year.
> (Thomas, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 182-183)

'The children wear it' – there is a double meaning to this line. The children both wear the path down as they walk and wear the landscape upon themselves, the land like clothing stuck to them. Here Thomas is pointing to the extent the landscape has impacted himself and others, an individual is both part of the landscape and the landscape part of them. As Macfarlane writes, "Paths and tracks criss-cross his [Thomas's] own work, figuratively and structurally. He writes of winding roads, and he writes in winding syntax." (Macfarlane, 340) For Thomas, text and landscape overlap as shown in his poem 'November':

> The prettiest things on ground are the paths
> With morning and evening hobnails dinted,
> With foot and wing-tip over-printed
> Or separately charactered. (Thomas, *Poems*, 67)

The link between perambulation, cognition and creativity as discussed in the solitary walks of Rousseau and Wordsworth played a significant role in the creation of Thomas's prose and poetry. Walking was also a way for Thomas to look after his mental state, Moorcroft Wilson has analysed the letters of Thomas and highlighted Thomas's suffering of melancholy and depression, walking was an aid to such maladies:

> One symptom of Thomas's depression which Helen found particularly difficult to bear was his constant irritation with the family and frequent trips to escape home. (Moorcroft Wilson, 169)

Walter Benjamin in his description of Marcel Proust's writing methods, breaks down the often-physical torment which artists must suffer to unlock their imagination. Thomas's long rambling walk with their blister-inducing distances can be compared to Michelangelo's back ache or Proust's sofa-ridden maladies:

> For the second time there rose a scaffold like Michelangelo's on which the artist, his head thrown back, painted the creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: the sickbed on which Marcel Proust consecrates the countless pages which he covered with his handwriting, holding them up in the air, to the creation of his microcosm. (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 210)

Walking, sometimes for several hours, allowed Thomas to journey inward and tackle his depression. Thomas self-diagnosed his condition “as writer’s melancholy, a symptom rife amongst the Romantic poets that preceded him the century before.” (Moorcroft Wilson, 126). Harris describes *In Pursuit of Spring* as being “about long, uncertain transitions, returning storms, and human moods which fluctuate as much as the weather.” (Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring,* 12) There were many reasons why Thomas was depressed: his intensive workload as a writer, the disappearing of his beloved old English landscape, the relationship with his wife Helen and constant displacement, by 1915 they had moved 8 times in 13 years (although this may be an effect rather than a cause). A brief infatuation and attraction to the young Hope Webb put Thomas in a more positive mood. However, when her father insisted, they stopped writing to each other, he plunged into further despair. (Moorcroft Wilson, 166-186)[5]

Thomas’s long poem ‘The Other’ is a self-reflective and self-analytical work. The opening lines deal with Thomas’s escape from a state of melancholy – a departure from a darkened forest grove:

> The forest ended. Glad I was
> To feel the light, and hear the hum
> Of bees, and smell the drying grass
> And the sweet mint, because I had come
> To an end of forest…
> (Thomas, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 153-154)

The poem’s protagonist then enters wayside inns and taverns, and he hears of this Other Man, trying to pursue him. When locals are asked whether they have seen this Other Man, their descriptions are similar to the protagonist. Thomas’ turn to poetry is tangible evidence that there had been a change in Thomas as despite this fear of the ‘Other’, he continues his pursuit (Moorcroft Wilson, 232). The ultimate couplet

[5] Moorcroft further detail Thomas’s fluctuating and deteriorating mental state:
“Edward was in an even worse state, confessing to de la Mare less than a fortnight after his return that ‘his mind ha[d] been in Hell these many days’ and that after he found living ‘only just possible’. Two days later Helen noted that since returning from Minsmere Edward had been ‘terribly nervy, depressed, desperate, as bad as ever and that ‘all [her] hopes ha[d] fallen into many fragments’. By the end of March Edward felt as though he were ‘crawl[ing] along the very edge of the life, wondering why [he] didn’t get over the edge.’ (Moorcroft Wilson, 174)

highlights this endless pursuit: “He goes. I follow: no release / Until he ceases. Then I shall also cease.” (Thomas*, Selected Poems and Prose*, 153-154)

As war was declared in 1914, Thomas was burdened by a sense of guilt for not fighting and in his writing, we are presented with a Hamlet-like character drowning in quandary. For example, ‘Adlestrop’ is a poem where the Romantic Thomas, yearning for the chirping birds of old England listens attentively to their songs as the threat of a steam train chugs on the horizon, waiting to interrupt the pastoral beauty. The steam train seems to represent modernity and warfare which is disturbing nature and the landscape:

> …the express-train drew up there
> Unwontedly. It was late June.
>
> The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
> No one left and no one came
> On the bare platform. What I saw
> Was Adlestrop—only the name
>
> And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
> And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
> No whit less still and lonely fair
> Than the high cloudlets in the sky. (164)

In this period, Thomas wrote the poem ‘The Sign-Post’ on 7 December 1914, shortly after the declaration of war. He writes:

> I read the sign. Which way shall I go? (154)

He ponders which way he would turn at the age of twenty versus sixty and how that would impact his decision on which path to take, youthful thirst for endeavour and the elder’s more pensive calculation, the choice of innocence or experience. Thomas’s friend Robert Frost at this time tried to convince him to emigrate to America and spend time in New England, away from the trenches. His wife Helen pleaded with him to remain in Hampshire with his family. Meanwhile, Thomas feels the pressure to represent king and country and his conscious is a heavy burden. There was no obligation for him to enlist as he aged thirty-six and married with children. (Moorcroft Wilson, 335-353) These were the decisions that met the walker at the signpost. The final lines are:

> At any age between death and birth, -

> To see what day or night can be,
> The sun and the frost, the land and the sea,
> Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring, -
> With a poor man of any sort, down to a king,
> Standing upright out in the air
> Wondering where he shall journey, O where? (Thomas, Selected Poems and Prose, 154)

'The Sign-Post' was written in a prolific period for Thomas – the last of five poems composed over successive days. There are distinct similarities between the poem and Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken', written later, which is based on the walks the two took in the summer of 1914. Frost played an important role in pushing Thomas towards poetry, seeing the potential for lyricism in his prose. After reading 'The Road Not Taken', shortly after Thomas enlisted and continued writing poetry while away in the in the trenches until his death. On the last pages of his diary, he wrote:

