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The Complicity of Landscape: Imagining the English Landscape as a Postcolonial Ruin

*La complicité du paysage : imaginer le paysage anglais comme ruine
postcoloniale*

Karolina Kolenda

- ¹ In this paper, I would like to confront the image of the English landscape, as presented by the German (but England-based) writer W.G. Sebald in his account of a “sentimental” pilgrimage of England in the novel *The Rings of Saturn* (2002), with selected works of contemporary British photography and literature in order to investigate the perspectives from which the definition of the English landscape can be presently challenged. Sebald’s novel is an example of a hybrid *genre* of fictional and non-fictional writing, where visual elements (photographs, photocopied documents, archive materials, and drawings) play an important part. For this reason, I employ a comparative approach and discuss it in reference to photographic depictions of landscape (by Ingrid Pollard and Simon Roberts), as well as in the context of the post-pastoral British novel (for example Adam Thorpe’s *Pieces of Light*).
- ² Sebald’s literary *oeuvre* concentrates on the memory and post-memory of World War II.¹ *The Rings of Saturn* does not seem to share this interest. The novel’s primary focus is the story of the British Imperial project, delivered through a series of seemingly unconnected narratives. In what follows I will argue that Sebald’s vision of the English landscape, built around the figure of the ruin, makes a strong, albeit directly unarticulated, connection between the post-traumatic and the postcolonial spaces. In my discussion of how the post-traumatic and the postcolonial inform each other, I will refer to Michael Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory”. In his book, Rothberg employs a comparative approach, whereby the Holocaust is discussed as that which “enabled articulation of other histories of victimization” (Rothberg 2009, 6). Works by Ingrid Pollard and Adam Thorpe will help me explain how the Romantic vision of the English landscape has been challenged by the postcolonial theory and art,

which reject the tradition of picturesque looking in favour of the post-traumatic practices of witnessing. The work of Simon Roberts further emphasises this ethical more than aesthetic shift: his photographs, much like those in Sebald's novel, adhere in their formal composition to the rules of the Picturesque, defined by William Gilpin in the eighteenth century, yet their "appropriation" of its visual language is made to articulate a different message and question the ethical implications of a nostalgic appreciation of landscape in our time and age.

Landscape in the age of (unnatural) disasters

- 3 *The Rings of Saturn* was originally written in German and published by Vito von Eichborn Verlag (Frankfurt am Main) in 1995. Although its author, W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), spent much of his life in England (working at English universities from 1966 until his death in 2001) and made his adopted homeland the subject of many of his texts, he wrote his works in German. Born in 1944 and raised in a small town in the Bavarian Alps, as a young man, Sebald had only a limited understanding of the events that occurred before his birth and soon after, yet he always sensed their insistent "shadow" cast over his life.² As a representative of the generation who became acutely aware of the horrors inflicted on Europe by their fathers and grandfathers, throughout his career, Sebald continuously confronted the inherited "perpetrator trauma" (Gwyer 2014, 206; Hage 2006, 106-111). He identified himself as one of the *Nachgeboren*: those born after the Event, whose experience of the Holocaust is indirect—mediated through texts and images produced by others.³
- 4 In his study of literary representations of the immediate reality of postwar destruction in Germany, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), Sebald introduces another perspective: that of victims of the Allied bombings, which further complicates the position of the subject towards ruined landscape. His account starts with an observation that "there was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described" (Sebald 2003, 11). This treatment of the shadow cast by wartime bombings on the lives of countless German citizens in terms of a "shameful family secret", which "could not even be privately acknowledged" (11), explains, in Sebald's view, the complete absence of this topic in postwar German literature. As Joseph Masco aptly summarised, this absence was a product of "a collective understanding that it was Germany who pioneered mass bombing years earlier in Guernica, Warsaw, and Belgrade" (Masco 274). This way, the national repression Sebald investigates in his study becomes doubled, connecting the truth about "life in the postwar ruins" with that of "a prior position as mass bomber", thus "linking trauma and destruction as part of the same psychosocial legacy" (Masco 274). While Sebald's poignant description of the nature of collective repression of postwar trauma in Germany is directly linked to a very complex debate about German identity, which, over the last several decades, involved a great number of scholars and policy makers alike, some of his observations and conclusions about the ruined landscape in postwar Germany seem to reverberate in his writings about other afflicted spaces as well.
- 5 In Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the act of looking at landscape, a form of cultural practice permanently inscribed in the way people experience the rural environment, becomes powerfully challenged by the late-twentieth-century practice of "witnessing",

where the focus is not so much on an aesthetic construction of observed landscape, but on its direct connection with particular events from the past, that is, on landscape's "ethical" content: its unwilling complicity in these events.

