

*Also by W.G. Sebald*

**THE EMIGRANTS**

**W.G. Sebald**

**The Rings of Saturn**

*Translated by*  
**MICHAEL HULSE**

**A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK**



at the outermost limit of the earth, in expectation of the miracle longed for since time immemorial, the miracle which would justify all their erstwhile privations and wanderings. In reality, however, these men camping out under the heavens have not traversed faraway lands and deserts to reach this strand. Rather, they are from the immediate neighbourhood, and have long been in the habit of fishing there and gazing out to the sea as it changes before their eyes. Curious to tell, their number almost always remains more or less the same. 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. They say it is rare for any of the fishermen to establish contact with his neighbour, for, although they all look eastward and see both the dusk and the dawn coming up over the horizon, and although they are all moved, I imagine, by the same unfathomable feelings, each of them is nonetheless quite alone and dependent on no one but on himself and on the few items of equipment he has with him, such as a penknife, a thermos flask, or the little transistor radio that gives forth a scarcely audible, scratchy sound, as if the pebbles being dragged back by the waves were talking to each other. I do not believe that these men sit by the sea all day and all night so as not to miss the time when the whiting pass, the flounder rise or the cod come in to the shallower waters, as they claim. They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness. The fact is that today it is almost impossible to catch anything fishing from the beach. The boats in which the fishermen once put out from the shore have vanished, now that fishing no

longer affords a living, and the fishermen themselves are dying out. No one is interested in their legacy. Here and there one comes across abandoned boats that are falling apart, and the cables with which they were once hauled ashore are rusting in the salt air. Out on the high seas the fishing continues, at least for the present, though even there the catches are growing smaller, quite apart from the fact that the fish that are landed are often useless for anything but fish-meal. Every year the rivers bear thousands of tons of mercury, cadmium and lead, and mountains of fertilizer and pesticides, out into the North Sea. A substantial proportion of the heavy metals and other toxic substances sink into the waters of the Dogger Bank, where a third of the fish are now born with strange deformities and excrescences. Time and again, off the coast, rafts of poisonous algae are sighted covering many square miles and reaching thirty feet into the deep, in which the creatures of the sea die in shoals. In some of the rarer varieties of plaice, crucian or bream, the females, in a bizarre mutation, are increasingly developing male sexual organs and the ritual patterns of courtship are now no more than a dance of death, the exact opposite of the notion of the wondrous increase and perpetuation of life with which we grew up. It was not without reason that the herring was always a popular didactic model in primary school, the principal emblem, as it were, of the indestructibility of Nature. I well recall one of those flickering short films that teachers could borrow from local film and slide libraries in the Fifties, which showed a trawler from Wilhelmshaven in almost total darkness riding waves that towered to the top of the screen. By night, it appeared, the nets were cast, and by night they were hauled in again. Everything happened as if in a black void, relieved only by

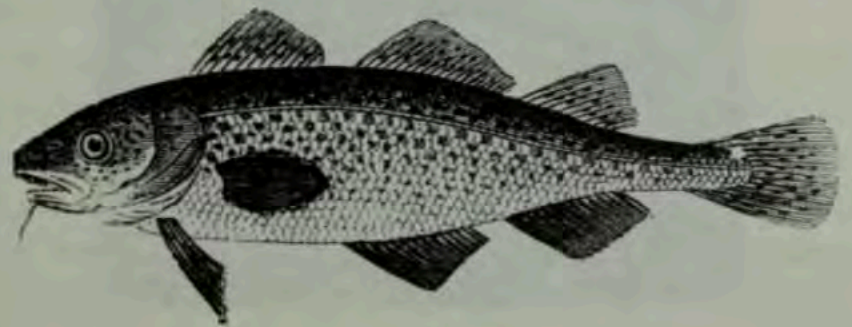
the gleam of the white underbellies of the fish, piled high on the deck, and of the salt they were mixed with. In my memory of that school film I see men in their shining black oilskins working heroically as the angry sea crashes over them time upon time – herring fishing regarded as a supreme example of mankind's struggle with the power of Nature. Towards the end, as the boat is approaching its home port, the rays of the evening sun break through the clouds, spreading their glow over the now becalmed waters. One of the seamen, washed and combed, plays on a mouth organ. The captain, with the air of a man mindful of his responsibilities, stands at the helm, looking ahead into the distance. At last the catch is unloaded and we see the work in the halls where women's hands gut the herring, sort them according to size, and pack them in barrels. Then (so says the booklet accompanying the 1936 film), the railway goods wagons take in this restless wanderer of the seas and transport it to those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled. I have read elsewhere, in a volume on the natural history of the North Sea