> The light of the moon and every star
> And no more singing for the bird…
> I never understood quite what was meant by God (258)

Thomas was a bridge between the Georgian poets and the full-fledged Modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and played a critical role in the development of twentieth-century poetry. Thomas can be attached to many genres: war poet; nature poet; mystic or folklorist; however, his "exploration of such topics as memory, identity, disintegration, directionless and loss anticipate many of the themes of modern poetry." (Moorcroft Wilson, 2) The Modernists that came after Thomas and the War reacted to the upheaval through their poetry. T. S. Eliot also wrote about Spring but with greater pessimism whereby the season symbolises holistically: new flowers bloom out of the pulp of the decayed and withered. The symbiotic reliance between life and death is described by T. S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* (1922), reminiscent of Thomas's discovery of the Grave of Winter:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot, 326)

Springtime, the change of the season, is viewed differently now to Thomas's pilgrimage. Eliot points also to the fact that the earth itself is a receptacle of memory and human beings, as well as footprints, imprint and plant the roots of memories into

the landscape, writing: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” (Eliot, 326) Death, destruction, and upheaval captured in the palm of a hand. This also bears a strong resemblance to memories like sand flowing out of the hand of Agnes Varda and the earth being pinched between Thomas’s finger and his thumb, his beloved landscape fading away as it trickles through his hand. The hinge period in the 1910s and the time of Thomas’s enlisting and death at Arras was personified by William Butler Yeats in *The Second Coming.* Yeats wrote about a slouching beast reaping havoc upon the world:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> (Yeats, 235)

Thomas feared that his beloved landscape would disappear with time and Yeats paints these desolate images with the technicolour of modernity. Sebald quotes Thomas Browne in *The Rings of Saturn* and it carries Yeats’s same tone of foreboding:

> On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 23-24)

In the following chapter, the discussion will centre around Sebald and his works, *The Rings of Saturn* and *After Nature*. Both works, one prose, one poetry, bare similarities to the work discussed above on Edward Thomas. Both writers share similar anxieties toward modernity, writing on life and death, memory and the English landscape where spectres haunt their wanderings. As Moorcroft Wilson writes, Thomas’s: “*In Pursuit of Spring* anticipate[s] by many years the experimental work of writers such as W. G. Sebald and meditative essays and impressionistic fiction.” (Moorcroft Wilson, 5)

The similarities between Thomas and Sebald will be explored in the following chapter. They wrote on themes of identity and memory as they walked across the English landscape. However, by the time when Sebald was writing at the end of the twentieth century, as the millennium draws to a close, there is an even greater disconnection between the literary pilgrim and the landscape through which they travel.

Chapter 3 - W. G. Sebald: A Disillusioned Pilgrim Contemplates Oblivion

The acceleration of change gained a greater pace in the twentieth century as the destruction of relics of the past was pursued even more vigorously. The two-pronged pitchfork of science and technology further impacted the literary pilgrim's relationship with landscape. While Edward Thomas wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, W. G. Sebald was writing at the end.

For Sebald, the past is the enemy of progress as to create, one must also destroy. He shares a view of history with Walter Benjamin who after observing Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* wrote:

> His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling the wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. […] But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 249)

Themes of displacement, identity, destruction, and nature run through Sebald's work. Sebald was born in Wertach in the Bavarian Alps in 1944 just before the end of the war. Germany's defeat cast a long shadow in his post-war childhood. Later he studied at Freiburg University and then moved to England in 1967, first to Manchester and then to Norwich where he settled for the remainder of his working life. He worked as a professor of European Literature and Literature in Translation at the University of East Anglia. He wrote his books first in German and then carefully oversaw their translation into English. Indeed, it was only when the books began to appear in English, he experienced acclaim and notoriety. In 2001, Sebald tragically died at the age of 57 in Norfolk after suffering a heart attack behind the wheel of his car.[6]

The Rings of Saturn: A Haunted and Haunting Landscape

The two texts this chapter will analyse by Sebald both deal directly with the philosophy of landscape and the pilgrim on a journey of self-discovery. Spectrality is

[6] Auto-biographical details taken from the film *Patience, After Sebald* by Grant Gee.

a major part of both works as the past haunts Sebald wherever he goes. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), like in so much of Thomas's work, Sebald walks around the English landscape recording his impressions. He encourages random objects and subjects, both material and immaterial to trigger memories that form portals into the past. T. S. Eliot saw fear in a handful of dust and Sebald sees fear in a landscape of dust. Dust, decay, ash, being and nothingness, remnants of past decadence litter *The Rings of Saturn* as the writer's own unstable state is projected onto a landscape cast aside by the passage of time, where modernity has drawn people away from these old places.[7]

Displacement is part of Sebald's pilgrimage process. He is living in exile and feels disconnected from his homeland. By reading the English translation of Sebald's original German works, further distance is added, reinforcing a metaphysical difference in understanding. Thus, the crisis of identity and alienation in the works of Sebald are further exaggerated. The German concepts of *Heimat* and *Heimweh* cannot be adequately translated into English. A rough translation of Heimat would be 'one's geographical roots within a spiritual sense of belonging' and the word *Heimweh* approximates to 'homesickness' but neither of these definitions fully cover the feelings that these words convey in German. Analysing his work in English, the language of his adopted homeland further increases the feeling of melancholy, displacement, and disconnection resulting from Sebald's self-imposed exile. In the process of translation some meaning is inevitably lost in the void, which is, in itself, Sebaldian.

Sebald and Thomas are connected by their use of photographs. *In Pursuit of Spring* and *The Rings of Saturn* both have black and white images placed within the text providing a visual depiction of the paths being walked by the writers on their pilgrimages and the images that are conjured up in their minds. The original German text full title is *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. The subtitle translates to 'An English Pilgrimage'. In the book, the narrator sets out on his pilgrimage in August 1992 and walks across the county of Suffolk. The plot thickens as these are

[7] The Rings of Saturn begins with a quote from Joseph Conrad, written in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska, 23rd-25th March 1890: *Il faut surtout pardoner à ces âmes malheureuses qui ont elú de faire le pèlegrinage à pied, qui côtoientle rivage et regardant sans comprendre l'horreur de la lute, la joie de vaincre ni le profonde désespoir des vaincus.*

based on walks taken by Sebald himself between 1992 and 1994. Thus, there are blurred lines between the narrator and Sebald.[8] The narrative is as meandering as his movements and it is a work that moves through varied topics that reflect the writer's own melancholic state:

> I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 3).