- 6 The narrator travels across the eastern coast of England, visiting declining seaside towns and decrepit country mansions. His reflections on the appearance of rural and urban landscape, architecture and gardens, are continually interrupted by his musings on the history of famous figures from literature, culture, and history (such as Thomas Browne, Chateaubriand, Joseph Conrad), various industries (such as fishing and silk manufacturing), and England's richest families and their eventual decline. All those seemingly unconnected accounts combine into a complex history of the British Imperial expansion: the enormity of accumulated riches and the consequences which the Imperial project had for masses of people in places as remote as the Congo, China, Ireland, and the English countryside. Ultimately, Sebald's descriptions build an image of a voracious nation, whose spectacular enterprises always ended with an unimaginable size of material destruction and devastation of nature.
- 7 Sebald's tour of the seaside towns near Norwich and Lowestoft is an ironic and melancholic re-enactment of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "picturesque tours" (published by William Gilpin, Thomas Malton, and Dorothy Wordsworth, among others), where travellers and tourists were instructed about how to move around the landscape, where to stop, and how to look, in order to appreciate the truly picture-like view.⁴ Whereas it is customary to perceive picturesque beauty in terms of a Romantic emotional experience of landscape in its natural beauty, in fact, the discourse of the Picturesque, starting with Gilpin, sought to explain why particular views are pleasing to the eye by dividing the perceived landscape into separate parts and describing their appealing features. In his *Observations on the Coasts of Hampshire, Sussex, and Kent* (1804), Gilpin narrates his tour of the seaside areas and towns and explains the role water plays in the depiction of a picturesque view:

Water, therefore, is one of the grand accompaniments of landscape. [...] The lake scene, in which wilder ideas predominate, rejects [...] trivial appendages [...]. Flocks and herds are by no means unnatural [...], but banditti, gypsies, soldiers, or other wild characters, are more accommodated to it. In coast scenery, [...] if its character be preserved distinct, the ideas of grandeur rise very high. (Gilpin 1804, 3)
- 8 Whereas Gilpin sees elements of landscape and its inhabitants as mere "appendages" in a constructed, truly picturesque, view, Sebald focuses on the effects that this approach exerted on the human treatment of nature. Yet, his general outlook on human history, marked by decline and catastrophe, turns his attention to those aspects of observed natural and human-made landscape that reflect the direction of all human endeavours towards unavoidable catastrophe. This contrast is most pronounced when Gilpin's account of the port city of Portsmouth is compared with Sebald's description of Reedham. Gilpin's description focuses on how human ingenuity recast the seaside landscape into the profit-bringing area of Portsmouth harbour. His general optimism, in the way he reacts to the effects of human efforts to tame this seaside landscape, is never shaken, as evidenced by his description of the destruction of a warehouse by fire:

In the year 1760 the vast magazine of naval stores, contained in the arsenal here, was set on fire by lightning, and almost entirely consumed. [...] This prodigious loss, in the midst of a war, threw the country, ignorant of its own strength, into consternation. In fact it was nothing; it seemed only as if intended to show Europe the resources of the nation. Such an abundance of stores were immediately poured

into Portsmouth from other magazines, [...] that the loss was never felt [...].
(Gilpin 1804, 25-26)

- 9 Sebald's narrator's account of his visit in Reedham, a town located on a vast flatland, where once "white flecks of windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye", is anything but optimistic (Sebald 2002, 30). The riverside landscape of Reedham is seen as a ruin, merely a reminder of what once was. This land, once a lively manifestation of how human enterprise can take control of nature's powers, is now filled with ruins:

Save for the odd solitary cottage there is nothing to be seen but the grass and the rippling reeds, one or two sunken willows, and some ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilisation. These are all that remains of the countless wind pumps and windmills whose white sails revolved over the marshes of Halvergate and all along the coast until the decades following the First World War, one after the other, they were all shut down. [...]. (Sebald 2002, 45)

- 10 This image of human engagement with water is most poignant when confronted with John Constable's iconic *Flatford Mill* from 1816-1817 (oil on canvas, 101.6x127 cm, Tate collections), where the painter, typically for his early period marked by distinct optimism, depicted the countryside as a controllable, predictable, generous, and seemingly inexhaustible source of prosperity. Sebald's description, if read in the context of the novel as a whole, is marked by an at once retrospective and prospective vision. The picture included by the account shows one of the mills and a waterway [fig. 1]. The frame clearly repeats the traditional composition of picturesque landscape art, acknowledging how the painter's or traveller's eye structured the land to remodel it into a "view" of the English landscape. At the same time, Sebald is interested in the landscape's future condition as a "ruin", as the signs of future ruination are already very much in place.