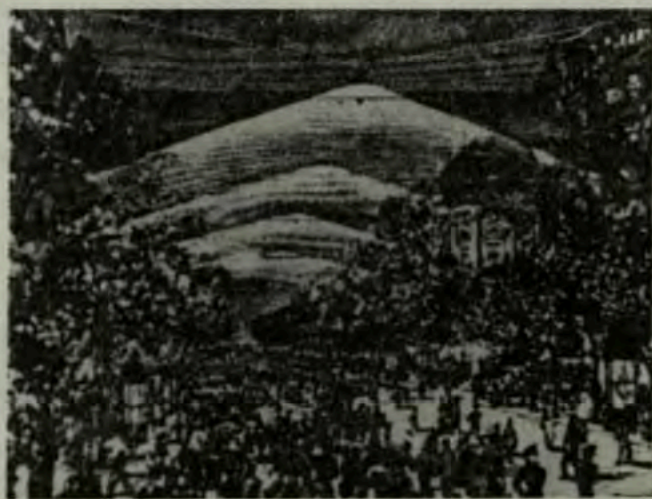
published in Vienna in 1857, that untold millions of herring rise from the lightless depths in the spring and summer months, to spawn in coastal waters and shallows, where they lie one on top of another in layers. And a statement ending with an exclamation mark informs us that each female herring lays seventy thousand eggs, which, according to Buffon's calculation, would shortly produce a volume of fish twenty times the size of the earth, if they were all to develop unhindered. Indeed, the records note years in which the entire herring fisheries threatened to go under, beneath a truly catastrophic glut of herring. It is even said that vast shoals of herring were brought in towards the beaches by the wind and the tides and cast ashore, covering miles of the coast to a depth of two feet and more. The local people were able to salvage only a small portion of these herring harvests in baskets and crates; the remainder rotted within days, affording the terrible sight of Nature suffocating on its own surfeit. On the other hand, there were repeated occasions when the herring avoided their usual grounds and whole stretches of coastline were impoverished as a result. The routes the herring take through the sea have not been ascertained to this day. It has been supposed that variations in the level of light and the prevailing winds influence the course of their wanderings, or geomagnetic fields, or the shifting marine isotherms, but none of these speculations has proved verifiable. For this reason, those who go in pursuit of herring have always relied on their traditional knowledge, which draws upon legend, and is based on their own observation of facts such as the tendency of the fish, swimming in even, wedge-shaped formations, to reflect a pulsating glow skyward when the sunlight falls at a particular angle. One dependable sign

that herring are present is said to be myriads of scales floating on the surface of the water, shimmering like tiny silver tiles by day and sometimes at dusk resembling ashes or snow. Once the herring shoal had been sighted, it was fished during the following night, and this was done, according to the natural history of the North Sea already quoted, using nets two hundred feet long that could take almost a quarter of a million fish. These nets were made of coarse Persian silk and dyed black, since experience had shown that a lighter colour scared the herring off. The nets do not enclose the catch, but rather present a kind of wall in the water which the fish swim up against in desperation until at length their gills catch in the mesh; they are then throttled during the near-eight-hour process of hauling up and winding in the nets. Because of this, by far the majority of the herrings are lifeless by the time they are hoisted out of the water. Earlier natural historians such as M. de Lacépède therefore tended to suppose that herring die the instant they are removed from water, from some form of infarct or other cause. Since all authorities were soon agreed in ascribing this particular characteristic to the herring, much attention was long paid to eye-witness accounts of herrings remaining alive out of the water. Thus it is recorded that a Canadian missionary by the name of Pierre Sagard watched a batch of herring thrashing about for some time on the deck of a fishing boat off the Newfoundland coast, and that one Herr Neucrantz of Stralsund meticulously chronicled the final throes of a herring that had been taken from the water one hour and seven minutes before the time of its death. Again, the inspector of the Rouen fish market, a certain Noel de Marinière, one day saw to his astonishment that a pair of herring that had already been out of