The book opens with the narrator reclining in a hospital bed thinking back to this pilgrimage he made the year before. He is an invalid inviting the reader to share the thoughts of his shattered life and scattered mind, "I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility." (3) Throughout the book, the narrator meanders on endless twists and turns both mental and physical: aerial warfare, Dutch elm disease, Schiphol Airport, Konrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a Chinese locomotive, the Decay of Dunwich and the origin of radar are but some of the thoughts summoned by the narrator on this winding literary journey.[9]

This opening section is full of opposites: from immobility to mobility, light to dark, the subterranean to high altitudes. Morbid memories enter in his mind, brought on by his situation in the ward. He ponders Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr.Tulp*, piles of paper detritus in university offices, the death of his friend Michael Parkinson, Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* and Flaubert:

> In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas Mountains. (8)

When thinking of Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* and chaos and destruction he thinks about Thomas Browne's skull that was in Norfolk & Norwich Hospital. But though he searches high and low for the skull, his searching is in vain. It has disappeared. As he thinks of the granular - sand, dust and death – he then looks up to see a plane flying across the sky:

> I saw a vapour trail cross the segment framed by my window. […] The aircraft at the tip of the trail was as invisible as the passengers inside it. The invisibility and intangibility of that which

[8] For the avoidance of doubt, this thesis will refer to the protagonist in *The Rings of Saturn* and *After Nature* as the narrator.
[9] A map of Sebald's mental and physical journey was created by Rick Moody as a supplement for Grant Gee's *Patience, After Sebald* - https://www.wgsebald.de/moody/moodymap.html

> moves us remained an unfathomable mystery for Thomas Browne too, who our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond. (18)

Altitude is a theme that runs throughout Sebald's work channelling Thomas Browne's vertiginous and Protean style, forever in flux:

> …because of the immense weight of the impediments he is carrying, Browne's writing can be held back by the force of gravitation, but when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiralling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation. The greater the distance, the clearer the view. (19)

Sebald adopts this same approach in *The Rings of Saturn*. As a wandering pilgrim he goes in search of the landscape and to view humanity from a greater height. With his own lofty prose, he spins a thread in an ever-widening gyre, as he attempts to come to terms with the weight of the past, his tone irradiating with melancholy. As Uwe Schütte writes:

> His [Sebald's] efforts were directed at coming up with a new type of writing that would address the horrors of the German past but also place them in an overarching matrix, in order to enable a more insightful understanding of how our own existence is inextricably linked with that of other creatures and the natural world around us. (Schütte, 86)

The sighting of this aeroplane flying across the frame of his window, reinforced his feeling of imprisonment and he cannot fathom its height so far from the earth. He is immobile and overwhelmed by the plane, a symbol of modernity ripping humanity away from the landscape:

> And yet, says Browne, all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 19)

The theme of destruction runs throughout *The Rings of Saturn* and Sebald shares the beliefs of Thomas Browne, quoting "On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation" and "There is no antidote […] against the opium of time." (23-24) The pilgrimage of *The Rings of Saturn* begins with the narrator shuttling on a train from Norwich to Lowestoft. The aim of the pilgrimage is an attempt to tackle the emptiness he felt after finishing a large mountain of work – the process of *Solvitur Ambulando* ('healing through walking'). On the slow-moving train, he passes ruined buildings and defunct windmills that resemble "relics of an extinct civilisation." (30) The narrator is reminded of stories of a friend's youth, where the landscape seems to be in movement, rather than paralysis:

> …turning sails in his childhood, […] white flecks of the windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye. And when those bright points little points faded away, the whole region, so to speak, faded with them. (30)

The spinning of the windmills of his childhood have now stagnated. This reflects the narrator's attempts as a writer to fire up the churning mechanisms in his own mind as he delves into his own memory for inspiration. The narrator visits Somerleyton Hall and quotes an article from *The Illustrated London News* from 1852 which described the grand mansion as being: "famed for the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior; those who visited were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began." (33)

At night, the mansion used to "cast an immense brightness that pulsated like the current that runs through the earth." (34) However, the spark has left the mansion by the occasion of the narrator's arrival, a gas explosion in 1913 rendered it a ruin and those maintaining the estate eventually departed, leaving an empty structure "full of bygone paraphernalia." (35) The narrator occupies the remnants of the past: "The stuffed polar bear in the entrance hall stands over three yards tall. With its yellowish and moth-eaten fur, it resembles a ghost bowed by sorrows." (36) The polar bear was taken out of nature and stuffed as a decorative piece for this mansion. The taxidermized beast acts as a symbol of the destruction of nature by humanity for the sake of their pleasure. The narrator in his own labyrinthine wandering identifies with both humans, animals and wild fowl throughout *Rings of Saturn.* For example, as he leaves the decaying Somerleyton, he feels solidarity with a caged bird:

> I was saddened to see, in one of the otherwise deserted aviaries, a solitary Chinese quail, evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage and shaking its head every time it was about to turn, as if it could not comprehend how it had got into this hopeless fix. (36)

The narrator associates himself with the incarcerated quail, bumping against the edges of a cage, disorientated and confused by his very own existence. The narrator himself then gets lost in a vast yew maze on the overgrown estate, retracing his steps and meeting dead ends at almost every turn. (38) This echoes the narrator's labyrinthine peregrination where he gets lost and disorientated both in the landscape and in the past, as the reader can in his prose. The narrator wanders through the town of Lowestoft, in the style of Edward Thomas, and walks:

> On a cheerless evening, past rows of run-down houses with mean little front gardens; and, having reached the town centre, to find nothing but amusement arcades, bingo halls, betting shops, video stores, pubs that emit a sour reek of beer from their dark doorways, cheap markets, and seedy bed-and-breakfast establishments… (42)

The narrator stays in the deserted Albion hotel where a ghostly female is the only visible staff member: manning reception, giving the keys, serving the food and clearing the table. After his fish which "lay a sorry wreck among green-grass peas and the remains of soggy chips that gleamed with fat," (43), he looks out the window to the beach and sea. After this comic description of his substandard meal, Sebald drags the reader back into his echoing melancholy as he again ponders the sea, which seems unmoving: "Even the white waves rolling into the sands seemed to me to be motionless." (43)