Fig. 1. Page 30 from *The Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald, translated by Michael Hulse, published by Vintage Classics.

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Post-Imperial ruins

- 11 In his digressions, the narrator seeks to find the sources of decline and degeneration, and locates them in the British colonial project. In the novel, this connection between Britain's colonial expansion and the ruined condition of the English landscape at home is not stated explicitly, but suggested through a series of historical digressions woven into the narrator's account of his tour of the English seaside towns.⁵ For instance, during his visit to Halesworth, he describes the once-lively landscape, which is now "nothing but grey water, mudflats and emptiness" (Sebald 2002, 138). He goes on to inform the reader about the bridge over the Blyth, which "had originally been built for the Emperor of China" (Sebald 2002, 138). His narrative turns then to the history of Britain's colonial presence in China, with a focus on the destruction of the Forbidden City and its landscape parks:

In the name of Christian evangelism and free trade, which was held to be the precondition of all civilized progress, the superiority of western artillery was demonstrated, a number of cities were stormed, and a peace was extorted, the conditions of which included guarantees for British trading posts on the coast, the cession of Hong Kong, and, not least, reparation payments of truly astronomical proportions. [...]

When the summerhouses, hunting lodges and sacred places in the extensive gardens and neighbouring palace precincts, more than two hundred in number, were then burnt to the ground [...]. The temples, palaces and hermitages, mostly built of cedarwood, went up in flames one after another with unbelievable speed [...]. Apart from a few stone bridges and marble pagodas, all was destroyed. (Sebald 2002, 141-142, 144)

- 12 This account ends with the narrator's attention shifting back to the town of Halesworth. Its desolate appearance is then shown to bring associations with other locations: "The region is so empty and deserted that, if one were abandoned there, one could scarcely say whether one was on the North Sea coast or perhaps by the Caspian Sea or the Gulf of Lian-tung" (Sebald 2002, 154). These shifts in the story between descriptions of visited towns and accounts of the impact that Britain had on colonised lands recur with regularity: in a Reading Room in Southwold he tells the story of Apollo Korzeniowski and his voyages to the West Indies with cargo of ammunition and guns, while in Middleton he converses with a Dutchman de Jong about production methods employed in plantations in the East Indies, emphasising that while "the Dutch invested chiefly in cities, the English put their money into country estates" (Sebald 2002, 193). This way, what seems at first sight as a collection of unrelated detours in a narrative of a nostalgic journey gradually reveals itself as a structure that was put in place in order to suggest a link between observed landscape and its history. Significantly, this history is shown as unbound by geographical limitations; instead, the history of the English landscape is intertwined with the history of global colonialism. This perspective confirms what postcolonial theory has identified as the irremovable consequence of colonisation, namely, the blurring of the boundary between the centre and its peripheries (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 87-90; Said 1994, 59). In her introduction to a volume of essays about ruinous effects of colonial expansion both overseas as well as at home, Ann Laura Stoler argues that:

The "interior" and "exterior" spaces of imperial formations may not correspond to the common geographical designations that imperial architects scripted themselves. Terms like *metropole* and *colony*, *core* and *periphery* presume to make clear what is not. We might rather think of other criteria to distinguish the contemporary zones of imperial duress that are more mutable and as mutable as imperial formations themselves. (Stoler 19)

- 13 In this volume, titled *Imperial Debris*, Stoler and other authors analyse the aftermath of colonialism and focus on the ruins left behind in the centre and the periphery alike. In Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, as well as in his other texts, the ruin is the central figure around which the narrator builds his melancholic narrative of inevitable decay. Photographs of decrepit buildings, enormous human-made structures, such as bridges, canals, and entire towns, are shown in a manner that both repeats the model of picturesque representation of such objects, as well as calls into question its underlying aesthetic premise. In traditional picturesque imagery, ruins are elements introduced into the scene to work as a disruption of composition and a vehicle for nostalgic contemplation of the past. This is evidenced by countless texts and images that embraced the aesthetic of the Picturesque and the Sublime. For instance, Gilpin used the opportunity of his visit to Arundel Castle and its ruined towers to recall the story of Bevis:

On the left stand the ruins of another tower, known by the name of Bevis tower. Bevis was a giant of ancient times; [...] The ruins of this last-mentioned building, raised on a lofty artificial mound, and deeply moated round, stand in the middle of the garden. [...] This ruin is [...] the most picturesque part of the whole castle. (Gilpin 1804, 32-33)

- 14 As Stoler explains, ruins were imagined or depicted in the Picturesque tradition in order to indicate "privileged sites of reflection—of pensive rumination. Portrayed as enchanted, desolate spaces, [...] ruins provide a favoured image of a vanished past, what is beyond repair and in decay, thrown into aesthetic relief by nature's tangled growth"

(Stoler 9). In Sebald's rendition, the ruin is no longer a beautiful element of a picturesque, aesthetically pleasing picture; neither is it the proof of human helplessness in the face of more powerful forces—as it was for the Romantic hunters of the Sublime. Instead, it is a poignant reminder of the unstoppable greed for destruction of both nature and ourselves. Rather than victims of natural disasters, humans are shown as agents of unnatural disasters, that destroy the natural and man-made environment. In the account of his tour, which starts in Reedham, Haddiscoe, and Herringfleet, and moves through to Somerleyton, Lowestoft, and Southwold, to end in Orford and Ditchingham, Sebald's narrator constantly shifts the perspective, offering a list of visited towns and features of landscape (much like any eighteenth-century collector of picturesque views),⁶ to immediately turn it into a list of natural and man-made objects in a state of decay:

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. (Sebald 2002, 64)

- 15 This sensation is further heightened by his visit in the island of Orford, a former site for military experiments and research [fig. 2]:

My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations. But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilisation after its extinction in some future catastrophe. (Sebald 2002, 237)

Fig. 2. Page 236 from *The Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald, translated by Michael Hulse, published by Vintage Classics.

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- 16 This sensation, where the impression of a “mysterious isle of the dead” (a projection onto actual landscape of the well-known Symbolist painting by Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*, 1880) gradually transforms into a chilling experience of being in the moment “after the catastrophe”. Although Sebald locates this moment in the future, it is quite clear that the insistently recurring vision of future ruination provokes too visceral a reaction in the narrator to be a mere premonition. For contemporary dwellers of these spaces, ruins are more than “monumental ‘leftovers’ or relics”, as Ann Stoler aptly defined this contemporary relevance, but rather “what people are *left with*”, the “aftershocks of imperial assault” (Stoler 9). In the final passages in *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator describes his visit to the village of Ditchingham in Norfolk, where, situated “well off the main road above a serpentine lake”, is Ditchingham Hall, a house built in 1710, and surrounded by parkland transformed by the great landscape designer, Capability Brown (Sebald 2002, 261). Although seemingly unconnected to the preceding accounts of several episodes from British colonial history, these remarks on how the English landscape was forcefully made to conform to the rules of the Picturesque and remodelled into a landscape park that offered its owners much desired “views” focus on the enormity of such endeavours and the social and economic cost they entailed, which clearly follows the novel’s general focus on loss and decay:

Estates of this kind, which enabled the ruling elite to imagine themselves surrounded by boundless lands where nothing offended the eye, did not become fashionable until the second half of the eighteenth century. [...] In order to complete such a project it was usually necessary to buy parcels of land and add them to the existing estate, and roads, tracks, individual farmsteads, sometimes even entire villages had to be moved, as the object was to enjoy an uninterrupted view from the house over a natural expanse innocent of any human presence. It was for the same reason that fences were replaced with broad, grass-covered ha-has, which were dug out at a cost of many thousands of working hours. Naturally, such an undertaking, with its considerable impact not only on the landscape, but also on the life of the local communities, could not always be accomplished without controversy. (Sebald 2002, 262)

- 17 In what sense can spectacular landscape parks be regarded in terms of “imperial aftershocks”? In his famous text about Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Edward W. Said argued that “no matter how isolated and insulated the English place [...], it requires overseas sustenance” (Said 1997, 107). The development of large country mansions surrounded with enormous landscaped areas was possible thanks to the fortunes made in the colonies.⁷ Therefore, every such structure carries the traces of this direct reliance, rendering aesthetic appreciation of landscape deeply problematic.
- 18 In the comments following the above-cited description, the narrator lists other interventions made into landscape to “comply with the overall concept”, such as the removal of “unsightly thickets and scrubs” and “planting trees as specimens or in small groups”, to gradually move to a vision of what parks of this kind will look like when the trees die of old age and other causes, and we will be able “to envisage once more the [...] emptiness in which the great country seats stood in the late eighteenth century” (Sebald 2002, 262-263). Following these observations are facts related to the natural destruction of countless trees in England in the late twentieth-century, caused by disease spread by airborne beetles. This way, by mixing accounts of human-made destruction with havoc wreaked by nature itself, and comments about catastrophes both past and future, Sebald ultimately dismisses any possibility of a nostalgic

appreciation of traces of the past, indeed, any consideration of such traces other than as testimonies to our present and/or future catastrophic condition.