the water between two and three hours were still moving, a circumstance that prompted him to investigate more closely the fishes' capacity to survive, which he did by cutting off their fins and mutilating them in other ways. This process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster. What is not eaten at the spawn stage by haddock and sucker fish ends up inside a conger eel, dogfish, cod or one of the many others that prey on herring, including, not least, ourselves. As early as 1670, more than eight hundred thousand Dutch and Friesians, a not inconsiderable part of the entire population, were employed in herring fishing. A hundred years later, the number of herring caught annually is estimated to have been sixty billion. Given these quantities, the natural historians sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction wrought in the cycle of life, and moreover in the assumption that the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes. But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels. All we know is that its internal structure is extremely intricate and consists of more than two hundred different bones and cartilages.



Among the herring's most striking external features are its powerful tail fin, the narrow head, the slightly prominent lower mandible, and its large eye, with a black pupil swimming in the silvery-white iris. The herring's dorsal area is of a bluish-green colour. The individual scales on its flanks and belly shimmer a golden orange, but taken together they present a metallic, pure white gleam. Held against the light, the rearward parts of the fish appear a dark green of a beauty one sees nowhere else. Once the life has fled the herring, its colours change. Its back turns blue, the cheeks and gills red, suffused with blood. An idiosyncrasy peculiar to the herring is that, when dead, it begins to glow; this property, which resembles phosphorescence and is yet altogether different, peaks a few days after death and then ebbs away as the fish decays. For a long time no one could account for this glowing of the lifeless herring, and indeed I believe that it still remains unexplained. Around 1870, when projects for the total illumination of our cities were everywhere afoot, two English scientists with the



apt names of Herrington and Lightbown investigated the unusual phenomenon in the hope that the luminous substance exuded by dead herrings would lead to a formula for an organic source of light that had the capacity to regenerate itself. The failure of this eccentric undertaking, as I read some time ago in a history of artificial light, constituted no more than a negligible setback in the relentless conquest of darkness.

I had long left the beach fishermen behind me when, in the early afternoon, I reached Benacre Broad, a lake of brackish water beyond a bank of shingle halfway between Lowestoft and Southwold. The lake is encircled by deciduous woodland that is now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea. Doubtless it is only a matter of time before one stormy night the shingle bank is broken, and the appearance of the entire area changes. But that day, as I sat on the tranquil shore, it was possible to believe one was gazing into eternity. The veils of mist that drifted inland that morning had cleared, the vault of the sky was empty and blue, not the slightest breeze was stirring, the trees looked painted, and not a single bird flew across the velvet-brown water. It was as if the world were under a bell jar, until great cumulus clouds brewed up out of the west casting a grey shadow upon the earth.

Perhaps it was that darkening that called to my mind an article I had clipped from the *Eastern Daily Press* several months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake. During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945,