As the narrator is in exile, the sea plays an important role in his thoughts. The Dogger Bank which originally connected the European Continent to Britain is now submerged. The towns and places he wanders through are also crumbling into the sea, particularly later in his descriptions of the Dunwich coast. This is the inevitable end-point for humanity in the mind of this pilgrim, a great diluvium spreading across the landscape. The thoughts of the sea also reflect the narrator's disconnection from his homeland, he lives on an island cut-off from the European mainland and the only way he can travel there on foot is through the lens of his fading memory. The narrator observes from dunes fisherman departing from the coast of Lowestoft. These purgatorial fishermen reflect the narrator's attempts to enter into the past and Sebald's archaeological style of prose, as he attempts to dig into memory:

> If one strikes camp, another soon takes his place; so that over the years, or so it appears, this company of fishermen dozing by day and waking by night never changes, and indeed may go back further than memory can reach. (52)

The narrator imagines the fishermen going out to an unknown a place untouched by modernity: "They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness." (52) However, he goes onto discuss how the fishermen are dying out with no one interested in their tradition and legacy and "abandoned boats that are falling apart, and the cables with which they were once hauled ashore are rusting in the salt air." (53) The fishing close to shore has decreased massively and most trawlers go further out into the North Sea. Pollution

leaking into the North Sea and across the Dogger Bank has led to the grim reality that “the fish are now born with strange deformities and excrescences.” (53)

Remaining on the topic of fish and fishing, the narrator confronts history by comparing the overfishing of herring in the North Sea. The narrator uses the herring as an example of how humanity battles against the supremacy of nature, and this small fish becomes an allegory for humanity’s inhumanity to nature and its fellow creatures. The narrator’s theory of history is depicted as a nightmare of repetition and a series of ongoing catastrophes. (Schütte, 76) This theory continues with the narrator stares out at the Southwold coast and imagines the blaze of the Sea Battle of Sole Bay between the Dutch and English vessels in May 1672, despairing at the destruction of craftmanship:

> At that date there can have been only a few cities on earth that numbered as many souls as were annihilated in sea-battles of this kind. The agony that was endured and the enormity of the havoc wrought defeat our powers of comprehension, just as we cannot conceive the vastness of the effort that must have been required – from felling and preparing the timber, mining and smelting the ore, and forging the iron, to weaving and sewing the sailcloth – to build and equip vessels that were almost all predestined for destruction. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 78)

Throughout history there has always been warfare and bloodshed. History is the process of remembering and forgetting and through his thoughts of the Battle of Sole Bay, the narrator draws attention to the fact that so much of the past is forgotten and misremembered, and therefore means that humanity is destined to repeat such actions. The Dogger Bank makes the narrator think of his time spent in the Netherlands across the strait. He remembers a flight from Amsterdam to Norwich in a small propeller plane. Unlike Thomas Browne, the narrator has the opportunity to rise to high altitudes and observe humanity and the landscape from great heights. The reader observes his uneasiness at the distance between himself and the landscape below:

> Nowhere, however, was a single human being to be seen. […] It is as though there were no people, only the things they have made and in which they are hiding. […] If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end… (91-92)

After the memory of this flight, his thoughts travel to an even greater height as he thinks of the space probe Voyager II approaching the outer limits of the solar system. He questions if this is the endpoint, departing this earth in search of a replacement

as like Icarus, humanity flies ever closer to the sun as the space race gathers greater momentum.

The theme of conquering space enters into the narrator's mind as he listens in a pre-sleep daze to BBC Radio discussing the life of Roger Casement. The narrator then guides the reader through biographies of Casement and Josef Konrad. He sees much of his exiled self in Konrad as they both moved to England at twenty-one. Sebald did not write in the English language as to start doing that, he would feel a definitive rupture between himself and his homeland. Lack of quotation marks associates the narrator with the figures he discusses, often using first person which blurs the lines between writer and the other. The mantra of colonialism troubles the narrator: "to open up the last part of the earth to have remained hitherto untouched by the blessings of civilisation." (118) The narrator channels Konrad and thinks of the Congo and King Leopold as an extreme example of the dangers of human endeavour to endlessly conquer space, stratify and 'civilise':

> The aim, said King Leopold, was to break through the darkness in which whole peoples still dwelt, and to mount a crusade in order to bring this glorious century of progress to the point of perfection. (118)

Reminiscent of the images of the Sea Battle of Sole Bay, the narrator remembers travelling to the large memorial at the battlefield of Waterloo, a cenotaph to the lives lost. The narrator sees history as palimpsests of corpses and the layers of history defined by conquering and bloodshed:

> This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. […] The night after the battle, the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that the ultimate vantage point? (125)

The theory of history as repetition again enters the narrator's mind. He observes a railway bridge between Southwold and Walberswick crossing the silted up River Blyth where there "is nothing but grey water, mudflats and emptiness." (137) The sight of this bridge transports the reader to the Forbidden Palace of Beijing. The narrator describes how the bridge was built for the Emperor of China in 1875. (138) The cyclical nature of history is discussed with the mention of a severe drought in China in the nineteenth century:

> Travellers who were in China between 1876 and 1879 report that, in the drought that had continued for years, whole provinces gave the impression of expiring under prisons of glass. Between seven and twenty million – no precise estimates have ever been calculated – are said to have died of starvation and exhaustion... (150)

This again is the narrator bringing attention to the Holocaust and how that level of horror inflicted on one human by another is a common theme through the threads of history. The narrator discusses the tenet of the philosophical schools of Tlön, how "the future exists only in the shape of our present apprehensions and hopes, and the past merely as memory." (154) In coastal Dunwich, the narrator witnesses the devastation of the passing of time:

> The Dunwich of the present day is what remains of a town that was one of the most important ports in Europe in the Middle Ages. There were more than fifty churches, monasteries and convents, and hospitals here; there were shipyards and fortifications and a fisheries and merchant fleet of eighty vessels; and there were dozens of windmills. All of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel… (155)

The former hub of the mercantile town is literally crumbling into the sea, as the tides encroach on the coastline. Dunwich prompts the narrator to summon Algernon Charles Swinburne, a writer of the Victorian Age who died in 1909. Dunwich became a site of pilgrimage for Victorian poets as Swinburne had spent time there. Swinburne's *By The North Sea* was a "tribute to the gradual dissolution of life. Like ashes the low cliffs crumble and the banks drop down into dust." (160) Swinburne yearned to die gloriously in war but could not enlist due to his feeble stature. Instead, he chose the life of writing, devoting himself "unreservedly to literature and thus, perhaps, to a no less radical form of self-destruction." (163) Dunwich forces the narrator to ponder humanity's cataclysmic pursuit of progress:

> Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create. The making of a fish-hook, manufacture of a china cup, or production of a television programme, all depend on the same process of combustion. Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilisation has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. (170)

The reader enters into a nightmare in the narrator's mind. He recounts how he erratically criss-crosses Dunwich Heath, "Despite signposts, he "loses his way" and does not make "any progress" but finds himself "walking in circles". This is a clear nudge towards a philosophy of history that contradicts any teleological idea of advancement towards a better future" (Schütte, 81):

> I was on Dunwich Heath once more in a dream, walking the endlessly winding paths again, and again I could not find my way out of the maze which I was convinced had been created solely for me. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 173)

In the same style as Thomas, Sebald uses spectrality in his writing as he summons writers of the past. The narrator is a spectral wanderer who is visiting places and is himself displaced. Sebald is a figure of exile and therefore is "a ghost out of place" (Wylie, 177). The narrator visits his friend Michael Hamburger.[10] Hamburger is also a German writer in exile who left to live in England and wrote his work in English. Hamburger told the narrator that crossing through customs at Dover as a boy signified:

> The beginning of the disappearance of his Berlin childhood behind the new identity that he assumed little by little over the next decade. How little there has remained in me of my native country, the chronicler observes as he scans the few memories he still possesses, barely enough for an obituary of a lost boyhood. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 177)

Hamburger's vague memories of childhood mesh with the narrator as he attempts to remember his youth: "How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?" (182) and "on my first visit to Michael's house I instantly felt as if I lived or had once lived there, in every respect precisely as he does, I cannot explain." (183) After visiting Hamburger and entering into his memories, the narrator remembers a trip to a stately home in Ireland. While there, a whirring projector shone on a decaying wall as the Ashbury family played the narrator a rolling tape. It was a film of their house and estate in the past, "mute images", "rendered unclear by the aristocracy and all they have is their decaying house, they are "tied to it, like a damned soul to their place. (219-20) After visiting this house in Ireland he enters into a nightmare fantasy of a sandstorm, where:

> A darkness closed in from the horizon like a noose being tightened, I tried in vain to make out, through the swirling and ever denser obscurement, landmarks that a short while ago still stood out clearly, but with each passing moment the space around became more constricted. (229)

The sandstorm comes after the narrator's attempts to trace back into his Berlin past and the Ashbury's distorted memories of their happier times in their manor house. This darkening haze of a storm reflects the narrator's fragmented mind as he attempts to document a past that is growing more and more distant with the passing

[10] Michael Hamburger translated Sebald's *After Nature*

of time, he writes of the post-storm landscape: “A deathly silence prevailed. There was not a breath, not a birdsong to be heard, not a rustle, nothing.” (229)

The imagery of a darkening space is followed shortly by a journey to the island of Orfordness, a former weapon-testing site. The voyage evokes Odysseus’s journey into the Kingdom of the Dead in *The Odyssey*: “As we crossed the river in his blue-painted boat, he told me that people still mostly avoid Orfordness.” (234) The post-apocalyptic world that the narrator enters into has a morbid landscape similar to the realm of Hades: “With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound.” (235) His first encounter with any living thing is a frightened hare that flees as he approaches. In this short passage, Sebald has an epiphany and a mystical union forms between himself and the hare, in the same manner as the yellowed, stuffed polar bear and Chinese Quail at Somerleyton. (235) Orfordness exists in an ambiguous state between nature and civilization, present and past, where structures are now derelict as nature conquers the space once again (Schütte, 83). As the narrator says:

> 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 civilisation after its extinction in some future catastrophe. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 237)

From this deserted world of Orfordness, Sebald visits Thomas Abrams who has recreated the Temple of Jerusalem: “He had spent the past month painting about a hundred of the more than two thousand figures, no more than a quarter of an inch high, that peopled the Temple precincts.” (243) In the context of visiting a post-apocalyptic-like landscape, this sight of a minuscule version of a famous landmark serves as a grim vision of a future where these landmarks no longer exist. The only way to see them is to construct them from memory. The construction of this model reflects Sebald’s own style of writing and how his prose spans centuries and involves a reconstruction of the past: “‘I don’t consider myself a writer’, Sebald once told an interviewer, ‘It’s like someone who builds a model of the Eiffel Tower out of matchsticks. It’s a devotional work. Obsessive’”. (Schwartz, 169)

The narrator discusses the life of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, in particular his time spent in Suffolk. Again, Sebald writes in the first person, so the lines are blurred between the narrator and Vicomte. Chateaubriand wrote extensive *memoires* and

within them there is a quote that the narrator mentions, reflecting the pilgrimage and the notion of landscape inciting a memory:

> Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 255)

The narrator as chronicler recalls memories from a distant past and describes writing as an "an act of self-mutilation, onto his own body" where a fragment of the past "though still alive, is already in the tomb that his memories represent." (257) These thoughts of entombed memories push him into a passage where his pilgrimage ends at Ditchingham churchyard (259-261), reading the gravestones of the dead in the same style as Thomas in the graveyards of *In Pursuit of Spring*. As he thinks of the deceased, he remembers Chateaubriand living in France in another time where he planted trees on his vast estate:

> Now, he says, they are still so small that I provide them with shade whenever I step between them and the sun. But one day, when they have grown, they will give shade to me, and look after me in my old age much as I looked after them in their youth. (263)

Like Edward Thomas seeing the dying flowers of Winter and the blooming flowers of Spring, the narrator portrays the roots of a tree meshed with the memories of those buried in the graveyards. After imagining the growing trees, Sebald recalls the impact of storm that reaped havoc in his back garden:

> The forest floor, which in the spring of last year still had been carpeted with snowdrops, violets and wood anemones, ferns and cushions of moss, was now covered by a layer of barren clay. (268)

The dawn chorus, the noise of nightingales, the wind in the meadows and fields and the songs of the larks, nature's "pure and penetrating song punctuated by theatrical silences, there was now not a living sound." (268) After finishing his pilgrimage discusses the history of the manufacture of silk as it spread from China to Europe. The silkworm weaving the material is an allegory for time, a frail, delicate patchwork weaved together and ephemeral as the caterpillars that make it. Humans have mutilated these creatures in the name of industry.