- 19 This impossibility of “picturesque” viewing in contemporary postcolonial reality exposes any attempts at channelling the Picturesque into present-day engagement with landscape as deeply “inaccurate”, if not altogether grotesque. A visual commentary on the consequences of such attempts can be found in some examples of contemporary photography. For instance, in Simon Roberts’ portraits of contemporary English people’s engagement with landscape, titled *We English* (2007-2008), landscape as the locus of national identity and cultural heritage is revealed as problematic on many levels. Roberts focuses on traditional, national habits, which have been seen as typically English, such as hunting, sports, and tourism. His images avoid easy criticism, yet emphasise the highly instrumental treatment of landscape by its present occupants.
- 20 *Heberdens Farm, Finchdean, Hampshire, 20th December 2007* [fig. 3], for instance, presents a hunting scene in a composition that is very familiar from a long tradition of English landscape painting. The picture plane is divided allowing the sky to cover more than half of its surface. The scene seems just another repetition of a well-known hunting theme. However, with small but significant details, such as the dim, unsaturated colours, and slight lack of sharpness in the upper parts due to movements of hunted birds, Roberts achieves the effect of discrepancy between the familiarity of the scene imposed by its affinity with traditional hunting representations, and its contemporary setting. This discrepancy is even more distinct in another photograph from the series, *Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station, Nottinghamshire, 16th June 2008* [fig. 4], which features a golf course with players engaged in their activity, towered by enormous structures of a neighbouring power station. In this scene, composed according to the rules of the Picturesque, elements typical of the genre are supplanted by their contemporary equivalents: transmission towers instead of solitary trees, massive chimneys instead of mountains or hills, and golf players, staring into the distance to assess the trajectory of the ball, instead of prospect-admiring travellers. This photograph is deeply unsettling in the way that it follows the convention of traditional landscape depiction and yet contains almost nothing that is not artificial and man-made. The history of the aesthetic ideal of the Picturesque—understood as the way of looking at the landscape and the direct consequence of this practice, that is, the landscape park with its ambition to make nature “picture-like”—shows that artificiality was at its very heart from the very beginning. What Roberts’ photographs effectively convey is how the nostalgic longing for the past, so powerfully evoked by the Picturesque and its depiction of ruins, turned in present-day reality into a prospective longing for “the present as future ruin”.

Fig. 3. Simon Roberts, *Heberdens Farm, Finchdean, Hampshire, 20th December 2007* (2007–2008), photograph, dimensions variable

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Fig. 4. Simon Roberts, *Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station, Nottinghamshire, 16th June 2008* (2007–2008), photograph, dimensions variable

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- 21 Sebald's narrator emphasises this conflicted present status of landscape by his insistence on its "ruined" condition: ruined not only in terms of evidence of a turbulent history, but also as that which makes an aesthetic and therefore emotionally detached appreciation of landscape impossible. In his text, the landscape is not only "marked" by its complicity in the country's colonial past, but it is also a source of powerful emotional reactions experienced by the observer, who, as a subject onto whom the past trauma is transferred in the act of memory, cannot engage in aesthetic contemplation but is, instead, compelled to give testimony to the history of the place.