but immediately after VE-Day returned home from Germany to manage his great uncle's estates in Suffolk, a task he had fulfilled in exemplary manner, at least until the mid-Fifties, as I knew from other sources. It was at that time too that Le Strange took on the housekeeper to whom he eventually left his entire fortune: his estates in Suffolk as well as property in the centre of Birmingham estimated at several million pounds. According to the newspaper report, Le Strange employed this housekeeper, a simple young woman from Beccles by the name of Florence Barnes, on the explicit condition that she take the meals she prepared together with him, but in absolute silence. Mrs Barnes told the newspaper herself that she abided by this arrangement, once made, even when her employer's way of life became increasingly odd. Though Mrs Barnes gave only the most reticent of responses to the reporter's enquiries, my own subsequent investigations revealed that in the late Fifties Le Strange discharged his household staff and his labourers, gardeners and administrators one after another, that thenceforth he lived alone in the great stone house with the silent cook from Beccles, and that as a result the whole estate, with its gardens and park, became overgrown and neglected, while scrub and undergrowth encroached on the fallow fields. Apart from comments that touched upon these matters of fact, stories concerning the Major himself were in circulation in the villages that bordered on his domain, stories to which one can lend only a limited credence. They drew, I imagine, on the little that reached the outside world over the years, rumours from the depths of the estate that occupied the people who lived in the immediate vicinity. Thus in a Henstead hostelry, for example, I

## Housekeeper Rewarded for Silent Dinners

A wealthy eccentric has left his vast estate to the housekeeper to whom he hardly spoke for over thirty years.

Major George Wyndham Le Strange (77), a bachelor, collapsed and died last month in the hallway of his manor house in Henstead, Suffolk which had remained virtually unchanged since Georgian times.

During the last war, Le Strange had served in the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment which liberated the concentration camp at Belsen on 14 April 1945. Immediately after VE-Day, he returned to Suffolk to manage his great uncle's estates.

Mrs. Florence Barnes (57), employed by Le Strange in 1955 as housekeeper and cook on condition that she dined with him in silence every day, said that Le Strange had, in the course of time, become a virtual recluse but she refused to give any details of the Major's eccentric way of life.

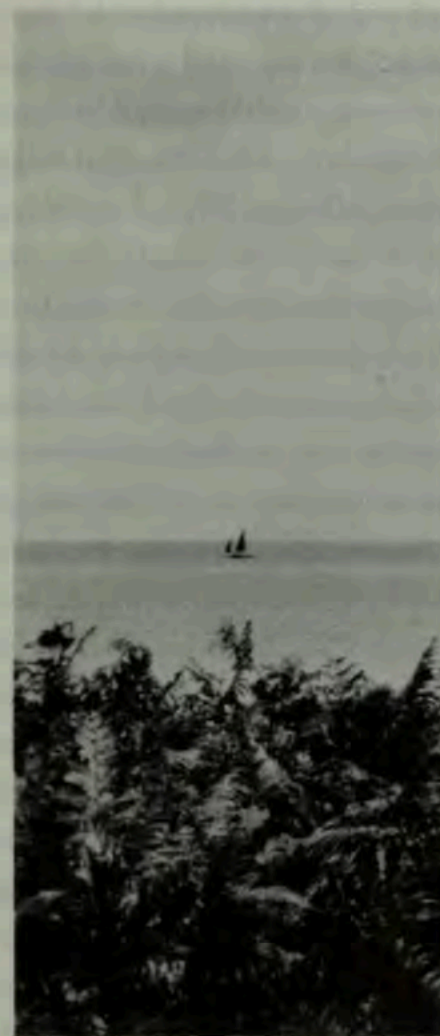
Asked about her inheritance, she said that, beyond wanting to buy a bungalow in Beccles for herself and her sister, she had no idea what to do with it.



heard it said that in his old age, since he had worn out his wardrobe and saw no point in buying new clothes, Le Strange would wear garments dating from bygone days which he fetched out of chests in the attic as he needed them. There were people who claimed to have seen him on occasion dressed in a canary-yellow frock coat or a kind of mourning robe of faded violet taffeta with numerous buttons and eyes. Le Strange, who had always kept a tame cockerel in his room, was reputed to have been surrounded, in later years, by all manner of feathered creatures: by guinea fowl, pheasants, pigeons and quail, and various kinds of garden and song birds, strutting about him on the floor or flying around in the air. Some said that one summer Le Strange dug a cave in his garden and sat in it day and night like St Jerome in the desert. Most curious of all was a legend that I presume to have originated with the Wrentham undertaker's staff, to the effect that the Major's pale skin was olive-green when he passed away, his goose-grey eye was pitch-dark, and his snow-white hair had turned to raven-black. To this day I do not know what to make of such stories. One thing is certain: the estate and all its adjunct properties was bought at auction by a Dutchman last autumn, and Florence Barnes, the Major's loyal housekeeper, lives now with her sister Jemima in a bungalow in her home town of Beccles, as she had intended.