> The caterpillar now stops eating, runs about restlessly, and, seeking to leave the low earth behind, strives to gain greater heights, until it has found the right place and can start to weave its cell from the resinous juices produced in its insides. (275)

The narrator compares the writer to a weaver at a loom. Silk is diaphanous and fragile, as the blurred border and lines are of the pilgrimage around the Suffolk Coast. He connects memories and finding patterns in history, they are “forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created.” (283) The narrator closes the narrative circle by returning to Thomas Browne and his ambivalent view of the world, which show affinities to *The Rings of Saturn.* Both Sebald and Browne bring together “reason and myth, scientific research and metaphysical speculation, local and cosmological components.” (Schütte, 86) Sebald has a heightened view of history and sees connections in all things where a crumbling windmill in East Anglia can be connected with natural history of destruction and mass genocide with overfishing, where progress is enveloped in carnage.

The Rings of Saturn is woven together in such a rich tapestry. It forms a matrix in which the reader has the feeling of being lost, surrounded by high walls in a labyrinth in the same way as the narrator does throughout the pilgrimage (86).

After Nature: Imaginary Landscapes of the Past

After Nature by Sebald is a pilgrimage that covers a half a millennium from the 1500s to the present and it is written in the form of a triptych. It differs from *The Rings of Saturn*, which was based on Sebald’s actual wandering, as the panels of the *After Nature* triptych do exist but his pilgrimage is imaginary. The three sections are a self-portrait where each one represents an individual aspect of Sebald. The figure in the first section is German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald, a religiously determined artist of suffering. The second is German botanist George Wilhelm Steller who took part in the Bering expedition, a pioneer of Alaskan natural history, a pre-enlightenment scientist attempting to classify and civilise unconquered space. The third is a pseudo-biographical section where Sebald confronts his own uncertainties of a fading past and his worries of man’s relationship with nature (Schütte, 31). In summary, Grünewald represents Sebald the artist; Steller stands for Sebald the academic, displaced and distant from his homeland; and the autobiographical narrator in the final section can be viewed Sebald’s personal history which offers the reader “an exploration of his roots as a child born in the penultimate year of the war and a recollection of his life as an emigrant in England. (32)

The titular ‘after’ has a double meaning. Firstly, signifying the disappearance of nature, where the narrator observes a world where nature is being annihilated. The second meaning symbolises the narrator’s attempt to go ‘after’ nature, like Thomas pursuing Spring, the narrator pursues the past through landscapes and occupying others like a parasite of memory. The narrator does this like a phantom, as in *The Rings of Saturn* and akin to how Thomas walked in the footsteps of other literary pilgrims – Wessex poets, Coleridge, Wordsworth. Sebald engages with the themes of memory and identity. The dominant perspective of *After Nature* is humanity’s eco-centric view of quantifying, colonising and defeating nature (33).

After Nature – Section One – ‘As the Snow on the Alps’

In the first section, the narrator discusses Grünewald of which there is little known of his life. What evidence there is the narrator sifts through with the determination of a detective and an archaeologist unearthing details of Grünewald’s existence. In this regard, he relies heavily on observing the artist’s works. Thus, the narrator pieces together a biography:

> Foremost at the picture’s edge he stands
> Above the world by a hand’s breadth
> And is about to step over the frame’s
> Threshold. (Sebald, *After Nature*, 5)

This painting is of a ship which sank during a battle fought in Thirty Years’ War in 1631 or 1632. The narrator imagines how much of art and history can be forgotten if not documented. In this way, Sebald is justifying the purpose of the artist and his writings. The precise year of a battle or the exact details of an individual’s past can disappear:

> in the wild war of that era this panel
> had been taken away and sent off to Sweden,
> but by shipwreck beside many other
> such pieces of art had perished
> in the depths of the sea […] (11)

The narrator furthers his anxiety towards the disappearance of art and an unremembered artist where he thinks of a self-portrait by an unknown painter in the Chicago Institute of Art: “Through the window on his left a / landscape with mountain and valley / and the curved line of a path is visible.” (17) A winding path into the distance portrays the narrator’s uncertainty as an artist and his worries that human

life is ephemeral, but you can remain living through your artwork if you are remembered. What is beyond the borders or the frame? What has the artist left out?

> Everywhere and at all times,
> Is not to be seen on the altar panels,
> Whose figures have passed beyond
> The miseries of existence, unless it be (25)

Grünewald had an extremist view of the world and saw, like Yeats, the past as a slouching beast of modernity, a chimera reaping havoc to the landscape and nature:

> On the right, a stilt-legged bird-like beast
> Which, with human arms,
> Holds a cudgel raised up […]
> Crab-clawed together, shark- and dragon-like
> Maws, rows of teeth, pug noses
> From which snot flows (26)

A beast making life out of life devouring all in sight as all ethereal things turn to blood, dirt, and dust where the purpose of humanity is “To try out how far it can go / Is the sole aim of this sprouting” and “The machines sprung from our heads, / All in a single jumble, / While behind us already the green / Trees are deserting their leaves […] (27) and as the years go by, the ultimate endpoint of humanity is when “darkness comes / and with it a yellow dust / that covers the land.” (28) These images evoke the post-apocalyptic works and nightmare landscapes of Hieronymus Bosch.

In Grünewald’s Basel *Crucifixion* of 1505, the narrator stares into the landscape depicting within the painting and stares: “Behind the group of mourners / A landscape reaches so far into the depths / That our eyes cannot see its limits.” (29) He is weary of modern times and attempts to enter paintings, like portals of a forgotten time, to make his way back from the heavy burden of the past. However, he realises that the past weighs heaviest on the living, layers, and layers of time, carried on their shoulders. Grünewald observed an eclipse, and the narrator compares this to his own fear of an apocalypse: The secret sickening away of the world, / In which a phantasmal encroachment of dusk / […] never again to be / driven out of the painter’s memory. (29-30) The narrator through Grünewald anticipates the apocalypse, where an eclipse triggered Grünewald to cast “a pathetic gaze / into the future” and to paint “a planet utterly strange” (31):

> Here in an evil state of erosion
> And desolation the heritage of the ruining
> Of life that in the end will consume
> Even the very stones has been depicted. (31)