Traumatic landscape

- 22 The "aftershocks of imperial assault", which Stoler describes, are, understandably, both material ruins as well as "the social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things"; they are both tangible and intangible; effects residing in "the corroded hollows of landscapes, in the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes and in the microecologies of matter and mind" (Stoler 9). Sebald's conflicted narrative of touring the landscape with signs of both future and present ruination, viewing sites at once idyllic and traumatic, finds its precedents in earlier cultural texts by postcolonial writers and artists.
- 23 Derek Walcott wrote that "decadence begins when a civilisation falls in love with its ruins" (Walcott 3, cited in Stoler 27). In his view, England's "cult of ruin" and its clinging to the idea of Imperial grandeur precipitated its cultural demise. Notably, writing in 1964, Walcott prophetically anticipated the unprecedented growth of this fascination with traces of the national past brought by the rise of what is known as the "heritage industry" in the early 1980s. Paradoxically, this nostalgic attachment to England's past glory was shared by some former colonial subjects, such as V.S. Naipaul, whose account of the encounter with the English rural space of country mansions and rolling hills in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) testifies to this pervading sense of nostalgia: "I had come to England at the wrong time [...]. I had come too late to find the England, the heart of empire, which (like a provincial, from a far corner of the empire) I had created in my fantasy" (Naipaul 141). The sense of being "always too late", a nostalgic realisation that there is no access to the imaginary past, still resonates in countless texts on England's material and immaterial heritage, just as it prevails in popular collective imagination and institutionally sanctioned cultural policy (e.g. in heritage marketing, tourist information and so on). In the final decades of the twentieth century, the ethical implications of Naipaul's nostalgic longing for a past he only had a chance to know through his readings of British fiction and poetry were powerfully exposed by postcolonial theory, on the one hand, and the post-pastoral turn in literature, on the other. In these texts, nostalgia for the past is supplanted by a different kind of emotion: a deeply personal experience of the impact of this past on actual lives of former colonial subjects here and now.
- 24 In contemporary British photography, one of the first instances of challenging the apparently idyllic rural English landscape came with Ingrid Pollard's *Pastoral Interludes* series from 1988. The artist, who came to England from Guyana, explained that the poetry of the English Romantic poets, read to her by her father in childhood, came to represent for her the quintessence of England, itself always present and absent. When finally offered a chance to wander in her beloved Lake District, Pollard realised with

horror that her presence was not welcome in this green, yet also very “white” landscape: “I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white”, she comments in a caption to one of the photographs from the series (Pollard 1988). The idyllic pastoral landscape suddenly came to represent the actual underlying exploitation of the forced labour in the colonies and at home. Pollard’s series was one of the works that triggered the broader interest in how cultural Englishness, understood as an imagined community united around a shared vision of landscape, can be reviewed through the prism of contemporary theories of trauma and revealed as a deeply traumatic space.

- 25 In contemporary memory and trauma studies, places that were the sites of traumatic events, are seen as lying outside the aesthetic order, so to speak. Reception of such sites comes through the act of witnessing, expressed by the survivor in his or her testimony, or re-enacted by the visitors, researchers, and others, in the act of remembrance and commemoration. In her reflections on how contemporary viewers experience such places, the German scholar Aleida Assmann introduced a distinction between “places of memory” and “traumatic places” (Assmann 169, cited in Szymański). While the former contain a gap between the past and the present that is filled with memories, the latter are different from them in that they contain a powerful emotional element that is imposed by memory. Assmann emphasises that telling the story of such places “requires the highest kind of effort”, “overcoming biases and social taboos”, since local communities have already moved on, rejecting relics of the past or coming to terms with them (Assmann 169). What Pollard’s photographs poignantly manifest is that it is not so much the presence of traumatic places in the English space that produces the feeling of “dread”, but it is the irrefutable connection of the English rural landscape as a whole with its colonial past that makes it a traumatic space: “[...] a lot of what MADE ENGLAND GREAT is founded on the blood of slavery, the sweat of working people [...] an industrial REVOLUTION without the Atlantic Triangle” (Pollard 1988).
- 26 Whereas traditional colonial fiction focused on the experience of the colonies through the eyes of Englishmen and Englishwomen,⁸ postcolonial novels reverse this direction: it is England discovered by the colonial subject, whose situation is complicated by the problematic discovery of England as a “home” that is not home. With several exceptions, among them Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*, most narratives of the hostile reception of former colonial subjects by the “Mother Country” concern the urban environment of London and other big cities.⁹ Rural space and, in particular, the status of the English landscape as the imagined *locus* of English identity, became subject to a more focused scrutiny only with the rise of cultural geography and its investigations of racial distribution of space.¹⁰ On the grounds of literary practice, this revisionist interest found its counterpart in post-pastoral writing, with authors seeking to deconstruct the myth of “Green England”, since in the era after the break-up of the British Empire England becomes “the site for post-colonial contestation,” where “the idea of pastoral [...] is stretched to breaking point” (Head 190).
- 27 One of the most highly acclaimed examples of post-pastoral novel in the late 20th-century was Adam Thorpe’s *Ulverton* (1992), which presents the story of an imaginary English village, the titular Ulverton, across several centuries and through the eyes of a series of first-person narrators, inhabitants of the village, many of which represent previously marginalised subjects (peasants, former soldiers, shepherds, etc.). More relevant in the context of this text, however, is Thorpe’s subsequent Ulverton novel, *Pieces of Light* (1998), which presents the same village through the eyes of a former