A quarter of an hour's walk south of Benacre Broad, where the beach narrows and a stretch of sheer coastline begins, a few dozen dead trees lie in a confused heap where they fell years ago from the Covehithe cliffs. Bleached by salt water, wind and sun, the broken, barkless wood looks like the bones of some extinct species, greater even than the mammoths and dinosaurs, that came to grief long since on this solitary strand. The footpath leads around the tangle,

through a bank of gorse, up to the loamy cliff-head, and there it continues amidst bracken, the tallest of which stood as high as my shoulder, not far from the ledge, which is constantly threatening to crumble away. Out on the leaden-coloured sea a sailing boat kept me company, or rather, it seemed to me as if it were motionless and I myself, step by step, were making as little progress as



that invisible spirit aboard his unmoving barque. But by degrees the bracken thinned, affording a view of a field that extended as far as Covehithe church. Beyond a low electric fence lay a herd of almost a hundred head of swine, on brown earth where meagre patches of camomile grew. I climbed over the wire and approached one of the ponderous, immobile, sleeping animals. As I bent towards it, it opened a small eye fringed with light lashes and gave me an enquiring look. I ran my hand across its dusty back, and it trembled at this unwonted touch; I stroked its snout and face, and chucked it in the hollow behind one ear, till at length it sighed like one enduring endless suffering. When I stood up, it closed its eye once more with an expression of profound submissiveness. For a while I sat on the grass between the electric fence and the cliff edge. The thin, yellowing blades of grass were bending in the rising wind. The sky was darkening as banks of cloud were piling far out across the sea, which was now streaked with white. All of a sudden, the boat, which for so long had not moved, was gone. The scene reminded me of the story St Mark the evangelist tells, of the country of the Gadarenes, which follows the far better-known account of the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Neatly as the image of the doubting disciples waking their master from his untroubled sleep when the waves beat into the ship fitted the school catechism, there was little understanding of what the story of the mad Gadarene meant. I at least could not recall its ever being read to us in our so-called religious knowledge lessons or at church, much less explained. The raging maniac, of whom it is said that he came out of the tombs where he dwelt, was possessed of so violent an unclean spirit that he could not be bound or

tamed. He plucked asunder the chains, and broke the fetters in pieces. Always he was in the mountains, writes St Mark, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones. Asked his name, he answered: My name is Legion: for we are many. And he besought the Lord not to send him away out of the country. But the Lord commanded the unclean spirits to enter the herd of swine feeding there. And the swine, some two thousand according to the evangelist, plunged down a steep slope and drowned in the sea. Is this terrible story, I asked myself, as I sat overlooking the German Ocean, the report of a credible witness? If so, does that not mean that in healing the Gadarene Our Lord committed a serious error of judgment? Or was this parable made up by the evangelist, I wondered, to explain the supposed uncleanliness of swine; which would imply that human reasoning, diseased as it is, needs to seize on some other kind that it can take to be inferior and thus deserving of annihilation? As these things were going through my mind I was watching the sand martins darting to and fro over the sea. Ceaselessly emitting their tiny cries, they sped along their flight-paths faster than my eyes could follow them. At earlier times, in the summer evenings during my childhood when I had watched from the valley as swallows circled in the last light, still in great numbers in those days, I would imagine that the world was held together by the courses they flew through the air. Many years later, in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, which was written in 1940 at Salto Oriental in Argentina, I read of how a few birds saved an entire amphitheatre. The sand martins, I now saw, were flying solely at the level that extended from the top of the cliff where I was sitting out into empty space. Not one of them climbed higher or dived