And after this eclipse, the darkness and nightfall, the narrator imagines oblivion where the eyes, the windows to the world, fail the individual and all that is visible is white void:

> A colourless image of Earth.
> So, when the optic nerve
> Tears, in the still space of the air
> All turns as white as
> The snow on the Alps. (37)

Grünewald's haunted landscapes evokes the narrator's experience on the dereliction of the isle of Orfordness. Schwartz aptly described the narrator's view of humanity's detrimental relationship with nature:

> We are living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out, and that other world which is generated by our brain cells. And so clearly that fault line runs right through our physical and emotional makeup. And probably where those tectonic plates rub against each other is where the sources of pain are. (Schwartz, 56)

After Nature - Section Two – 'And if I Returned by the Outermost Sea'

In the second section, the narrator confronts the troubling concept of humanity conquering the world by colonising nature. As his cipher, he uses the life of botanist Georg Wilhelm Steller. The narrator cherishes the challenge of piecing together the life of another with scant details, like the weaver at the loom challenging to produce silk from flimsy material. The narrator engages with Steller due to the "temptation to work with very fragmentary pieces of evidence, to fill in the gaps and blank spaces and create out of this a meaning which is greater than that which you can prove." (Bigsby, 139-165)

> He felt some comfort, although he knew
> That even with these he would not
> Arrest the slow corrosion
> That had entered his soul. (Sebald, *After Nature*, 54)

Leader of the expedition is cartographer Vitus Bering and even when the expedition sees the mountains of Alaska on the horizon – their endpoint - he remains in a "fit of

deepest depression." (58) The mission to reach the strait between the Pacific and Atlantic separating the Chukchi Peninsula of the Far Eastern Russian and the Seward Peninsula of Alaska, proves to be of immense detrimental effect on the ship's expeditionary crew. The narrator describes the scurvy of the crew and the immobility and sickness of Bering as a metaphor for the trials humanity goes through in order to colonise a space: "The lesson is clear: those who dare to map and conquer the unexplored corners of world are being taught a lesson for their hubris." (Schütte, 35) Space was able to be conquered due to the development of technology and machines of mobility. The narrator merges the machine with nature after seeing a whale erupting from the ocean, describing the steam engine as "The first warm-blooded animal / Created by humankind. (Sebald, *After Nature*, 60) These expeditions caused massive damage to the animals in these ecosystems:

> A particularly disheartening example is Steller's sea cow (Hydrodamalis gigas). The large marine mammal, first described by Steller in 1741, was hunted to extinction within twenty-seven years of its discovery. (Schütte, 36)

The steam engine is a tool of convenience that shrunk the landscape. For humanity and the literary pilgrim this locomotion caused a breakdown between the individual and landscape. This pursuit of all-knowledge and the quest to colonise the unknown and nature relates back to Rousseau, Wordsworth and Thomas's disdain for the classification of the wild, where classification leads to destruction. This ties in with T. S. Eliot's grim litany of the quest for all knowledge, in "Choruses From The Rock', the poet sums up the dangers of humanity's hunger for progress:

> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (Eliot, 153)

Steller discovers that nature is no longer a means to escape society but has morphed into a "travel chart for hunters, / blueprint for the counting of pelts." (Sebald, *After Nature*, 74) Steller was a botanist, inspired by defining nature but his work, in reality, is detrimental to the environments he explored. Through Steller, the narrator describes his anxieties around the negative impact of the unknown being charted and defined; a dissolving of nature as the earth is digested for sake of humanity's indulgence and ambition to know it all.

After Nature - Section Three – 'Dark Night Sallies Forth'

In the third section of *After Nature,* the narrator now enters into his own memories and tries to connect with his former self and the landscapes of his memory. The narrator, like Thomas sniffing the Old Man bush enters his past through the portals of fading photographs.

> How far, in any case, must one go back
> To find the beginning? […] (81)

The imagery of a faded photograph which corresponds to the disappearance of memory, is a motif so commonly used in Sebald's work, is once again used in these poems. In an interview with Sebald he discussed his use of photographs in his work:

> For a brief moment in time to rescue something out of that stream of history that keeps rushing past. And this is why, among other reasons, I have photographs in the text […] The photograph is meant to get lost somewhere in a box, in an attic, it is a nomadic thing that has a small chance only to survive. And I think we all know that feeling when we come accidentally across a photographic document being one of our lost relatives, being of a totally unknown person and we get this sense of appeal they are stepping out after decades or half centuries having been found by somebody, all of a sudden they come back over the threshold and they say, 'we were here too once and please take care of us for a while'.[11]

Memories too are nomadic things, as are spaces and places, pilgrims and writers and when Sebald stumbles across something that triggers a memory of the past, he enters into that world, sometimes only for a brief moment, sometimes for a longer spell. The image the narrator first stares at in *After Nature* has an inscription in ink:

> On the reverse of the
> Spotted grey cardboard mount
> The words 'In the future
> Death lies at our feet',
> One of those obscure oracular sayings
> One never again forgets. (Sebald, *After Nature*, 82)

This photograph of the narrator's mother was taken as she fled the burning city of Nuremberg on August 26, 1943. His mother was pregnant with the narrator at the time. He imagines his mother's memory through the lens of a painting by Albrecht Altdorfer in Vienna's *Kunsthistorisches* Museum:

> On the horizon

[11] This quotation was transcribed from the podcast *Backlisted Podcast* hosted by Andy Miller, episode 'The Rings of Saturn by W. G. Sebald' released 11/11/2019.