colonial subject, a white English boy raised in Africa, who is both English as well as “Other”. As Thorpe explains, for the young Hugh Arkwright, “England is exotic and frightening and dark; darkest Africa is light and domestic and friendly” (Thorpe 2010, 18). The title’s reference to the most famous novel of colonial Africa, namely Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, is a telling reversal of the logic of centre and periphery, since the “pieces of light” are memories of Africa which the narrator recalls in his old age. These memories are what helps him cope with the gloomy atmosphere of England, recurrently shown as a place of mystery and dark forces, embodied in the figure of Hugh’s uncle Edward, whose semi-scientific interest in England’s prehistoric past leads to his involvement with nationalist organisations from Germany and research into primeval customs, such as human sacrifice. The country mansion where Hugh is brought up, an example of a paradigmatic English country house, with ordered landscape in its immediate surroundings, raises in him emotions which powerfully contradict the prevailing belief in the soothing qualities of England’s idyllic, pastoral scenery.

- 28 In *Pieces of Light*, Thorpe deconstructs the English pastoral by revealing the underlying premise of idealisation of the English landscape, namely, its reliance on the significant colonial Other. However, the plot of this novel, set partly in the 1930s, is constructed on a reversal of this binary opposition: Africa is shown as that which is idealised through the contrast with dark, dangerous, and deeply mysterious England. In this novel, Thorpe shows England as a place where fascist ideas grow from earlier ethnic-based conceptions of nationhood, yet the connection between the effects of colonialism and those of fascism is suggested rather than explicitly made. Similarly, in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s narrator makes such a connection through association of “a lake of brackish water beyond a bank of shingle halfway between Lowesoft and Southwold” (Sebald 2002, 59), where suddenly “great cumulus clouds” cast “a grey shadow upon the earth”, with the story of the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, who during World War II “served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen-Belsen in the 14th of April 1945” (Sebald 2002, 59). This account is followed by a two-page uncaptioned archive photograph of corpses of camp prisoners lying on the ground in the woods. Immediately after, the narrator informs that Le Strange “returned home from Germany to manage his great uncle’s estates in Suffolk” (Sebald 2002, 62). In this account, the image of ruined landscape, with “deciduous woodland that is now dying, owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea”, where the “trees looked painted, and not a single bird flew across the velvet-brown water” (Sebald 2002, 62), is juxtaposed with the image of the Holocaust, suggesting not so much a causal link between the two, but rather how the memory of the Holocaust is triggered by the image of landscape.¹¹ This can be explained in terms of what Michael Rothberg termed “multidirectional memory”. In his book, Rothberg analyses the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and André Schwarz-Bart, among others, which, he argues, “draw particular attention to the spatial dynamics and outcomes of racialization through their writing of ghettos and ruins” (Rothberg 2009, 136). In his discussion of how Schwarz-Bart links black and Jewish histories “through the ruinous geography of the Warsaw Ghetto”, by recalling the ruins of the ghetto in his reflections of the site of a failed Caribbean slave revolt, Rothberg asks what it means “to bring histories into contact at the site of a ruin” (Rothberg 2009, 135). The site of the Caribbean plantation discussed by Schwartz-Bart is a ruin in the sense that it is “disjoined from the present” and “half buried by nearly two centuries of ‘innocent’ activities but still testifying to a traumatic past”

(Rothberg 2009, 147). What is at stake in making connections between ruined colonial landscapes and Holocaust ruins (shown as sites of “humiliation and absence” rather than signs of “history and change”) is to “people” “history’s abysses through risky acts of imagination” (Rothberg 2009, 152–153).

- 29 It is, therefore, the act of the writer’s imagination that converts a site of events into a traumatic place. Indeed, as Allen Meek argues, Sebald’s “mosaic construction” of word and image “does not easily lend itself to the notion of transmission of, or identification with, traumatic memory: instead it appears to continually defer and displace such identifications through spatial movement and visual correspondences” (Meek 2018, 109). In the final passages of his novel, Sebald moves from the discussion of silk production in Britain to similar initiatives in Prussia, and then in Nazi Germany, to finish with a discussion of various events that occurred on 13 April over the course of history:

Today, as I bring these notes to a conclusion, is the 13th of April 1995. [...] On this very day three hundred and ninety-seven years ago, Henry IV promulgated the Edict of Nantes; [...] Warren Hastings was appointed Governor-General of Bengal two hundred and twenty-three years ago; the Anti-Semitic League was founded in Prussia one hundred and thirteen years ago; and, seventy-four years ago, the Amritsar massacre occurred, when General Dyer ordered his troops to fire on a rebellious crowd of fifteen thousand that had gathered in Jallianwala Bagh square, to set an example. Quite possibly some of the victims were employed in silk cultivation, which was developing at that time. (Sebald 2002, 294–295)

- 30 In this final passage, which concludes the journey of the English coast as well as brings together themes discussed throughout the novel, both spatial and temporal determinants of history are dismissed in favour of the multidirectional memory that undermines the linear and geographical logic of the narrative. The English landscape is thus recast as a space always already open to such intervention from the observer’s act of viewing, which is, at once, an act of bearing witness to the landscape’s complicity in the history of British colonialism.

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NOTES

1. Among Sebald's books that make World War II, its history and memory, their primary focus are: *The Emigrants* (1992), *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), and *Austerlitz* (2001).
2. "At the end of the war I was just one year old, so I can hardly have any impressions of that period of destruction based on personal experience. Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge". W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell, New York: Random House, 1999, 71.
3. Sebald's attempt to express experiences that were not directly available to him but had an impact on his life can be explained in terms of what Marianne Hirsch called "post-memory" (Hirsch 2012). For an analysis of Sebald's work in the context of post-memory see: Susanne Vees-Gulani, "The Experience of Destruction: W.G. Sebald, the Airwar, and Literature", *W.G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (eds.), Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006, 335-349.
4. The Picturesque as an aesthetic ideal entered the cultural debate in England with the 1782 publication of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*. On late eighteenth-century debates on the Picturesque and the political sources of its definition around 1790 see: Bermingham 2002, 77-101.
5. For a discussion of how melancholy in Sebald's novels can be linked with the history of capitalism and colonialism see: Cosgrove 2007, 91-110.
6. For a detailed investigation of imaginative geography in *The Rings of Saturn* see: Kraenzle 2001, 126-145.
7. This connection has been recently investigated by estate archaeology. For instance, Tom Williamson writes that in Britain "large landowners were fully involved in the

development of the Atlantic economy, through investments in shipping or in colonial plantations. Some probably derived as much wealth from such sources as they did from their English acres. Parks and pleasure ground in the 18th and the 19th century proudly displayed the far-flung contacts of trade and empire, boasting a wide range of exotic plants, brought back in some cases by plant-collectors directly funded by great families” (Williamson 2007, 5).

8. Among numerous examples are such classics as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924).

9. Postcolonial novels, from early accounts by Sam Selvon (*The Lonely Londoners*, 1956) to second and third-generation writing, including Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, and Zadie Smith, locate their characters and plots in urban, usually metropolitan environments.

10. Notable examples of studies in this area include: Kinsman 1995; Milbourne 1997; Darby 2000; Dwyer and Bressey 2008.

11. Robert Eaglestone analyses the multidirectional interweaving of events and memory in Sebald’s novels in terms of “stasis-as-resistance” and in reference to Thomas Browne’s *Quincunx*. See: Eaglestone 2017, 80-85.

ABSTRACTS

The article confronts the image of the English landscape, as presented by the German writer W.G. Sebald in the novel *The Rings of Saturn*, with contemporary works of photography (by Simon Roberts and Ingrid Pollard) and literature (by Adam Thorpe) that provide a parallel critique of the English landscape, whose traditional pastoral imagery conceals its actual complicity in economic and cultural exploitation. The analysis focuses on the notion of the Picturesque, its significance for the formation of the English landscape, and its role for contemporary visual and literary practices that seek to confront the Romantic tradition of looking at landscape with the post-Holocaust and postcolonial practices of witnessing.

L'article confronte l'image du paysage anglais, tel qu'il est représenté par l'écrivain allemand W.G. Sebald dans le roman *Les Anneaux de Saturne*, à des œuvres photographiques contemporaines (de Simon Roberts et Ingrid Pollard) et à des œuvres littéraires (d'Adam Thorpe) qui formulent une critique de l'imagerie pastorale traditionnelle, vue comme complice de l'exploitation économique et culturelle. L'analyse se concentre sur la notion de pittoresque, son importance dans la représentation du paysage anglais et son rôle dans les pratiques visuelles et littéraires contemporaines, qui confrontent tradition romantique et témoignage postcolonial et post-Holocaust.

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