lower, to the water below them. Whenever they came towards me, fast as bullets, some seemed to vanish right beneath my feet, as if into the very ground. I went to the edge of the cliff and saw that they had dug their nesting holes into the topmost layer of clay, one beside the other. I was thus standing on perforated ground, as it were, which might have given way at any moment. Nevertheless, I laid my head back as far as I could, as I did as a boy for a dare on the flat tin roof of the two-storey apiary, fixed my eyes on the zenith, then lowered my gaze till it met the horizon, and drew it in across the water, to the narrow strip of beach some twenty yards below. As I tried to suppress the mounting sense of dizziness, breathing out and taking a step backwards, I thought I saw something of an odd, pallid colour move on the shoreline. I crouched down and, overcome by a sudden panic, looked over the edge. A couple lay down there, in the bottom of the pit, as I thought: a man stretched full length over another body of which nothing was visible but the legs, spread and angled. In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man's feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusc washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils. Filled with consternation, I stood up once more, shaking as if it were the first time in my life that I had got to my feet, and left the place, which seemed fearsome to me now, taking the path that descended from the cliff-top

to where the beach spread out on the southerly side. Far off in front of me lay Southwold, a cluster of distant buildings, clumps of trees, and a snow-white lighthouse, beneath a dark sky. Before I reached the town, the first drops of rain were falling. I turned to look back down the deserted stretch I had come by, and could no longer have said whether I had really seen the pale sea monster at the foot of the Covehithe cliffs or whether I had imagined it.



Recalling the uncertainty I then felt brings me back to the Argentinian tale I have referred to before, a tale which deals with our attempts to invent secondary or tertiary worlds. The narrator describes dining with Adolfo Bioy Casares in a house in Calle Gaona in Ramos Mejia one evening in 1935. He relates that after dinner they had a long and rambling talk about the writing of a novel that would fly in the face of palpable facts and become

entangled in contradictions in such a way that few readers – very few readers – would be able to grasp the hidden, horrific, yet at the same time quite meaningless point of the narrative. At the end of the passage that led to the room where we were sitting, the author continues, hung an oval, half-fogged mirror that had a somewhat disquieting effect. We felt that this dumb witness was keeping a watch on us, and thus we discovered – discoveries of this kind are almost always made in the dead of night – that there is something sinister about mirrors. Bioy Casares then recalled the observation of one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar, that the disturbing thing about mirrors, and also the act of copulation, is that they multiply the number of human beings. I asked Bioy Casares for the source of this memorable remark, the author writes, and he told me that it was in the entry on Uqbar in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. As the story goes on, however, it is revealed that this entry is nowhere to be found in the encyclopaedia in question, or rather, it appears uniquely in the copy bought years earlier by Bioy Casares, the twenty-sixth volume of which contains four pages that are not in any other copy of the edition in question, that of 1917. It thus remains unclear whether Uqbar ever existed or whether the description of this unknown country might not be a case similar to that of Tlön, the encyclopaedists' project to which the main portion of the narrative in question is devoted and which aimed at creating a new reality, in the course of time, by way of the unreal. The labyrinthine construction of Tlön, reads a note added to the text in 1947, is on the point of blotting out the known world. The language of Tlön, which hitherto no one had mastered, has now invaded the

academies; already the history of Tlön has superseded all that we formerly knew or thought we knew; in historiography, the indisputable advantages of a fictitious past have become apparent. Almost every branch of learning has been reformed. A ramified dynasty of hermits, the dynasty of the Tlön inventors, encyclopaedists and lexicographers, has changed the face of the earth. Every language, even Spanish, French and English, will disappear from the planet. The world will be Tlön. But, the narrator concludes, what is that to me? In the peace and quiet of my country villa I continue to hone my tentative translation, schooled on Quevedo, of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* (which I do not mean to publish).