A terrible conflagration blazes,
Devouring a large city.
Smoke ascends from the site,
The flames rise to the sky and
In the blood-red reflection
One sees the blackened façades of houses.
In the middle ground there is a strip
Of idyllic green landscape (84-85)

The destruction of Nuremberg makes the narrator ponder an early visit to Manchester – 'the most wonderful city of modern times, according to Disraeli.[12] However, Manchester, Sebald's first home after exile, is full of skeletons of an industrious past, "Those silent mutations clear the way for the future" where the obscure crowds / Who fuelled the progress of history" are overwhelmed by modernity:

The disused viaducts and
Warehouses, the many millions
Of bricks, the traces of smoke,
Of tar and sulphuric acid,
Long have I stood on the banks
Of the Irk and the Irwell, those
Mythical rivers now dead,
Which in better times
Shone azure blue,
Carmine red and glaucous green. (95-96)

Sebald's visions of the empty skeletons of past industry reflect Walter Benjamin's view that upheaval and destruction are the products of the civilizing process (Schütte, 39). These images of Manchester haunt the narrator's memory, he writes that they "plunged me into a quasi / sublunary state of deep / melancholia…" (Sebald, *After Nature*, 97) And this process of the new constantly replacing the old in the name of progress reflects Thomas's reflections of Winter to Spring in *In Pursuit of Spring*, one in nature, the other in industry and modernity:

The one thing always
The other's beginning
And vice versa. (102)

Humanity is compared to Icarus - too ambitious, too exploratory - where the endpoint of progress is oblivion. Like William Carlos Williams and W. H. Auden and may other poets before him, the narrator is drawn to the image of Brueghel's *Fall of Icarus* in

[12] Sebald also published a book called a *A Natural History of Destruction* (1999) which deals with the Allied bombing of German cities during WW2.

which the individual in the context of the entire world is insignificant and their existence transitory:

> As in Brueghel's
> picture, the beautiful ship,
> the ploughing peasant, the whole
> of nature somehow turn away
> from the son's misfortune? (103-104)

In the closing poem of the third section the narrator imagines himself on an escapist pilgrimage fantasy to Munich. *The Rings of Saturn* begins with the narrator lying stasis in a hospital bed pondering death, burial, dust, altitude, as a plane crosses the atmosphere. The narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* could not even fathom that there could be people within that plane. However, now, at the conclusion of *After Nature*, there is a perfect example of Sebaldian circularity as the narrator is himself *in* the plane. He views the earth from a vertiginous perspective and this immense height troubles him:

> Now I know, with a crane's eye
> One surveys his far-flung realm […]
> And slowly learns, from the tininess
> Of the figures and the incomprehensible
> Beauty of nature that vaults over them… (112)

The end point of this escapist pilgrimage by plane is to go to Munich to view Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529), depicting Alexander in battle against Darius of Persia. Again, the narrator is using this as an example of his view of history as an endless litany of disasters and destruction:

> The reader should be cautious, though, of Sebald's ironic insinuation: Alexander the Great is not only a hero; for Sebald, his exploits as a world conqueror also made him the model for the imperialist fantasies of later military commanders such as Napoleon or Hitler. (Schütte, 40)

This is highlighting Sebald's view that the recent past must not overpower the ancient. The description by the narrator in the aeroplane and his vertiginous perspective, strikes distinct similarities with Petrarch's panorama after summiting Mount Ventoux in the year 1336, he wrote:

> As if I suddenly wakened from a sleep, I turned about and gazed towards the west. I was unable to discern the summits of the Pyrenees, which form the barrier between France and Spain; not because of any intervening obstacle that I know of but owing simply to the insufficiency of our mortal vision. But I could see with the utmost clearness, off to the right, the mountains of the region about Lyons, and to the left the bay of Marseilles and the waters

> that lash the shores of Aigues Mortes, altho' all these places were so distant that it would require a journey of several days to reach them. (Petrarch, 316)

As with Petrarch, the narrator observes the spanning landscape from on high, god-like, and the horizon as a bending meniscus. As he does so, as well as the landscape, he is able to see history and the past in overview. He imagines both mortality and eternity through the desperate eyes of Darius and the burning stare of Alexander. He moves from the great to the granular, as he thinks of molluscs and pluming factories, woodlice and murmuring motorways. At altitude, the landscape is a different beast, the distance from sea level makes all that is below indistinct but overwhelming:

> What is revealed here through an unbounded, painterly gaze is an opportunity to look into the cosmic dimension of creation – a metaphysical opening into a timeless realm after nature. (Schütte, 41)

As modernity and all its futurist creations – the plane, the train, the automobile – walkers like Thomas and Sebald, engine-less, relocate the unchartered territories of the unknown into the interior of the Self, not some far-flung continent, archipelago, or glacier. Instead, they attempt to shine a torch to throw light on the cavernous dark of the human interior.

In ancient times, King Canute set his throne beside the ocean and commanded the tide to withdraw, however, the waves kept advancing. King Canute is often misrepresented, he did this not to prove he was omnipotent but to show to his courtiers the futility of trying to control nature. Like Canute, Thomas and Sebald as literary pilgrims fully understand that they are powerless to stop the tide of progress but the vital thing for them is that they document and record this ceaseless advance. In doing so, they provide a warning that we must question the ruthless pursuit of progress.

Conclusion

This thesis has compared the works of Edward Thomas and W. G. Sebald, literary pilgrims both walking in England. It has shown the impact that the ever-changing state of the English landscape had upon their writing. The concern for a disappearing nature and the importance of documenting it was discussed by Rousseau and Wordsworth who served as the precursors to Thomas and Sebald. Their fears continued on into the twentieth century with greater intensity.

In recording their peregrinations, both Thomas and Sebald probed themes of memory, identity, and humanity's relationship with nature. They voyaged into both an individual and collective past, struggling with their identity in an ever-altering landscape. The prose and poetry of Sebald, writing nearly a century later than Thomas, carries greater melancholy, despair, and foreboding. During the twentieth century, the relationship between landscape and the individual became increasingly disconnected. The English landscape in which Sebald travels is one that is further along in the evolution, or devolution, process than that experienced by Thomas. Thomas disliked the growth of towns and suburbs, manicured gardens of stately homes, advertising hoardings and telegraph wires. Sebald travels through these same spaces, now overgrown, uninhabited, eroding and decaying, derelict mansions of bygone times and the profound left by scars of war. This thesis has provided an analysis of both these literary pilgrims of memory, tracking their response to the ever-changing state of nature in modernity.

Despite the existential dread, combustion and melancholy, their aim is that their work may provide hope both to themselves and the reader. As humanity emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, questions arise from mankind's disregard and abuse of nature, which has threatened the sustainability of our society, and even the planet. Furthermore, as the pandemic suspended, and even stunted, globalisation, people walked more in the landscape directly around them due to imposed barriers and limited radius of kilometres. Following in the footsteps of Thomas and Sebald, this enforced interaction with the immediate landscape and natural surroundings, may inspire a new generation of writers. Thus, these landscape writers and literary pilgrims could help stem the tide of modernity, and, like signposts on a rural track,

point humanity in the right direction, allowing us to reconnect with the ground beneath our feet, one step at a time.

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